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UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS DURING SOCIAL ISOLATION – A HERMENEUTICAL STUDY OF FILIPINO DOMESTIC WORKERS DURING COVID-19

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This paper prepared by **MA. CRISTEL G. JANCE** with the title: **"UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS DURING SOCIAL ISOLATION A HERMENEUTICAL STUDY OF FILIPINO DOMESTIC WORKERS DURING COVID-19"** is hereby accepted by the Faculty of Information and Communication Studies, U.P. Open University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Program.

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Biographical Sketch

Ma. Cristel G. Jance was born in Bacolod City, Philippines. After completing her schoolwork at Colegio de San Jose in Iloilo City in 2008, Cristel entered the University of the Philippines in the Visayas. In April of 2012, she graduated with a Bachelor of Science with a major in Business Administration - Marketing.

Since 2015, she has been employed as a Marketing and Sales Executive at Window-Cool (S) Pte Ltd in Singapore and in September 2019, she entered the Master of Development Communication graduate program at the University of the Philippines Open University.

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And finally, thank you to my UPOU classmates, family, and friends who endured this long process with me, always offering support and encouragement.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all foreign domestic workers and migrant workers. Your sacrifices and love for family and country are unparalleled. Truly you are the modern heroes of today!

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Abstract

Purpose: Foreign domestic workers (FDWs) engage in intercultural and interpersonal interactions day in and day out, but the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their communication dynamics as social isolation from the lockdown and restrictions created limitations on their communication channels and tendencies. This study aimed to examine and understand the "stay-at-home" experiences of FDWs with foreign employers, especially their challenges in communication, in the multicultural landscape of Singapore.

Methods: Interviews were conducted with 5 Filipino FDWs with employers of varying ethnicities. Their narratives were recorded, analyzed, and interpreted through a qualitative approach, particularly using hermeneutical phenomenology.

Findings: Three main themes emerged from the participants: (1) Silence as a Reluctant Yes, (2) Striving for Multicultural Coexistence, and (3) Interpersonal Communication During a Double Pandemic. These were further explained and expounded under seven sub-themes.

Conclusion: From the constant and lengthy togetherness of the lockdown, shifts in communication dynamics were primarily involving power inequalities and differences in cultural perspectives inside the household. As these were emphasized, violation of worker rights, especially on the FDWs' rest days became prevalent as they struggled with boundary negotiation. Reading body language and emotions served great importance in navigating through barriers of effective communication, achieving multicultural coexistence, and overcoming loneliness from social isolation.

Keywords: Communication Dynamics**,** Social Isolation, COVID-19, Foreign Domestic Workers, Domestic Helpers, Multicultural Singapore, Pandemic Narratives

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Communication enables man, the ultra-social animal, to thrive and survive. It is our effective communication and social coordination that have allowed us to evolve our cognitive skills and information sharing to become far more advanced as compared to other earthly species and progress our society to how it is today (Tomasello, 2014). It has therefore become our very nature to imbue interpersonal and intrapersonal communication in almost every aspect of our daily lives.

For Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs), communication plays a huge part in both their work hours and personal lives. The work scope and environment of FDWs include intercultural interactions with their foreign employers and keeping in touch with their distant family members back home which often involve interpersonal digital communication. Because of COVID-19, it has become even more important to look into the communication dynamics in the lives of FDWs especially since the shift to a "staying at home" setup had caused them much impact such as the limitations in their day-to-day communication and social interactions.

“Staying at home” has become a global response to ensure safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Telecommuting or work-from-home arrangements have been implemented for a significant number of workers and offices. Schools have shifted to online classes and learning modules for students. Even weddings, reunions, and religious gatherings have moved to live streams and Zoom meetings in exchange for

the usual face-to-face set-up. Here in Singapore, the change to a “staying at home” setup had also been closely followed by the general public as an after-effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My interest in studying the communication dynamics of FDWs during the pandemic arose from the interactions and talks about COVID-19 that I’ve had with fellow Filipinos from our church during our weekly Zoom prayer meetings. Since I am also a foreigner living and working in Singapore, I understood that our struggles of surviving through the pandemic came with burdens from being away from our families and our inability to freely travel home to the Philippines. However, it struck me after listening to the experiences and prayer concerns of our other church members who were working as FDWs or domestic helpers that the pandemic created a bigger change in their lives compared to other foreign workers.

Many FDWs shared negative experiences that touched and burdened me as a development communicator. I felt that there needed to be more discourse regarding the unique and often unfortunate predicament of FDWs who spent their “staying at home” period socially isolated with foreign employers and not their own family members. In development communication, acknowledging the existence of a problem and giving light to such issues are often the first steps to facilitate change and development. I started this study in hopes that the narratives I gathered will aid in the creation of a positive change in the experiences of FDWs, especially if another pandemic will come to pass.

Social isolation is a communication problem as it creates challenges that disrupt and impede the flow of communication (Koszalinski & Olmos, 2022). Communication is a meaning-making process and so lost or limited safe channels and spaces for communication can affect the quality of messages being delivered and received.

Social isolation while “staying at home” has been even more burdensome and challenging for FDWs since their current home is also their place of employment. Along with the blurred lines between their time of work and time of rest, there have also been disruptions in their fundamental channels of communication and the consistent close companionship with their foreign employers; thus, giving rise to amplified intercultural exchanges now more than ever. With limited opportunities to socialize with friends, even on their rest days, because of restrictions on social group gathering sizes and closures of some places of leisure for the safety of the community, foreign domestic workers mostly experienced personal social interactions during the pandemic only with the family members of the foreign employers they are living with.

