“Should I stay or should I go?”—Why the future of global work may be less binary: Lessons on approaches to global crises from the experiences of expatriates during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
COVID-19 has significantly impacted expatriates, affecting their ability to work effectively and their personal and family lives. This study explores their experiences in different phases of the pandemic, and their perspectives on the future of international living in light of such global disruption. Involving over 600 expatriates in 48 countries, the research shows shifts in motivation and priorities as a result of the crisis and reveals how family (extended and immediate) topped expatriates’ concerns. The study examines if and how support systems worked and looks at coping mechanisms, skills, traits, previous experience, and attitudes which participants found useful. A common theme was “falling between two stools”—where expatriates were ineligible for support in either their home country or in their host country. Others described being “pulled in different directions” or “torn by a dilemma” with pros and cons in either choice. The study contributes to the questions about the future of global work with results of the survey revealing changing norms for expatriation and global mobility raising the possibility of more nuanced approaches to global projects and less binary options for global professionals and their families.

KEYWORDS
crisis, expatriation, family, future of work, global mobility, travel

1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the globally mobile workforce, with international professionals and their families particularly affected by the travel restrictions. Closed borders, canceled flights, and the introduction of new entry restrictions for foreign residents from the beginning of the pandemic left many expatriates separated for long periods from partners, family members, and friends, and unable to return to the host countries where they have homes and jobs. Previously held assumptions about the ability to travel to see relatives in case of emergency or whenever needed have been severely challenged at the time of pandemic and for the foreseeable future, leaving some questioning the attractiveness of living and working abroad.

Most literature about the COVID-19 pandemic publishes the insights acquired after the first impact of the pandemic. Companies were not prepared for a large adverse risk (EY, 2020; Ernst & Young, 2019). Life was affected at personal as well as the professional
level (Gartner, 2020; Griffin & Denholm, 2020), remote work and home office became the norm (Herath & Herath, 2020), uncertainty and fear led to new consumer trends, isolation, and stress (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020), and the travel industry was deeply affected (Asmelash & Cooper, 2020).

Workplace transformations have been accelerated (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020) and concern for the implications in Human Resource Management is growing (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020). In periods of stress and anxiety, people tend to seek out comfort in the familiar, the people, places, and even food that are the most predictable. Expatriates, by definition being separated from family and friends, and being unable to travel because of travel restrictions, have acutely felt the stress and anxiety of not being close to family (Expat insider, 2021). Being used to global mobility, they may experience a sense of loss: restrictions and virtual meetings, accommodating to different time zones, and being grounded at home, all added to the sense of job insecurity, as some did lose their jobs, and uncertainty about the future (Caligiuri et al., 2020).

The originality of this study lies in its longitudinal character and its focus on the perspectives and lived experiences of the expatriates themselves. We asked them about their immediate reaction in the spring of 2020, as soon as the world practically went into lockdown, and again 6 months, then 1 year later, in order to find out what had been the impact on their personal and professional lives, their priorities and the changes in the meaning of travel. At the end of 2020, a number of participants were interviewed in order to explore deeper the overall experience of expatriates during the first 9 months of the pandemic as well as to examine their concept of the future.

The research questions were formulated as follows: (a) What did expatriates do when the pandemic started and borders were closing? (b) Did the priorities of the expatriates change? If so, how? (c) Did the expatriates’ meaning of travel for work, leisure, and family change? If so, how?

2 | BACKGROUND

2.1 | Expatriates

Exact figures for those impacted are not available but should not be underestimated. In 2017, Finaccord counted roughly 50.5 million expatriates worldwide and expected the figure to rise to 87.5 million by 2021. According to the Finaccord analysis, the majority of expatriates in 2017 were classifiable as individual workers (71.1%) followed by students (8.5%), retired expatriates (5.2%), and corporate and other transferees (1.0%), with the balance of other expatriates (defined as nonemployed spouses and children) making up the residual 14.1%.

There are different definitions of an expatriate. The dictionary definition is simply “someone who does not live in their own country”. In the international management literature, the term “expatriate” is used in reference to employees of multinational corporations who are sent abroad for a usually predefined period and position (Berry & Bell, 2012; Cerdin & Brewster, 2014). The reasons for expatriate employees are diverse, from career development and international management experience for young potentials to control or implementation of changes in host countries’ subsidiaries.

International living and working experience is highly valued by organizations and human resource and talent recruiters as a predictor of the ability to work effectively across cultures. Living abroad has been linked to increased creativity and problem-solving ability even when compared to the experience of traveling abroad (Aytug, Kern, & Dilchert, 2018; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009).

In education, there seems to be a “mobility imperative” for educators and students alike (Cairns, 2014, p. 46; Cairns, Cuzzocrea, Briggs, & Veloso, 2017). Self-initiated expats (SIEs) have also become the subject of research. SIEs relocate to a country of their choice for personal, cultural, or professional development, without being sent by an organization (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Selmer, Andresen, & Cerdin, 2017; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Another category of expatriates is older people who retire to places with favorable characteristics such as climate or the cost of living (Balkir & Kirkulak, 2007; Gibler, Casado-Díaz, Casado-Díaz, Rodriguez, & Taltavull, 2009).

Although new forms of workforce mobility, such as virtual and hybrid assignments, are emerging and actively supported by a majority of employees as reported by BGRS (2021a, 2021b), physical mobility remains strong. As the context is changing, virtual mobility has become an important issue for organizations. Costs of time and money for quarantine and other safety measures are seen as a barrier to business trips and expatriation.

2.2 | Expatriates and crisis

The definitions of crisis and disaster share many common features and they are closely interconnected. A crisis can lead to a disaster if neglected or mismanaged. The mainstream literature uses the terms disaster, crisis, and emergency interchangeably and in combination (Al-Dahash, Thayaparan, & Kulatunga, 2016). The Covid-19 pandemic does not neatly fit within the existing classification of hazard events (emergencies, disasters, and catastrophes), and there may be a need for an additional category that has yet to be articulated (Montano & Savitt, 2020). Disasters are traumatic events which are dangerous, overwhelming, and usually sudden (Figley, 1985). Lerbingher (2012) explains a crisis event as a sudden, unexpected event with high impact and low probability. In expatriate society, a crisis can be viewed as either an interactional or a reactional crisis depending on how it is triggered. An interactional crisis as explained by McNulty, Lauring, Jonasson, and Selmer (2019) could be a fit-dependent crisis, arising from an expatriate’s actions and building on the person-environment fit theory. Examples of reactional crises for expatriates, as explained by Fee, McGrath-Champ, and Liu (2013) arise from sets of triggers that can end up with evacuation, such as (a) Medical emergencies including community-wide pandemics. (b) Natural disasters, like floods, fires, earthquakes. (c) Irregular man-made crises, including kidnapping, civil or military unrest, or acts of terrorism. (4) Regular man-made crises like industrial accidents and nonwork misadventures.
In any disaster or crisis, the importance of maintaining family and social cohesion is stressed, along with the re-enforcement of support and self-help networks.