These limitations in social interaction had been especially challenging for some FDWs without their own bedrooms and were sleeping in the house’s common spaces since the constant close proximity and presence at the home of their employers meant that they didn’t even have a space to rest when they were free from chores (Antona, 2020). With their employers mostly working from home and their employer’s children on home-based schooling, foreign domestic workers were also left with more meals to prepare and more chores to do while having lesser

breaks and lesser space for themselves, greatly affecting their physical and mental states (Aware, 2020).

And so, these complicated communication dynamics and altered working conditions along with the financial woes, prolonged homesickness, and health concerns for themselves and for their family, have created a uniquely new meaning of “staying at home” during social isolation for foreign domestic workers.

Statement of the Problem

Complex shifts of dynamics inside the household, especially when it came to communication tendencies and the emphasis on cultural differences during their day-to-day interactions greatly influenced the quality of experiences of FDWs during their social isolation. The problem being addressed by this study is the effect of such communication dynamics on the lived experiences of FDWs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering government pandemic restrictions have severely limited the opportunities of FDWs to physically socialize with peers, even on their rest days, and obscured their travel plans to periodically see their loved ones at home, face-to-face interactions of FDWs were mostly limited only to the family members of their foreign employers. Cultural harmony inside the home was therefore highly important in garnering positive experiences for FDWs in social isolation.

And so, my research questions were:

(1) What were the experiences in communication dynamics of Filipino domestic workers in Singapore during their social isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic?

(2) How were the intercultural communication dynamics between foreign employers and Filipino domestic workers during their “stay-at-home” period?

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the experiences of Filipino domestic workers’ communication dynamics during social isolation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore;
- To understand the intercultural communication dynamics of foreign employers and Filipino domestic workers in a “staying-at-home” setting.

In this study, I aimed to examine the lived experiences, especially focusing on the communication dynamics both inside and outside of the household for Filipino FDWs in social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. My additional focus was to also understand the intercultural exchange and communication of FDWs with their foreign employers of varying ethnicities in Singapore as they spent extended periods together at home and to illuminate the meaning of “staying at home” during a pandemic for them.

Significance of the Study

Although the end of the COVID-19 pandemic may be approaching, safety restrictions to contain the widespread of the virus continue to be implemented. “Staying at home” is still widely practiced in today’s “new normal”. Therefore, this study is significant as it aims to address real and ongoing problems still being experienced by foreign domestic workers today. In Development Communication helping people, especially the underprivileged, have a voice is a building block for social change and transformation. For the community of foreign domestic workers, the exploration and sharing of their lived experiences through this study can empower them to join in the participatory communication of their encountered issues and concerns during the pandemic. The sharing of real and recent experiences can contribute to the strategic development of solutions and grounds for actions for the betterment of the working and living conditions of FDWs.

This study is made even more significant as domestic workers are one of the most marginalized groups when it comes to overseas foreign workers. Especially prone to oppression and violation of rights, there is a need to highlight, communicate, and bridge their concerns and predicaments to the stakeholders and policymakers that can give a solution to their issues and improve their working conditions (Khan & Butt, 2019). The welfare and protection of foreign domestic workers must be given importance considering they give significant contributions to the economy of both their home and work countries as their remittances allow for more purchasing power to their families and their employers are enabled with more opportunities to advance their careers (HelperPlace, 2020).

This study will also give emphasis on the effects of poor communication dynamics, intercultural misunderstandings, and limited social interactions from pandemic restrictions as an influential factor in the decline in the mental states of foreign domestic workers to support other research showing increased rates of depression and suicide during COVID-19 (John et al., 2020).

I hope that information gathered from this study will illuminate the real experiences of foreign domestic workers and this data can be used as a reference and framework by other researchers, especially other development communicators, conducting similar studies on domestic workers in other nations or states. The findings in this study will hopefully showcase the impact of healthy communication and proper cultural appreciation for FDWs and incorporate this importance in the strategic and updated addressing of their concerns and well-being.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to only Filipino nationals currently working as foreign domestic workers in Singapore. FDWs of other nationalities were not included. This also did not include the experiences of FDWs who have already resigned from their employers and have already left Singapore either to go back to the Philippines or move to a different country. This study was limited to participants who were geographically available to the researcher and has not reached the FDWs who may still be serving social isolation until this day.

There is also the limitation on what was left unsaid by the participants in their narratives, along with segments that were explicitly requested by the participants to be omitted due to personal risks in the event of their identification.

Gaps in Literature

Communicating about the COVID-19 pandemic experiences of marginalized groups is important to give sustained attention to the improvement and development of updated strategies to address their ever-changing needs, yet I have found that the gap remained when it came to communities like those of foreign domestic workers that experienced the anxieties of the pandemic while being miles away from their loved ones and were unable to leave the premises of their employers. There have been numerous studies on the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of groups and individuals but coverage of research participants was mostly on those that were stationary yet safe in their own homes and served isolation together with their own family members (McKenna-Plumley, et. al., 2021; Luchetti, et al., 2020).

And from the very limited literature on FDWs, there were even fewer studies regarding their challenges in communication from social isolation. The few available studies on women domestic workers that came up in my search of related references focused on the impact of the pandemic on their financial status, economic standing, and worker rights (Yadav, V. & Jacob, S., 2021) and not on the impact of communication and cultural dynamics in their long isolation. There was not much academic exploration on how communication dynamics during a pandemic can affect

the options and decisions of foreign domestic workers to either stay and endure the social isolation or to go home and give up on their jobs completely.