2.3 | Global pandemic

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic. The pandemic has led to increased cross-border distance problems with travel restrictions and limited international mobility (Caligiuri et al., 2020). The health and economic crises created by the global pandemic have given further significance (Caligiuri et al., 2020) to the concept of volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments (Johansen, 2007; Schoemaker, Heaton, & Teece, 2018; Stiehm, 2002; Van Tulder, Jankowska, & Verbeke, 2019; Whiteman, 1998) and extraordinary vulnerabilities have arisen from the global uncertainty (Caligiuri et al., 2020). It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic creates the greatest challenge ever experienced to the movement of people globally (Collings & Sheeran, 2020).

This global pandemic has changed the experience of work for most employees, forcing organizations globally to adapt to new ways of work, and to evaluate employee risk (Collings, McMackin, Nyberg, & Wright, 2021), and personal health and safety considerations associated with COVID-19 (Collings & Sheeran, 2020).

The PwC Global Mobility Pulse Survey (2020) looked at the actions companies were taking in relation to their globally mobile workforce during the pandemic. They identified three main potential strategies: (a) keeping up to date with regulatory changes, (b) work on communications and planning, and (c) understanding who their mobile employees are and where they are.

The pandemic has added to the current geopolitical changes, advances in technology, communication, and global travel, and organizational and demographic trends in the business population (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008) that have affected the way expatriates are managed and supported.

A new trend in expatriation reflecting the changing global economy seems to point to the use of home-grown expertise rather than relying on foreign experts to drive their economy (Groves & O’Connor, 2018), meaning that the hegemony of Western expatriates will be questioned (Farrer, 2010; Fechter & Walsh, 2010; Leonard, 2010; see also Bloomer, 2021).

At the same time, even before the global pandemic, there has been evidence of growing aversion to immigration in some communities and societies who feel threatened by the volume of incomers. At government levels, nationalist and protectionist policies and political rhetoric, such as “Brexit” and “America First” have increased tensions and a rise in economic and political nationalism (Horak, Farndale, Brannen, & Collings, 2019). Successive waves of COVID-19 have exacerbated this, with many countries closing their borders to foreign nationals and suspending immigration to protect jobs for their own citizens (BBC, 2020). According to the UN, the pandemic and the consequent economic slowdown have put nearly half of the global workforce at risk of job losses as governments struggle to balance the safe opening of their economies with managing the risks of containing the pandemic (Marinov & Marinova, 2020). “Working from Home” suddenly became the “new normal as many organizations and workers try to keep operating under the social distancing restrictions needed to stamp out the spread of the COVID-19 virus.” (Dockery & Bawa, 2020). For knowledge workers, in particular, this often led to “a radical shift from on-site to virtual collaboration” (Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai, & Bendz, 2020). For global professionals, and, often of necessity for expatriates who found themselves “locked out” of the countries they were hired to work in, this presented opportunities to “work from anywhere”. Initially, this concept was seen as a short-term quick-fix solution to the problem presented by COVID-19 lockdowns. However, as time goes on and the uncertainty of the ongoing pandemic continues, HR departments and global mobility professionals find themselves under pressure to implement the option for both existing and new hires (Meier & Traber, 2021).

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Research questions

The main objective of the current research was to explore the experiences of expatriates at the start and during global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to assess the impact of the pandemic on factors like restrictions on travel, concepts of family, home, and belonging, the support systems and the role of employers and organizations. The research questions were formulated as follows: (a) What did expatriates do when the pandemic started and borders were closing? (b) Did the priorities of the expatriates change? If so, how? (c) Did the expatriates’ meaning of travel for work, leisure and family change? If so, how?

3.2 | Research design

The research is based on a mixed method which includes qualitative and quantitative approaches (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011). It follows a sequential explanatory research design, which is typically used to help to explain and interpret quantitative results by collecting and analyzing follow-up qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2003; Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark, & Smith, 2011). In an explanatory research design, a large quantitative database can be used for the initial phase of the research followed by individual qualitative interviews with an identifier linked to the quantitative database (Subedi, 2016). Relying on this mixed method, we have collected data in three phases, of which the first two studies were quantitative and the third followed a qualitative research method.

Drawing on the nature of a pandemic, our research design has evolved over time. Our intention was to follow up on the experience of expatriates during a pandemic. This led us to create a longitudinal research plan adapting to the current situation from time to time (Figure 1).
In the first two phases of the research, we utilized a quantitative method using questionnaires which included some open-ended questions, while in the third phase of the data collection, we used a qualitative method by conducting semi-structured interviews. The first two questionnaires were created based on a literature review and the personal expatriate pandemic experience of the researchers. To establish content validity we used expert reviews. The three authors together with two external experts on the topic reviewed the questionnaire several times to evaluate if it captured the topic well. The five experts—three authors and two external experts—are researchers in the field of expatriation. They all have different nationalities and live in four different countries. This was an important factor during the content validation process. We started the next validation process only after the five experts on the topic commonly agreed on all the questions of the questionnaire. After the first step of validation, as a next step, we pilot tested the questionnaire on a subset (46 participants) of the intended expatriate population. After collecting their feedback, we adjusted the questions and started the data collection (Appendix S1).

We used snowball sampling as a nonprobability sampling technique drawing on expatriate networks (Table 1). “Snowball sampling consists of identifying respondents who are then used to refer researchers on to other respondents” (Atkinson & Flint, 2001 p. 1). We selected this sampling technique as the time factor was crucial in the era of a pandemic and we aimed to recruit research participants at the outset of the situation in the shortest time possible. This sampling method enabled the collection of large amounts of data from diverse samples (Wilson & Dewaele, 2010).

In the first phase of the research, the objective was to explore the immediate experience of expatriates, who at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, lived and worked in a country other than their home or citizenship country. The web link to the anonymous survey was sent by targeted email to individuals and shared via the social media pages of expatriate groups and networks. In this phase, we collected data from April to June 2020. The study group included 589 participants, from 55 countries with 48 nationalities.

In the next quantitative phase of the research was a follow-up questionnaire sent out to all the participants of the first phase, who had indicated their willingness to provide further information. The data was collected from July to September 2020.

Finally, we used a qualitative method and conducted semi-structured interviews online with those participants who were willing to share their experiences as an expatriate in 2020. We collected this...
data in the last week of 2020 and in the first week of 2021. We conducted 20 interviews, which is sufficient to apply thematic analysis as a qualitative method for interpretation of the data.

### 3.3 Research group

The definition of expatriates we applied throughout the research was clearly defined to the participants as “those who live ‘abroad’ (in a country other than your/passport or citizenship country)” including self-initiated expats, as well as those who had been expatriated by their employers and spouses, partners or adult family members. Participants had to be adults (over the age of 18).

Research participants in the first phase of the study, lived in 55 different countries, were born in 69 different countries, and had 48 citizenships (Table 2, Figure 2). Research participants in the last, qualitative phase of the study live in 11 different countries (Table 3).

### TABLE 2 Distribution of demographic variables of expatriates

| Demographic variables (N = 583) | F (%) |
|---------------------------------|-------|
| **Gender**                      |       |
| Male                            | 29%   |
| Female                          | 71%   |
| **Age in years**                |       |
| 18–20                           | 1.1%  |
| 21–29                           | 6.4%  |
| 30–39                           | 26.5% |
| 40–49                           | 30.2% |
| 50–59                           | 27.2% |
| 60 or older                     | 8.6%  |
| **Reason for living abroad**    |       |
| Expatriated by company/organization | 25.1% |
| Self-initiated expatriate (own choice to move abroad) | 45% |
| Accompanying spouse or partner of expatriate | 28.9% |
| Adult (over 18) child of expatriate | 1% |
| **Type of employment in the country** |       |
| Full-time employee              | 48.51%|
| Part-time employee              | 5.98% |
| Self-employed, freelance or own business | 19.54% |
| Voluntary work                  | 3.45% |
| Student                         | 3.45% |
| Stay-at-home spouse/parent       | 19.08%|
| **Field or profession**         |       |
| Government/diplomatic/consular  | 2.93% |
| Education                       | 15.58%|
| Medical, healthcare, pharmaceutical | 6.32% |
| Professional services, for example, legal, accounting | 9.03% |
| Manufacturing and engineering   | 6.32% |
| Energy and chemical             | 1.81% |
| IT and technology               | 9.48% |
| Financial services, insurance   | 5.64% |
| Fast-moving consumer goods      | 1.58% |
| Humanitarian, NGO, charity, missionary work | 3.61% |
| Publishing, journalism          | 2.48% |
| Travel, tourism                 | 4.51% |
| Coaching, training, consultancy | 11.74%|
| Sales, marketing, PR, advertising | 0.68% |
| Human resources                 | 0.23% |
| Other                           | 18.06%|
| **Total length of time lived abroad** |       |
| Under a year                    | 4.50% |
| 1–5 years                       | 23.20%|
| 6–10 years                      | 18.24%|
| 10 years or more                | 54.05%|

[FIGURE 2 Distribution of demographic variables of expatriates [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]]
RESULTS

The interpretation of the study result needs a complementary explanation. As the COVID-19 global pandemic situation is still ongoing, we aim to keep continuing our research. Thus, we chose to use a descriptive statistical data analysis process in order to leave space for further research phases and to allow for a final analysis of the process once the pandemic situation is deemed to have ended. As uncertainty is a crucial part of the current situation we aim to adapt the research, research design, and research analyses to this ongoing change.

4.1 First phase of the research

The objective of the first phase of the research was to explore what impact the pandemic has had on the transnational lives of expatriates and on global mobility in general. The questionnaire was built on mainly quantitative methods, however, included open-ended questions as well in order to explore the unique experience of the participants. The results demonstrate the objective of giving deeper insight into the data set and content.

During the data analysis process, we used descriptive statistics as well as coding. Despite the raft of difficulties experienced by many who took part in the first survey at the beginning of the pandemic, the majority of respondents (74%) indicated that they were “likely” or “very likely” to continue living and working abroad or to go abroad again to live and work.

Some were sanguine and saw the COVID-19 situation as “just another challenge” of living abroad. For others, living abroad has
**FIGURE 3** Motivation and priorities for expatriation before and since the COVID-19 situation [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

become a way of life or they are settled in the countries they are living in. At the outset of the pandemic, there was a shift in motivation and priorities for expatriation. (Figure 3). Before the COVID-19 situation, the top motivation factors were “seeing the world (58%)”, “new skills and experiences” (57%), and “career development” and “new opportunities” (48%). Only 25% chose “family reasons” and 19% “health, safety and security.”

After the arrival of COVID-19 “health, safety and security” jumped in importance, and “financial/economic reasons” rose slightly, while all the other factors including “Career development,” “new skills and experiences,” “seeing the world,” and “new opportunities for self”—dropped in importance (Figure 3).

The study included self-initiated expatriates (those who chose to live and work abroad), as well as those who had been expatriated by their employers. The research indicated that the borderless, international lifestyle which many global professionals and their families have taken for granted over past decades has been drastically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This chimes with news reports that thousands of international professionals around the world were separated for extended periods—sometimes months—from their spouses, partners, and children. Many lost their jobs and livelihoods along with their rights of residence in the countries where they worked and had set up home (Jenkins, 2020).

After borders started to close and flights were grounded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority (over 75%) of the participants stayed in the country they were living and working in. Most (87%) felt that they had made the right decision given the circumstances. The most common reasons cited for staying were that they felt “safe”, that it was their “home” and where they have their “life” and “work.” Some indicated they felt safer in the “host” country and had more trust in the measures taken by the governments of the host country than in their country of citizenship. The reverse was also cited by some of those who left and went to their “home” country. While 5% indicated they felt they had not made the right decision, 42% indicated “other” commenting either that they were “not sure yet” or that they “had no choice”.

Others indicated being torn by a dilemma; “Should I stay or should I go?” with pros and cons in either choice, for example; “leaving would have likely resulted in loss of job, staying meant not to see family for an unknown period of time”. 81% of the participants indicated that, with hindsight and knowing how the COVID-19 situation panned out, they would not have done anything differently. This is despite the fact that nearly 30% of the respondents found themselves separated from partners or immediate family members, some for several months when borders closed and flights stopped.

Most of those affected in this way were out of their countries of residence on work trips or on personal visits, such as to support elderly or unwell parents or family members, when COVID-19 took an abrupt turn for the worse causing borders to be closed and flights to be canceled. They suddenly found themselves “stranded” and unable to return to their homes and lives in countries which imposed strict entry restrictions. Often this meant that only citizens and permanent residents were allowed to enter the country (with additional strict quarantine and COVID-19 testing measures). Even foreigners with valid residence and employment permits were not allowed in without special permission, for example, for “essential workers” in the medical or healthcare fields.

Some of those stranded were fortunate enough to be in their “home” country and were able to stay with friends or family members. Others were in third countries and had the cost and inconvenience of having to find accommodation and make emergency living arrangements in an unfamiliar country. Alternatively, if they were not allowed to stay longer in that country, for example, because of visa restrictions, they then had no choice but to travel to their citizenship country and wait there until they were allowed back into their country of residence. In some instances, this meant children separated from both parents, and parents from each other, as in this case; “I’ve been unable to see my kids this year. They are stuck in China. My partner is stuck in Singapore. I’m stuck in the UK”.