I also believe that the demographics of the small city-state of Singapore played an important factor and made this study different as compared to other research done on other bigger and more homogenous countries considering the fusion of very diverse languages, cultures, races, and ethnicities made communication and interaction of foreign domestic workers with their foreign employers more challenging and individually different per household.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Theoretical Frameworks

The Theory of Interpretation

Paul Ricoeur (1976) developed The Theory of Interpretation based on an interrelationship between the interpreter and the interpretation. His key concepts denote that interpretation and intersubjective knowledge is a hermeneutical process wherein the interpretation first passes a naïve understanding in plain view of the text. Then the grasping of a structure will emerge from the determining and analysis of patterns seen from the repeated reading of the interpreter. Finally, the interpretation comes to completion by seeing a part into a whole through a comprehensive understanding to validate the process (Geanellos, 2000).

Ricoeur's approach further inspired subsequent researchers to apply his method of interpretation in the meaning-making of narratives that focus more on the future rather than the past (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). The Theory of Interpretation has been an integral framework in qualitative studies that involved the analysis of narratives and the capturing of meanings from existential realities (Hardwick, 2017). By separating the author from the text, the meaning of the text can be further described and allowed for approaches with alternative interpretations (Gerdin et al., 2021).

The Interpretive Theory of Culture

To further understand about the communication differences and tendencies of people of varying ethnicities, it would be important to view things through a tailored cultural lens.

Clifford Geertz (1973) discusses in the Interpretive Theory of Culture that since culture is an unphysical and intangible entity, understanding it relies heavily on the perspective and interpretation of the person doing the analysis, especially if he or she is an outsider. The meaning and significance of the actions of people may not be according to how they are plainly seen by others. A “thick description” will be observed and understood only when viewing it through the eyes of the culture unique to it, taking into consideration the beliefs and practices associated with it. For instance, the rapid opening and closing of one eye can be viewed as a “twitch” for most people in general. But for those to whom the message was intended, the “wink” can be a mode of signal with a deeper connotation.

Going back to the context of this study, the actions and communication tendencies of employers in Singapore are also subject to the personal interpretations of their Filipino domestic workers. In general, Filipinos are known to champion “pakikisama” or smooth interpersonal relationships (SIR), inclined to avoid conflict with aim of having a harmonious overall environment (Masumi, 2019). But a closer understanding of this trait would lead to the realization that Filipinos also highly value the concept of “kapwa” or reciprocity (Mendoza & Perkinson, 2003). In line with this distinction, it is possible for an employer to consider their FDW as “very submissive”

when she is not inclined to argue or explain herself but this submissiveness may actually be the manifestation of the FDW's inclination to not answer back in order to maintain the harmony of the home (though this is also brought on by the difference in social classes between employer and employee). Another is the possible assumption of the employer that the FDW is well-provided for as long as she is fed and rested in a safe environment. But for the Filipino FDW, there is still that need for "pakikisama" that is not being addressed. Beyond basic needs also lies the existing innate cultural code of wanting or needing reciprocated friendliness, respect, social interaction, and interpersonal communication at certain levels.

Though this trait might appear common to people of all nationalities and ethnicities in general, the desire for reciprocated interaction has varying levels as per the culture accustomed to it. Filipinos are known to have tightly-bound familial ties and a profound sense of community. When left isolated or disassociated from this concept of family and community, Filipinos feel a deeper impact mentally and emotionally. And so while some employers tend to have minimal interactions with their domestic helpers either as molded by their own ethical upbringing, as a form of keeping formality, or to avoid intrusion in the lives of others, it may be viewed as a form of distancing and alienation by their Filipino domestic workers, who are otherwise accustomed to more intimate cultures and traditions. Grasping this difference in perspectives and tendencies will help employers and employees of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds have a better understanding of each other.

Communication as a Basic Need and a Human Right

Communication has become an essential need and a basic human right as it is man's way of expressing thoughts, beliefs, conditions, problems, and needs. Man's freedom, equality, inclusiveness, etc. are all conveyed and understood only through communication (Sen, 2015). From a family, the smallest unit of society, to nations as a whole, mutual and alternate communication is the main building block in establishing relationships, understanding cultures, resolving conflicts, and pursuing progress (Purwanto, 2018).

To the individual, access to communication and social interaction directly affects their quality of life. Increased social activities, like enjoying nature or doing exercise with a companion, are associated with higher positive effects, as compared to doing the activity alone (Anderson, 2020). Higher well-being is also known to have correlations with the individual's time spent with others and engagements in more substantive conversations. Beyond mere social contact, quantity, and quality of communication matter in improving one's satisfaction in life (Milek, et al., 2018).

This basic human need for proper and adequate communication and social interaction must not be taken lightly as consequential effects of isolation and lack of social connection have been shown to include psychological problems, poor health, and even early mortality. Isolation and loneliness have also given rise to social issues like obesity, substance abuse, and self-harm (Holt-Lunstad, et al., 2015).

Online vs. Face-to-Face Communication

Technology has advanced to the point that man can even communicate with another man on the moon. Distance has long stopped being a barrier to communication as live feeds and streams can now show events in real-time to any receiver with a digital device and an Internet connection. Yet along with the rise in ICTs and digital communication are also criticisms of this communication channel. When comparing personal communication with those held digitally, findings show that there is usually better emotional understanding and higher satisfaction achieved from conversations done in a face-to-face setting (Mallen, et al., 2003; Paul, et al., 2016).

While the very essence of communication, which is the delivery of a message from a sender to a receiver, is achievable through either channel, face-to-face contact gives allowance for more in-depth understanding through the easier transfer of tacit knowledge and leaves lesser room for incorrect assumptions and misinterpretations. Relationship formation, cohesion, and trust are also enhanced by the personal presence (Heller, 2010).

Digital communication is of course, not entirely negative. The connectivity it offers has allowed families to reach loved ones in any part of the globe instantaneously, collectively, and at minimal costs, especially now with the enforced social distancing from the COVID-19 pandemic (Lin & Lachman, 2021). It is the lack of strong ties and in-depth quality from “the absence of nonverbal cues, lack of warmth, and less demand for engagement” that makes online communication an

incomplete substitute for interactions on a personal basis (Lee, et al., 2011), especially in family settings and dynamics, where communication can go beyond merely being informational to being emotional (Kevereski, L. & Iliev, D., 2017). Therefore, it is the balance of the communication methods used (whether in-person, through phone, or with technology) that plays an important role in making a difference in one's well-being (Lin & Lachman, 2019).

Communication Dynamics

Dynamics is known as the study of motion, what causes the movement or what affects and changes it. Similarly in communication, there is the movement of a message from a sender to a receiver. It is an exchange of data and information not limited to a one-way process. In families, for example, good communication dynamics are shown when parents can act as attentive listeners to their children and children can properly express or make themselves understood (Yang, 2014). In workplaces, communication dynamics can get a bit more complex. Communication can go from different directions: upward – like messages sent from a worker to a manager, downwards – for instructions from a boss to a subordinate, lateral – for employees of equal levels, and grapevine – which is communication without formal hierarchical lines (DeVito, 2010).

Body language can also be an indication of good or bad communication dynamics since it validates the integrity of oral communication (Oneri Uzun, 2021). Leaning forward, nodding the head, being unable to hold eye contact, or looking distractedly away can point out or give hints on whether the communication process

is going smoothly or not. Dynamic communication is not about catching attention or being an overly loud or impactful speaker, but more about hearing and receiving the message being told.

A study by Coombs & Holladay (2007) stated that in times of crisis where people can become easily distraught, anxious, or angered, people are more likely to participate in negative word-of-mouth communication or what can also be called negative communication dynamics. That is why one of the initial steps in crisis management is to soothe and express sympathy for the victims first, to allow them to adjust, and absorb the information and instructions being given to them.

It is important to give attention and find solutions to poor communication dynamics as it can often lead to numerous negative impacts like life-and-death situations in healthcare (Symon, 2018), additional costs in construction (Gamil & Rahman, 2022), bad experiences for guests in tourism (Sthapit & Jiménez Barreto, Jano, 2018) and ineffective outputs or conflicts in the workplace (Campbell & Phillips, 2020) when left unresolved.

Intercultural Communication

Tietze & Piekkari (2021) illustrates intercultural communication in a multilingual setting, especially in a workplace, like a layered iceberg. On the topmost layer is communication that is visible and audible, like how English is often used as a universal and commonplace language. Below it is negotiated communication, involving dialects, languages, or improvisations that the user shifts to in the context

of the encounter. Lastly, deep below the surface is inaudible communication, encompassing non-verbal cues, assumptions, and habits. The purpose of this analogy is to show that intercultural communication is made up of multiple interconnected areas that influence, shape, and even control the communication and meaning-making of people from different languages.

Aside from the differences in spoken and unspoken languages, intercultural communication also deals with the contrasts in culture, traditions, and norms as a factor in the understanding and interpretation of different people. Kassis-Henderson (2005) calls it a cultural “filter” that contributes to the communicative resources used by individuals during intercultural exchanges. Differences in these cultural filters, such as forms of expressions, intonations, delivery of politeness, or manifestations of habits and perspectives are often the root causes of misunderstandings and disengagement between communications of different cultures.

Communication Refraction

Similar to the refraction of light, communication refraction can also occur (Pfeiffer, 1998). The message being communicated can be bent, distorted, and misinterpreted due to intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental conditions. Interpretation and understanding can be directly affected when there is not enough sharing of common meanings and experiences.

Intercultural misunderstandings are especially common since language is one of the major barriers to effective communication. Norms and beliefs differ widely

across cultures. What is natural and appropriate to one culture may not often be the case to another. Cultural harmony and mutualism require sensitivity and awareness in monitoring behaviours and reactions, alongside increased knowledge of the other party to reach a greater convergence of meaning and understanding (Hinner, 2017).

Yet despite the bridging efforts in multiculturalism and multiracialism, the difference in innate cultural codes of people is still deep-rooted and manifests from time to time in their own unanticipated ways (Yeo & Pang, 2017).

While common stereotypes are not entirely accurate or applicable to every individual, the collective cross-cultural differences in personalities and social inclinations have actually between reported in global research. One of the most well-known of these studies is that of Robert McCrae and peers (2005), testing extraversion, introversion, openness, agreeability, etc. between groups of different nationalities. They have identified that collectively, people of certain nationalities and ethnicities stand out differently from others. Examples of these are how people from Malta and Brazil scored the highest when it comes to being extroverts, and those from Morocco and Indonesia scored as the most introverts (Jarrett, 2017).