At the beginning of summer in 2020, as border and travel restrictions eased around the world, reports indicated there were still tens of thousands of foreign residents waiting to get government permission to enter the countries they consider home and where they could be reunited with their family members. For many, this was an extremely stressful experience with a profound impact on their well-being and finances. Some respondents had given birth during this period without the presence or support of their partners and had newborns who were not able to see their fathers for extended periods. Numerous social media groups with thousands of members worldwide were set up to provide mutual support and advice for those separated in this situation.

The situation affected their attitude toward living abroad. Feelings of “disillusionment” were commonly reported by those who were...
“locked out” despite holding residence and work permits, commenting, for example, “I live there, pay tax, pay rent, volunteer for local charities, but without appeal or recourse, I’m banned from going home there and am still paying to live there. No empathy or consideration”. Others described feeling like a second-class citizen with comments like, “we work here, pay taxes, contribute to the economy and we are treated as if we are a burden on their society. We don’t count!”

Another common theme was “alienation” or “feeling unwelcome” and the feeling that “the expat/local divide has widened, which is upsetting” with comments like, “I very much feel like an outsider. I have read a lot of racist and negative comments towards expats which make me feel unwelcome.”

In other comments, respondents around the world and of a range of nationalities described a rise in “anti-foreign” sentiment with “outsiders” blamed for bringing in the coronavirus or foreigners seen to be flouting the rules around mask wearing and social-distancing measures.

However, for those who stayed together in host countries with closed borders and relatively low COVID-19 cases, life within the country was able to continue almost as normal, with few constraints, as in this example; “I am living a slightly isolated life, unable to leave and travel elsewhere at present. But within those confines, I am comfortable and can continue to work.”

The majority (78%) of participants in the survey experienced some sort of stay-home period with 60% describing the experience as “mandatory”. Some had contrasting experiences in their “home” and “host” countries, for example, “Stay at home in the US was much more lax; I had a very very strict mandatory quarantine on my return to Korea.”

Some had to quarantine several times in different countries in their efforts to be together including one respondent who had not seen her husband for several months after he was quarantined and in “lockdown” first in China, then Taiwan, and then quarantined in a hotel room in Singapore. Some found positive aspects of the lockdown, others found it really stressful causing major problems in their lives, such as “completely cut off with no family or friends in this country.” Some found the easing of restrictions post ‘lockdown’ more difficult, stating, “I’ve found the ambiguity and constantly changing rules post-confinement to be almost harder to bear.” Others also felt that the easing of restrictions benefited local citizens but did not take into consideration the needs of foreign residents. An example cited was the move from isolation to allowing meeting with members of another household, but only if that household is in the same family, thereby excluding foreign residents who do not have family in the country.

Over 75% of those surveyed indicated that the situation had impacted their attitude to living and working abroad, with 20% indicating it had “very impacted” and 6% indicating it had “completely impacted” their attitude. International travel (for work, leisure, and family visits) was very or completely impacted for most participants in the survey (92%). Like most of the world, since COVID-19, from March to the end of June 2020, most survey participants were grounded, reporting zero international trips during this time.

This was a stark contrast to their travel habits before the COVID-19 situation. According to the survey, 73% of those surveyed traveled internationally for work at least 1–2 times per year, with 36% traveling more than six times per year. 74% of those surveyed indicated that before the COVID-19 situation they traveled at least 1–2 times per year for personal/family visits, 23% indicated they traveled internationally for family visits 3–5 times per year, 6% traveled 6–10 times per year, and 3% more than 10 times per year for family visits alone. With “seeing new places” and “new experiences” being key attractions for those choosing to work abroad, survey participants also reported high levels of frequent travel for tourism/leisure prior to the COVID-19 situation, with 28% reporting international travel 1–2 times per year, 40% reporting 3–5 times per year, 19% reporting 6–10 times per year, and 9% reporting more than 10 times per year. Since COVID-19, between March and June 2020, 99% of those surveyed said their travel plans had been impacted, with most having made no international trips during that period. Most also predicted that their travel from June to August 2020 would be very (34%) or completely (52%) impacted, with 49% predicting that even beyond September, travel would be very (49%) or completely (13%) impacted.

Some saw the advantages of this, especially if they were able to continue working from home.

Comments included, “Unable to travel for my job, which is good for family life.” and “While I love traveling, it was also okay to have a break from the logistics of constant travel.” Others indicated that even when travel restrictions eased, they would think twice about “hopping on a plane for a business meeting or discussion which could just as easily be conducted on Zoom.” However, the significance of international travel to those who live and work abroad is about much more than business trips or holiday tourism. As one survey respondent said, “As an expat, maintaining relationships depends on international travel.”

Another commented, “I always stayed abroad on condition that I could jump on a plane in case I needed to attend to urgent family matters. Being unable to do this has made me reconsider the net benefit of staying overseas.” Travel restrictions on personal contacts and family members (including children who are studying in their “home” or other countries outside the country of residence) also had a big impact on those surveyed. Some reported that their children could not come “home” when their educational institutions closed down because of COVID-19 and that it was difficult for them to find somewhere to go. Those whose children did make it “home” before borders closed and flights were grounded were concerned about what to do when their visas expired, as this respondent commented, “My oldest child does not have a residence permit, so can only stay 90 days, then an extension of 20 days. Not sure what to do next.”

The great majority (98%) of participants indicated that the COVID-19 situation had impacted their home lives with 23% saying it had “completely impacted” and 27% that it had “very impacted” them. Social lives were also affected as well as work, with some citing the fact that friends are especially important to expatriates, who live so far away from family members. 53% indicated the situation had either completely or very impacted their work life—with the effects including job losses, salary cuts, and working from home. For those who lost their jobs during the pandemic, many found they also lost their right to live in their country of residence. Also, with many governments focusing their efforts on supporting the livelihoods of their own
citizens, some expatriates “fell between two stools”—not meeting the criteria for financial support schemes offered by their own government or the government of the country they are living and working in. Those expatriated by their companies had some redress and access to support from their companies. Some were offered repatriation, though most who were able to decide to stay put because they felt “safe” or because it was their “home”.

4.2 Second phase of the research

As the global pandemic had not stopped by the summer of 2020, willing participants from the first phase were sent a follow-up questionnaire to explore their situation after a few months of the pandemic. The same interpretation process for the data analysis as for the first phase of the study was used in order to obtain deeper insight into the content of the data.