These individual or collective behavioural differences also translate to communication tendencies. Japanese people, for example, talk a lot less and are quieter, especially in formal settings due to the culture of mindfulness ingrained in them (Ensor, 2018). This does not equate to them being colder or less warm than other nationalities, only that talking less allows them to be able to listen more. In contrast, Indians are accustomed to talking a lot and constantly being loud, almost

regardless of where they are, due to the environmental nature of India where there is a lot of honking and hammering especially in the streets that there is a need to raise your voice in order to be heard above the crowds (Suraiya, 2018).

So while people can be mindful of their actions when intermingling with groups of other nationalities and ethnicities, innate natures of being loud, talking, less, being an introvert, or being an extrovert is still pre-existent. And these differences in behaviour and communication tendencies are often most honestly displayed when the person finally lets his or her guard down and in the place of their utmost comfort: their home (Garone, 2017).

Multiracial and Multicultural Singapore

As a mega business hub and central trade point to its neighbouring countries and continents, Singapore has birthed the intermingling and settlement of different and numerous races, cultures, and nationalities despite its very small land area (Mathews & Wai Fong, 2016). Over time, this diversity in demographics has led to the development of the country's categorization of race and ethnic groups into a CMIO system: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and others (Reddy, 2016). The latest reports show that 75.9% of the population in Singapore comprises Chinese, 15% of Malays, 7.5% of Indians, and 1.6% of other ethnicities (Population in Brief, 2020). And so, while the majority of Singaporeans are ethnically Chinese, it is technically not accurate to consider a single ethnical bracket for the entirety of the residents.

Singapore's hybrid and diverse cultural environment are one of the country's major strong points, yet this predicament has also led to some weaknesses in its verbal and written communication systems. The cohesion of a country speaking over 20 languages including English, Mandarin, Tamil, and Malay, just to name a few, was achieved over time only through the efforts of the government to incorporate top-down multilingualism in the education, transport, and commercial systems of the country (Siemund & Li, 2020). Learning a mother tongue language in school is compulsory for primary students and this has not only reinforced academic knowledge but has also fed the appreciation of other languages and the embracing of other cultures to the younger generations (Ministry of Education, 2021). The flourishing multilingual landscape is also evident in the signages seen all over the country, from shops to MRT stations, giving translations of the four official languages to tourists and locals alike (Sin, 2019).

Roles and Importance of Foreign Domestic Workers

Migrant domestic helpers, housemaids, hired helpers, domestic personnel, housekeepers, etc. – foreign domestic workers (FDWs) have various globally accepted titles. But to clarify the scope and definition of what is a foreign domestic worker in this study, it will be in terms of a person employed to do domestic work within a household and in an employment relationship (Domestic Workers Convention, 2011). This would therefore exclude workers providing similar services in institutions like childcare centres, medical clinics, or old folks' homes (International Labour Organization, 2013).

74% of the estimated 11.5 million foreign domestic workers populations all over the world are female (Migration Data Portal, 2019). Considered live-in workers, they offer invaluable support to the child-raising, caregiving, and household-maintaining needs of families who are often too occupied with the demands of their careers to fully attend to matters at home.

As of June 2020, there are an estimated 252,600 foreign domestic workers employed in Singapore catering to the country's growing and aging population (Foreign Workforce Numbers, 2020). Foreign domestic workers are now considered a necessity that 1 out of 5 Singaporean homes are dependent on them, especially for families where both parents are working (Awang & Wong, 2019). Duties of foreign domestic workers often go above and beyond what is required of them, with some even given responsibilities in the sensitive medical care or elder care of the employer's family members experiencing dementia, paralysis, and other complex health conditions (Ha, et al., 2018).

Filipino Domestic Workers in Particular

Filipinos are a popular choice for employees due to their mastery of English, the most commonly used language in Singapore (Lee, 2016), with even high school undergraduates speaking adequate English to effectively communicate with their employers (Tay, 2016). Singapore is home to an estimated 200,000 Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and foreign domestic workers are in high demand they make up approximately 40% of the Filipinos in the country (Embassy of the Philippines, 2019).

Aside from their proficiency in English, Filipino domestic workers are also known to be patient, compassionate, and extremely hardworking to the point that it was a Filipina who was honoured as Singapore's First Model Maid in 2004 by the Association of Employment Agencies Singapore. Erlinda Saludes stood out amongst the other 85 foreign domestic workers of different nationalities vying for the award due to her care of an 11-year-old quadriplegic cerebral palsy patient that she carried to his school bus every single school day in her 10 years of service to the family (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, 2004). In general, Filipinos are a top choice for foreign domestic workers and other service-oriented careers because most can communicate English effectively, are known to be very family-oriented (Morillo et al., 2013), and are warm and caring to the recipients of their service (Mosuela, 2018).

Social Isolation and Hiddenness

Healthy interpersonal relationships don't just make people happier. They also have positive effects on one's mental and physical states (Brody, 2017). But certain circumstances can lead people to long periods of little to no socialization, either due to career responsibilities or geographic constraints like in the case of those doing remote work (Combating Social Isolation in Remote Working, 2020). And there are also times when people are together, but have minimal positive connections and interactions with each other. This situation of an individual that is present in society yet remains mostly voiceless, invisible, or overlooked and has very little power to change this predicament is what is labeled today as social hiddenness.

Social hiddenness has become a developing global concern that one of the biggest newspapers in Singapore ran a feature series on “people and communities around the region, living in the shadows of their societies where they exist largely unseen, unheard, and little talked about” (Tan, 2021). This included foreign brides of low-earning Singaporeans, short-term labourers in China, and sea gypsies in India (Invisible Asia, 2021). Aside from the underprivileged and marginalized members of society, social hiddenness or isolation is also strongly experienced by senior refugees in countries like Canada who are lacking interaction with family members, have no transportation to access social networks, or are facing racial prejudices (Government of Canada, 2018).

Low visibility to the point of social hiddenness is also a growing phenomenon encroaching on the lives of foreign domestic workers (Yeoh et al., 2020). Though highly essential, they are often deemed by the community as an invisible workforce (Westcott & Hunt, 2017). This hiddenness is also aggravated by cases of rights violation involving deprivement of rest days, strict confinement to the employer’s home, and a ban on the use of personal phones to contact family members. In an isolated case uncovered by the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), one foreign domestic worker in Singapore was unable to communicate with her family for almost seven years (Tang, 2019).

Foreign domestic workers in Singapore are entitled to 1 off day per week to allow for physical and mental recuperation but for those that might want to work during their rest days, salary compensation equivalent to 1 day’s work or a rest day scheduled on a different date must be given (Ministry of Manpower, 2013). These

rest days, usually on Sundays, are considered the ultimate breathers for foreign domestic workers who go out to mingle with their friends, refresh their minds, and unwind (Dodgson, 2016).

A previous cross-sectional study on 182 female foreign domestic workers in Singapore showed results that while the physical and financial conditions of the respondents are relatively average, good, or satisfactory, it is their social aspects that are significantly lacking, with over 50% conveying feelings of stress and almost 20% experiencing isolation (Anjara et.al, 2017). Mental health deterioration has been a long-pressing issue in the communities of foreign domestic workers. A study conducted by HOME in Singapore showed that 1 out of every 5 foreign domestic workers (around 40,000 FDWs of all nationalities) is experiencing poor mental health caused by factors like homesickness, cultural differences, or maltreatment at work (OFW Star; Lorenzo, 2020).

Covid-19: Blurred Boundaries between Time of Work and Rest

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that up to 55 million domestic workers (foreigners and non-foreigners alike) all over the world have been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and up to 73.7% have suffered a loss in work, income, or freedom of mobility (Impact of the COVID-19, 2020). For foreign domestic workers, their place of work is also their place of rest. Therefore there is much opportunity for the two to overlap. And when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the boundaries between work and rest hours of foreign domestic workers were blurred to the point of non-existence.

From 7th April to 2nd June 2020, due to the increasing number of COVID-19 cases, Singapore was put on a lockdown locally known as a “circuit breaker”. Most workplaces, retail, and industrial sites were forced to close and work-from-home arrangements were implemented, only with the exclusion of essential services (Gov SG, 2020). Even after the lifting of the circuit breaker, Singapore residents remained hesitant to leave their homes and numerous employees opted to continue their telecommuting arrangements. Most conditions of foreign domestic workers in Singapore have only gotten worse since COVID-19 restrictions kicked in. All public or private gatherings (except weddings or funerals) have been restricted to a maximum of eight people per group (GOV SG, 2020), so large picnics at the park were a favourite pastime of foreign domestic workers on their rest days are now not allowed.

For other more unfortunate foreign domestic workers all over the world, leaving their employers’ homes even on their rest days is now totally banned due to the worry that they might contract the virus from intermingling with others. Work obligations have also significantly increased. With their employers at home more often, more meals have to be prepared and foreign domestic workers now receive more orders or instructions to follow throughout the day (Westbrook, 2020; Anju, 2020).

Deprived of their rights to go out and socialize on their rest days due to the worries of their employers and in compliance with government advisories against the dangers of COVID-19, many have been confined in their employers’ homes for months (Antona, 2020; Summers, 2020) and while others are allowed to leave for

necessities (e.g. sending remittances to families back home) this is usually with the condition that their employer accompanies them during the entire duration that they are out.

Proper Interethnic Communication and the Involvement of Media

Similar to how workplace diversity and differences in employee communication patterns are studied and adapted to in organizations, interethnic communication between an employer and the foreign domestic worker of their household must also be given proper attention to improving the relationship and the work and life conditions of the two parties considering differences in ethnicity have a direct effect on the way people communicate verbally and non-verbally (Liu, 2016). This is even more imperative now that COVID-19 has led to a forced togetherness of the people at home.

Therefore, proper interethnic communication can allow for more points of contact, build on similarities, reduce discrimination, and help parties see eye-to-eye (Pieragostini et. al., 2017). Major points to focus on, especially between Western and Asian cultures, are obstacles in communication primarily involving the level of proficiency in speaking English, and subjective interpretations of body language (Dang, 2016). The gap in social status can also be a cause for shyness and communication apprehension (LaRochell, 2016), hence the comfort and confidence level of the lesser party, the foreign domestic worker, in this case, must be observed when aiming to communicate successfully.

The involvement of media in the propagation of interethnic communication and giving a larger platform to the concerns of the marginalized (Bendeley, 2019) also has significant contributions in giving a voice to foreign domestic workers and lessening social hiddenness. Media exposure on the realities of the conditions of foreign domestic workers especially their hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic has created widespread discourse, criticisms, and punishments for abusers, and advocated for opportunities for better treatment of migrant workers (Kaur-Gill, 2020).