Although the COVID-19 situation varied by country, 75% of the participants reported that they were still living in the same “host” country with no plans to move (either to their “home” country or to another “host” country), Interestingly there was only one participant planning to move soon to a new “host” country. The biggest impact they reported on their life was being unable to leave their country of residence (42%) followed by quarantine (35%), income reduction or loss (33%), disruption of children’s education, and separation from immediate family/household member/s for long period (both 30%). Participants reported the impact on international travels as one of the highest over 70%. The COVID-19 impact on their life was labeled as mostly negative over 50%. However, when asked, “Given the ongoing COVID-19 situation and other global disruption, how valuable do you think living and working abroad is?” over 82% indicated they thought it was valuable, very valuable, or extremely valuable for themselves and their families. While over 90% indicated they felt that it was valuable, very valuable, or extremely valuable in general, in terms of having a global workforce. Reasons given for this included: “Diversity of ideas and inputs” “We have to keep building the relationships. So you can see different perspectives. How else can you think global, act local?” and “A global perspective is an adaptive and necessary one. The pandemic has shown we are a global community, but it has increased xenophobia, so travel and global community is more important than ever now.”

When asked, “What personal skills, traits, previous experience or expertise have you found most helpful” during the COVID-19 situation, many cited skills and experience gained from living and working abroad, as in this example “Flexibility, resilience, I am used to uncertainty due to my kind of Expat life, independence, self-sufficiency (I am usually on my own due to husband’s travels).”

4.3 Third phase of the research

Reaching the end of 2020 without a major change in the pandemic situation we decided to follow up with our participants in a different way. We utilized a qualitative research method for the final phase of the data collection. Our aim was to gather more elaborated data which can explore deeper the overall experience of expatriates during the first 9 months of the pandemic as well as to examine their concept of the future. Therefore, we contacted all the participants who had previously completed both the first and second questionnaires and invited them for an online interview. Twenty participants were willing to take part in the final interview. Although for most research using thematic analysis, conducted with relatively homogenous individuals, 12 interviews should be a sufficient sample size (Ando, Cousins, & Young, 2014; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) we decided to use all 20 interviews for the data analysis. Generating initial themes is based on the idea of a central organizing concept, the central idea of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun, Clarke, & Rance, 2014). Thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the different perspectives of research participants, exploring similarities and differences, and identifying insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). In the process of data analysis, we followed an inductive approach.

The intention of the study was to search for themes which can describe the important phenomenon of the experience of the expatriates during a pandemic. The study follows the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm with the aim of understanding and reconstructing the experience of the participants with a more informed and sophisticated reconstruction. (It involves a highly interactive researcher–participant relationship as well as leads to discovered meaning and expression of experience.)

The research uses an inductive approach with the aim of building up a theory based on the collected data, allowing participant-generated meanings to be heard. Inductive in the sense of analysis of the theme as grounded in the data, rather than simple induction (Braun & Clarke, 2020). During the research process in both the interpretation of the researchers and the conducting of interviews, personal reflexivity is important. The researchers have a bias in that they share the same transnational experience that the interviewees have, which affects their interpretation. At the same time, it also gives them a deeper view and understanding of the participants’ experience.

For the data analysis process, the interview transcripts were managed using Quirkos computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS).

Relying on the narratives of the participants and focusing on their future concepts, four initial themes were generated during the data analysis process. These four themes are (a) assumptions about future directions, (b) experiencing the present, (c) wishes, and (d) vaccination.

Some quotes from the interviews related to Theme 1 “Assumptions about future directions” include fears, thoughts, and changes. “…as an expat... there’s this fear that you’re gonna do something wrong, because they were always living under this threat of inspection.” “You have to sort of bite your tongue and just... behave yourself because for fear of somebody reporting you, and underlying that... you’re hearing about families who do get told to leave because they break a COVID rule or they had too many people over for dinner.” “I really get worried for you know, the broader collective, and a lot of the cross cultural tapestry
of the web and networks and people.” “I worry, for people who are third
culture, people who are torn between, ...where life isn't simply defined,
you know, they're being put into boxes of countries by passport rather
than by identity.” “...And we're concerned mostly for our relatives.”
“What is one of my worries about this also, if, and then flight traffic and
prices are going to be the same. Because that's really something that for
us, as expats is important. And I am not sure it would be as automatic.”
“And I've been putting off trying to get there—while I've been trying
to get back there, I'm also concerned about not being able to come
back here.”

Direction describes a vector concept, moving forwards, backward,
or changing direction, as well as slowing down or accelerating planned
or suddenly occurring movements.

“So that I will, I'm here now, I canceled all subsequent plans, I had
planned to go back... I wasn't going to do that.” “I don't think it's really
derailed or changed or caused us to reassess our plans too significantly
short term. Yes, long term.” “To move away as soon as possible? If I could
go next month, I would go. Yeah, I know this is not the time to move.”
“So the biggest frustration for me it's basically put that on pause for,
I'm probably going to be a full calendar year behind my initial schedule I
think”.

Based on the narratives the direction of the future is considered
to be more challenging, required to be more cautious and reserved at
the same time. “I think mentally I decided that I won't expect to travel
next year”. “I don’t know what to do. So I didn’t want to stay... Because I
knew I figured they were going into lockdown. And I didn’t want to end
up being stranded there.”

The future actions of expatriates are led by uncertainty with
a lack of clarity and without a clear future image. “... makes you think
about the future, not that one has a clue how to tackle it”, “there's a lot
of uncertainty and lack of clarity for us”. “...getting stuck outside of the
country not being able to go where we want to, not knowing what's going
to happen next. Nobody to blame for a lot of that, but no control has
been very challenging”. “Because I think because we didn’t know when
the end was going to be, we didn't know how long it was going to go on.
So that was the worst part. Right? Not knowing.” “You know, there was I
guess, in terms of the workplace there was, you know, what was going to
happen? You know, if we do not have the student's, we will not have the
income and there might be job losses. And the expats would go first—you
know the higher paid professors going first—or what?”

The impact of COVID-19 generated changes in their planning in
the form of how, when and where. “It was also I have to say that there
was also uncertainty about my job because we didn’t know if they would
prolong my leave? Probably not. So most likely I will have to lose my job
to lose my contract. So that was also another big equation”: “The biggest
thing for me has been the impact on my own professional plans. Because
the plans that I had to launch my business were around telling my story
about living abroad. And suddenly, when I felt that that might disappear.”
“And I feel I had quite a number of friends in Singapore, leaving Singapore
pretty much between March and now. So, I mean, some of them was due
to COVID. Some of them was I mean, that’s the normal expat thing that
friends come and go. So some were scheduled to leave, even without
COVID others really left because of the situation. So yeah, at this point of
time, fewer friends, fewer, fewer opportunities to meet new friends.”