Effective communication involves effective interpretation and because interpretation is subjective (Ricoeur, 1976), media can help introduce commonalities between varying cultures to help establish a ground of understanding between them. After all, it is hard to understand something when you know nothing or have no background about it. Media plays the integral role of bringing awareness, communicating realities, and aiding in the development of a tailored understanding according to the culture being perceived (Geertz, 1973).

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Analysis

Due to the explorative nature of this study, I considered that there will be much importance not just on “what” will be said by the participants (content analysis) but also on “how” this information will be delivered (conversation analysis) (Jackson et al., 2007). Thus, I have chosen to go with the route of a qualitative study, particularly incorporating Hermeneutical Phenomenology as an approach to gaining an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Filipino domestic workers during a pandemic.

Hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on illuminating details within a worldly experience of a subject with the aim of creating meaning and reaching a sense of understanding of the phenomenon (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). Hermeneutic phenomenology can also be viewed as a circular process “working with part and whole in a cyclical, open and interrogative way to understand the person/people who produced the text, the person doing the hermeneutic phenomenological work, and ultimately, the phenomenon that is brought to awareness and made manifest as a result of the work” (Suddick et al., 2020).

A guide in my self-interpretation and analysis through hermeneutical phenomenology are three interrelated phases based on the theories of Ricoeur (1976) and expounded by Lindseth & Norberg (2004):

(1) *Naive Understanding* which involves an initial analysis and reflection after the repeated readings of the data gathered from the participants.

(2) *Structural Analysis* which involves seeking further clarifications and identifying recurring patterns and condensing or sorting them into subthemes with similar meanings.

(3) *Comprehensive Understanding* which is the in-depth consolidation of the first 2 phases along with validations from relevant theories and previous studies all brought together into a comprehensive and holistic interpretation of the phenomenon.

Participants and Inclusion Criteria

I have used purposeful sampling in selecting this study's participants. Purposeful sampling is often used in qualitative studies as it is an effective strategy in identifying participants that fit accordingly to the parameters of the study and can enable the collection of thick, detailed, and relevant data. Participants also helped to identify and nominate other relevant participants that were eventually recruited into the study.

The inclusion criteria that served as the basis for my purposeful sampling were as follows: the profile of this study's participants were female domestic workers originating from the Philippines that were aged between 23 to 60 years old, as per the eligible working age of Singapore's Ministry of Manpower. Participants must have been residing in Singapore during the time of the study. Filipino domestic workers employed only recently or who have not yet been in Singapore during the circuit

breaker period and those who have already left Singapore were excluded from the selection.

These selected FDW participants were employed by Singapore residents of either Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Caucasian descent, based on the CMIO ethnicity system. For a representation of at least 1 FDW per listed ethnicity, I have targeted a minimum sample size of 4 participants. This is to ensure that the diversity of employer ethnicity will also be reflected in the data results. Additional participants were considered and invited until I, as the researcher, felt that the saturation point was met, with no new significant insights likely to be gathered even if the sample size was increased. Due to the extensive and impactful narratives and comments gathered during the discussions, I have decided to focus on a small number of participants to also have better attention and understanding of each participant's perspective.

Data Collection and Analysis

I have employed in-depth and unstructured one-on-one interviews for data collection of the lived experiences to allow for active listening, sharing, and interaction with the participants. The interviews were conducted in a mix of both English and Filipino (Tagalog), the two official languages of Filipinos, to facilitate mutual discussions between both parties. Participants were encouraged to speak and converse in Filipino during the interview if this enabled them to better express themselves and their experiences. By using open-ended questions and keeping the