It also led to changes in their way of working including less busi-
ness travel, more online meetings, more short-term jobs abroad, and
the modality of work. “there are certain things I hadn’t considered
before that I realized that by working remotely, or virtually, it does open a
lot more doors in it before I was thinking it would have to be in a particu-
lar geographical location, and it would be more face to face training.”
“You realize just how valuable things like zoom are, because you know, if
this had happened 10 years ago, our ability to connect with others would
have been quite different.” “I think universities as well as many other
organizations are trying to think about how to cut costs, and especially
capital costs, and for lower equipment and maintenance is quite, quite
expensive. Yeah, so there is still some uncertainty.”

Besides the labor characteristics, COVID-19 has a big impact on
the future in the priorities of expatriates, where previous leading
vocational priorities became secondary motivation and family
emerged as a pivotal motivation factor. “I think that there will still be a
few premium locations where people will be willing to relocate to with
their families, but otherwise, it will become progressively more difficult.”
“Just to, you know, at the moment just to reestablish our lives back here,
really and to pick up friendships and maintain the friendships that we've
you know, we've got and family and, you know, I, I haven’t been able to
see my mother for three years. And she's got dementia now, you know,
reestablish some connections that have that have, we've lost because of
we were away for a while. And it makes you think twice about we live in
the countryside now. We always wanted to move back into a town or a
city after living in a city as expats.”

Priority toward family also appeared in the process of planning
and choosing future locations, where being safe and being easy to
visit by family members was a crucial point. “When that opportunity is
taken away, it certainly does make you wonder quite a lot about what the
benefits are”. “I would say this uncertainty about the possibility to
travel that's definitely the most difficult because it gives me uncertainty
about the possibility to meet my family”. “So that's my biggest preoccu-
pation, my biggest. It's the capacity of giving myself and my children qual-
ity time with their grandparents... and often enough.”

The pandemic also acted as a catalyst, as a pushing factor acceler-
ating previous future plans such as translocation, relocation, or even
retirement. “My plan is going to be, let's call it partial retirement in a
way...Because of this you know, I'm a bit tired...I was tired, my eyes,
everything I'm physically tired.” “I think, you know, life is short, and once
we can do the things that we can do, we're probably going to charge off
and do them.” “I think COVID hurried the decision up. So I did have that
thought before over the past one, two, maybe three years, but not very
often. And not very concrete. And it was just like that sometimes it would
be so nice to be back, but then the very next day I was already—It's so
nice to be instead in Singapore on so it was there but it wasn’t very
strong and not very concrete. So I think that my experiences in the year
2020 probably com—reduced the decision making process that might
have taken me another two years on top. Compressed it into one year. I
think it sped a decision up that would have come anyway.”
A different way of looking at the concept of globalization has been described as moving towards a less diverse, less global, and more local direction. “It will make it more difficult to find people that are willing to freely move about on a global basis and that’s before we get to the discrimination issues.” “I think the understanding, the respect that people pay to those that are different by nationality, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, political beliefs, I think that will also suffer going forward.”

“In a cross cultural context.... I worry about the world not being as diverse spread across....the pendulum swinging back to so I don’t know how many hundreds... have returned home, and we used to be quite spread around the world, and I’m going—so what does that mean for our general global reach as a country?” “I worry about the tensions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in countries when countries’ governments are clearly looking after their national citizens, and what that’s doing for the broader global fabric of the world, and longer term relationships across countries and nationalities.” “I really get worried for you know, the broader collective, and a lot of the cross cultural tapestry of the web and networks and people.”

Finally, besides uncertainty, there is also a wide range of ambiguity towards expatriate life and as a concept referring to a potential end of this type of transnational life. “So there’s no mopping up after the crisis, because we’re still navigating. And I don’t think we know the depth of the tolls yet. So I think the importance of good people around and putting people into personal and colleagues, making sure you’ve got that in use is critical.”

Theme 2 “Experiencing the present” indicates a sense of limitation in planning as well as an emotional state generated by the current situation. “The inability to travel, and to make travel plans has been very frustrating.” “Take every day as it comes...One day at a time.” “I think we’ve just learnt to just take one week at a time and just fill out diaries one week at a time and then take opportunities when they present themselves.” “I don’t know, basically I just focused all my energy on getting through each day.”

Lack of travel and limited capability of planning led to focus on present moments, today. “My inability to travel or perhaps call it unwillingness, my wife and I were not willing to take the risk of, of moving about and suffering the hardship of having to quarantine ourselves.” Indulging in the present moments however, can also re-enforce limitations and emotional reactions toward the limits. “The biggest downside of it is to miss quality time with my parents that are aging and aging quickly”. “So that international lifestyle was something that we had both just taken for granted. I think once the pandemic hit, that’s where things became interesting, because we suddenly realized that, you know, getting on a plane and going to visit relatives in the way that we had done before was no longer possible.” “It’s really strange, not being able to”.

This includes dealing with everyday challenges such as the fatigue of wearing masks, online meetings, zoom calls, as well as a general feeling of awkwardness. “Not many people are in the luxurious situation of having a segregated home office where they can distance themselves from family routines.” “I see the risk of this, that this networking how we build networks based on personal context, I am a little afraid that this will change” “And one’s tired, one’s zoomed out, one’s...um, but that’s not to say there haven’t been marshmallow moments through the year”. “Workshops I’d normally do in a room suddenly had to become virtual. So the whole dynamics changed.” “So I felt like it was difficult to meet people and make friends, even at work and at home, I could see people on the zoom.” “And we also limit the people that we meet physically, to those that we know to observe the equivalent rules in their own conduct. And it’s been quite hurtful. Where we needed to tell people you’re not welcome at all.” “I’m starting to be a bit tired of this. Because it’s basically you shop on the phone, you talk to people on the phone, you make a point everything is on the phone and starting to get a lot...I mean I’m on the phone. I don’t know how many hours but it’s really, really a lot. And now that I started working and I have several meetings a day, even making a phone call with my parents, I’m like, Oh no, not another video call.”

“We didn’t call it lockdown. It was a circuit breaker. And they extended it. And I was really starting, I was struggling, particularly when they extended it (it was a double barrel extension).” “Everything feels more significant to arrange to get together with people, especially if it’s more than just another couple than if it was, yeah, normally, we would just say, oh, come for dinner, So it’s, yeah, it’s just, it hasn’t felt natural.”

It also refers to moments that are not present or included when expected or supposed to be, such as constantly missing family, social life as well as face to face meetings. “Because expats, maybe I’m wrong, but I feel like expats travel more than local people do, right? Because we’ve got to visit family and things like that. But because, I think, as an expat, we don’t just travel for tourism, we travel for love, and family, things like that, right?” “Missing of course going to the office and seeing the people in real life”, “I miss traveling and the excitement and the adrenaline of traveling.” “I’m missing that whole fabric of the social life and the trips, so people who’d visit me, you’d spend a day with them, and that’s rich, as they’re passing through, or you, you go back to your home country, and you spend a couple of days with a really good girlfriend, and, you know, that’s not happening.” “I think it’s also kind of stressful for us, because we’re so far away, and we don’t know when they will be able to see their grandkids.” “It’s not as exciting anymore. I don’t want to be here. It’s just driven home the point that I want to be back in my home country now. I don’t want to be here anymore.” “You can’t bring the kids in for Christmas. And obviously you can’t bring them back. I’m not even allowed back even if I wanted to at the moment now.” “Reframing things has been really very much what this year for me has been about what is family? What is home? What is travel?”

Theme 3 “Wishes” as the opposite of being in the present moment tend to summarize all the concepts they are looking forward to regaining and re-experiencing again. “It would just be nice to have the freedoms back.” “I mean, I would hope that, you know, my social life gets back to some kind of normal again, because that’s what I miss the temptation as soon as we are allowed to be jumping on planes and bankrupting myself is, you know, I think I personally think that a lot of people are going to be like that.” “It really hit me the other day that the youngest one said—we were talking—his brother was talking about—‘Ah I’m looking forward to when COVID is over so we can do everything like before.’ And the brother was like—‘How was it before?’ Wow- he couldn’t remember, he said!” “Anticipating emotional security, this concept can create a sense of belief and hope for the future. ‘I learned the significance of hope.’ ‘So in a way that also gives me a sense of determination, to keep going down the path that I was going to because this isn’t going to go on
forever.” “I just want it to be over.” In their narratives they constantly emphasized their high hope for being able to travel again “And hopefully, we might be able to do our own travel, personal travel soon.” “Life won’t go back to being fully normal, but at least to have some, some elements of that, like being able to travel”, “being able to jump on a plane tomorrow and see them tomorrow” their wish for their familiar, joyful social life, “I was looking for things like choirs, I was looking for music groups, I was looking for dance classes, because I used to dance a lot. And those kinds of things, I’m really itching to get back into, not only because they are activities that I enjoy, but because I want that social connection.” their desire of being able to visit children, family and friends and simply resuming everything that has been interrupted. “So there’s light at the end of the tunnel, and it is getting easier. Thank goodness.” “We tell one another that we need to meet in person and drink a glass of wine and do some food, walk or take a walk in the Georgian mountains, which are beautiful. And we sort of keep pushing that forward.” “I think that hopefully on the other side of COVID, we can return to more personal interactions.” “And I anticipate that once things are back under control, there’ll be a lot of pent up desire, so to speak, for people to go out and experience even more of the world than perhaps they had thought that they wanted to do before.” “At the end of the day, there is a light at the tunnel, just that the tunnel might be 10,000 kilometers long, but there is a light at the end of it.”

Anticipating the future, the concept of endless variations of vaccinations and vaccination programs as the fourth theme were not missing from any narratives, even though there is enormous uncertainty around it. “I know a lot of people think oh, now with the vaccine, and I hope 2021 will bring change, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it doesn’t.” “I think most of us would have to get the vaccine and that’s going to take a lot of time. And then still, we’ll have to see the fact that it is going to protect us.”

Yet, there is a consensus around vaccination that it will bring change. “...on the way to this new normal, we want to co-create. I think the vaccine is the first stage, obviously.” “I think the vaccine is going to be the standout thing for everybody. I just hope everyone gets on board with it, to be honest, but and like, I hope that well, all the countries in the world get on board with a vaccine passport and things like that, because that’s really going to be the only way for everyone. If every country gets on board and says, ‘You’re vaccinated, you’re good to go.’ That’s going to be the key thing.” “And in the situation now, it seems, it still seems a little bit never-ending because they’re like, you know, vaccines may not be rolled out for another year or 18 months or whatever. But still, there’s still some hope right? It’s still here.”

Notwithstanding the belief in this change, there are many unclear possibilities as well as questions around it. No one knows how long the vaccination process will take. “Goodness knows, you know, I mean, this vaccination process, I mean, it’s going to take months.”

There is also a doubt about whether there will be trust in the vaccine. “Vaccine may not work, well, we’ll see.” “You know, are you going to trust a vaccine? Are you really going to trust a vaccine? Are you going to let people back in who’ve been vaccinated?”

They also question the efficiency of the governments’ reaction to the vaccination program, whether they will let vaccinated people back into the country? “I just really hope they can roll out the vaccines as quickly as possible to everyone and not just—I feel bad saying it—because yes I’m in a foreign country, and I know they’re going to prioritize certain people, but I just hope that they can think of us as well.” “what I’ve learned is that, you know, being an expat when we’re not treated like the locals, and I know that...we’re going to be bottom tier to get the vaccine. So I know we’re going to be waiting a while to get the vaccine.”

5 | DISCUSSION

An epidemic (or pandemic) makes a useful lens through which fundamental patterns of social value and institutional practice can be examined. Social structural and attitudinal factors create patterns of social response to disease constructed by a particular society (Rosenberg, 1992). The case of expatriate society during the COVID-19 pandemic is no different. Exploring the special patterns of response can support better responses at individual, family, and institutional levels in a post-pandemic world and in the face of the inevitable global disruptions of the future.

Our first question was about the decision the expatriates made when the pandemic started and borders closed. Interestingly, after borders started to close and flights were grounded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the participants stayed in the country they were living and working in. Most of them felt that they had made the right decision given the circumstances, as they felt “safe.” it was perceived as their “home” based on their “life” and “work.” In some cases, they even felt safer in the “host” country and had more trust in the measures taken by the governments of the host country than in their country of citizenship.

The biggest impact on their life they reported was being unable to leave their country of residence, quarantine, income reduction or loss, disruption of children’s education, and separation from immediate family/household member/s for a long period. For the respondents, the impact on international travel was one of the highest. Many of the expatriates taking part in the research found themselves separated from partners or immediate family members, some for several months when borders closed and flights stopped. On top of their family issues, changes in their ways of working occurred including less or no business travel, more online meetings, more short-term jobs abroad, and the modality of work itself. They reported a high level of impact on their work life—with the effects including job losses, salary cuts, and working from home. For those who lost their jobs during the pandemic, many found they also lost their right to live in their country of residence. Clearly, the restrictions affected their professional as well as their personal lives, as found in other studies (Gartner, 2020; Griffin & Denholm, 2020; Herath & Herath, 2020).

The sense of loss, isolation, and stress observed by other researchers (Calliguri et al., 2020; Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020) was obvious, due to the insecurity created by both professional and personal restrictions.

Our second question in the research project concerns the priorities of the expatriates, to find out if these changed or not due to the
pandemic. We can conclude that at the outset of the pandemic, there was indeed a shift in motivation and priorities for expatriation. According to the survey, the top motivating factors for foreign assignments before the COVID-19 situation were: “seeing the world,” “new skills and experiences,” “career development,” and “new opportunities.” However, immediately at the onset of the pandemic, priorities changed, with “health, safety and security” and “financial reasons” rising in importance, although “career development,” “new skills and experiences,” and “seeing the world” and “new opportunities for self” were still rated as “very important.” The pandemic seems to have had an impact on the future in the priorities of expatriates, where previous leading vocational priorities became secondary motivation and family emerged as a pivotal motivation factor.

Another original finding in this research is that the pandemic also acted as a catalyst, as a pushing factor accelerating previous future plans such as translocation, relocation, or even retirement. At the same time, the pandemic forced them to focus on the present moment, reiterating limitations and emotional reactions toward their limitations. These included dealing with everyday challenges such as fatigue from wearing masks, online meetings, zoom calls, as well as a general feeling of awkwardness. It also refers to moments that are not present or included when expected or supposed to be, such as constantly missing family, social life as well as face-to-face meetings. The impact of COVID-19 generated changes in their planning in the form of how, when and where.

The final research question refers to the meaning of travel for work, leisure, and family change, and the changes that may have occurred in the meaning of mobility. The significance of international travel to those who live and work abroad is about much more than business trips or holiday tourism. Travel restrictions on personal contacts and family members (including children who are studying in their “home” or other countries outside the country of residence) had a big impact on those surveyed. Limitation of travel indicated a change in their plans. Moving forwards, backward, or changing direction, as well as slowing down or accelerating planned or suddenly occurring movements. Based on the travel limitations, the future is considered to be more challenging, requiring them at the same time to be more cautious and reserved.

Lack of travel and limited capability of planning led to a focus on present moments. In their narratives, they constantly emphasized their high hopes for being able to travel again, their desire to be able to visit children, family, and friends, and simply to resume everything that has been interrupted. There is a consensus around vaccination that it will bring change, that it is a key to being able to freely travel again.

### 6 | IMPLICATIONS

The results of the survey reveal changing norms for expatriation and global mobility as a result of the current experience. “None of us are safe, until all of us are safe” said UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (UN News, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the interconnectedness of the world and the need for global collaboration across borders. Successive waves and new variants of COVID-19 show that the outlook is still uncertain, with restrictions to cross-border movement likely to continue impacting the global workforce for the foreseeable future. Uncertainty will play a larger role in the management of foreign assignments. New models for global talent management are emerging and there have been innovations and technology which have facilitated the continuity of virtual work. However, according to this research, the biggest challenge facing expatriates and skilled global professionals is not directly work-related but is the impact of mobility restrictions on families and relationships. Ensuring that individuals will not be separated indefinitely or long-term from their immediate and extended family members is the key concern for the majority of participants taking part in the research.

Resolving the current disruption and dealing with the looming economic and environmental crises will require the collaboration across borders of the world’s best talent, be it in face-to-face meetings or online, requiring new communication skills. Maximizing the potential of the complex and volatile global marketplace of the 21st century requires a range of international skills, a global perspective, and intercultural competence, along with a “global mindset” to lead and facilitate effective work and communication. The development of these skills and characteristics is shown to be enhanced by “living and working abroad” and is one of the key reasons that individuals choose and HR departments encourage international assignments. Solutions such as combining remote and onsite working (hybrid working), redefining, and even splitting jobs are being explored (Alexander et al., 2021; Jesuthasan, Malcolm, & Cantrel, 2020). With the pandemic situation looking set to continue for some time, along with the discovery by many individuals and organizations of the benefits and possibilities offered by such arrangements, the prospect of international remote working and virtual assignments will continue (Meier, 2021). Organizations are looking at versions of offshoring and outsourcing as possible solutions to the compliance issues they face in engaging global professionals to work remotely in locations which, because of border or other restrictions they cannot physically move to (see International Labour Organization, 2020). In light of the current uncertain situation, even as vaccines are rolled out, borders begin to reopen and the world takes cautious steps toward an uncertain future that is shaped around living with the pandemic as well as with the climate crisis, new models for a globally mobile workforce are emerging, raising the possibility of more nuanced approaches to global projects and less binary options for global professionals and their families. The lessons learned from the pandemic have implications for globally mobile professionals and their families as well as for the organizations they work for and which support them. As illustrated in Figure 4, disruption, whether as a local or global crisis, with travel restrictions and limitations, has a profound impact on the motivation of expatriates, shifting their focus of concern to their immediate and then extended family and to their health and safety. It also impacts their concept of home. This has implications for organizations’ HR and global mobility functions who need to assess and take these into consideration when deploying and supporting expatriates. It is also linked to the HR and Learning and Development priorities, with agility, resilience, managing uncertainty, crisis communication, and developing trust becoming increasingly important for those involved. A new skillset has
also emerged from the crisis, emphasizing the importance of human connection with caring, collaboration, communication, community, compassion, and creativity all coming to the fore at this time. In terms of the future of global work itself, hybrid and virtual options have emerged making more options and levers available to individuals and to organizations to deploy local, regional, and global employees on short- or long-term virtual, in-person or hybrid assignments.

7 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

This research shows obvious limits. The survey was not based on a representative sampling technique therefore we emphasize the limitation of the utilization of the result. At the same time, the snowball sampling technique allowed us to react to the situation immediately and collect the first data at the very beginning of the pandemic. The follow-up questionnaire was sent out to the participants of the first survey, but led to fewer participants being included in the second phase of the study, creating certain limitations. Using simple descriptive statistics in the first two phases of the research allowed us to have a quick overview of the data, yet restricts the deeper interpretation and understanding of the data. The third phase of the data analysis using reflexive thematic analyses gave us a deeper understanding of the expatriates’ experience during a pandemic, however, by focusing on future implications, it limits the utilization of the rich data.

Further research opportunities present themselves. Following a longitudinal research design especially during a unique period of time such as a pandemic, gives us a special opportunity to understand a common concept, theme or phenomenon from a very different perspective. This indicates two possible approaches to immersing in the data analysis: one is to complete a deeper analysis, the other is to keep following up on the situation, and to create a long-term longitudinal research design. Another expanding research stream is the future of mobility, given the uncertainties created by the pandemic and the climate crisis, as well as the role of HR in managing global talent in what will be a “new normal”. As we have seen, priorities have shifted from career-related values to family values and health, and this may require a new approach to global mobility and foreign assignments. The impact of remote work and online meetings on international collaboration needs to be explored, as well as the development of new skills for online meetings. Finally, the concept itself of what is “home” for the international workforce has been questioned by expatriates and would support future approaches to global mobility and foreign assignments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We thank Waltraut Ritter, Dr Vijayan P. Munusamy, and Kristin Hunter-Thomson for providing valuable feedback and support.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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How to cite this article: Végh, J., Jenkins, J., & Claes, M.-T. (2022). “Should I stay or should I go?”—Why the future of global work may be less binary: Lessons on approaches to global crises from the experiences of expatriates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thunderbird International Business Review, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1002/tie.22309