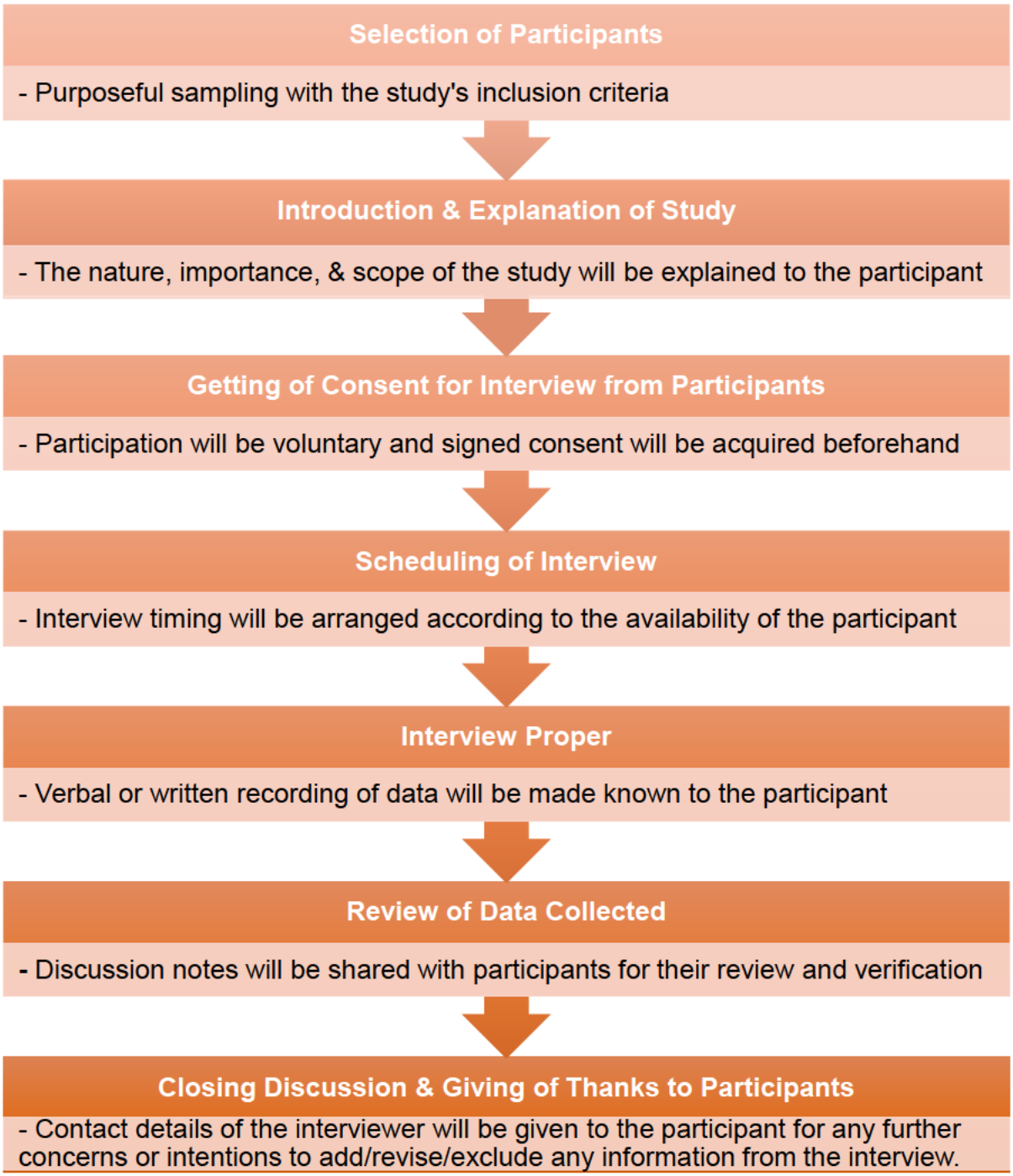
interviews unstructured, I was able to further probe depending on the individual responses of the participants.

In the adoption of a purposeful sampling method, recruitment was conducted on Sundays outside of Filipino churches and malls frequented by Filipinos in particular, like Lucky Plaza. In the initial screening and approach, prospective FDW participants were asked about the length of their stay and the nature of their work in Singapore to determine if they were already working as FDWs before the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the ethnicity of their employer to check for their representation in the CMIO system criteria. Next, oral information about the study was shared with them, along with an explanation of their role in the interview and the study. Upon preliminary acceptance, the participant and I moved to a more convenient site for the interview. Contact numbers were exchanged with participants who were not available for the interview during the time of the initial approach to further discuss the timing of their next availability. I have presented an **Informed Consent Form** (Appendix A) that covered the purpose of the research, type of research intervention, participant selection, voluntary participation, procedures, duration, risks, benefits, incentives or compensation, confidentially, sharing the results, right to refuse or withdraw, data management, the ethics committee, and who to contact with regards to the interview and the study. The official interview and recordings were done only after the participant had given their signed approval on the Informed Consent Form.

I have used the voice memo application on my digital phone to record quality audio of the interviews. In addition, written notes were taken down to highlight certain

statements during the discussion as well as a means of noting down significant visual or non-verbal cues from the participant's body language or changes in aura or demeanour with regard to their facial expressions, posture, mannerisms, gestures, etc.

Table 1: Diagrammatic Work Flow for Interviews



A total of 5 FDWs joined the interview and discussions stretched between 10 minutes to 1 hour. For a more diversified study and to reflect the unique multicultural environment in Singapore as a factor in the lives of the participants, the selection came from employers of varying ethnicities and had work experiences as FDWs in Singapore ranging between 3 to 14 years.

Table 2: Summarized Background of Selected Participants

Participant	Employer Ethnicity	Length of Stay in Singapore
#1	Chinese (Singaporean)	14 Years
#2	Chinese (Singaporean) & English	10 Years
#3	Malay	6 Years
#4	Vietnamese & Australian	9 Years
#5	Indian & Chinese (Hong Konger)	3 Years

The participants of this study were female Filipino foreign domestic workers (FDWs) who were working in Singapore before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. All have experienced the lockdown period, locally known as a “circuit breaker” from April 2020 to June 2020 where all Singapore residents, aside from workers under essential services, had to serve a mandatory stay-at-home order from the government to combat the spread of the virus. The FDW participants all experienced staying at home 24/7 with their foreign employers with no rest days or day-offs spent outside of their employers’ premises during this period. All participants are still employed as FDWs in Singapore at the time of this study and have also experienced

restriction changes as the COVID-19 pandemic has been re-classified as an endemic in Singapore.

Five Filipino women, working in five ethnically and culturally varying Singaporean households... Most are backed by extensive years of stay in Singapore, while one is fairly new to working in a foreign country when the COVID-19 pandemic started – these are the participants I have gotten to know and have gotten to exchange experiences with during the course of this study. Some participants gave interviews that were brief and concise, while some continued their personal sharing even after their hour-long recorded discussion.

While having their own different and contrasting lived experiences, the narratives of the five participants were also similar and relative in many ways. Between writing, my literature review in Chapter 2 regarding social isolation and life in general during the COVID-19 pandemic and my manual transcription of each and every conducted interview, some blatant patterns in the data set manifested themselves early.

To determine beyond what was obvious, I paid attention to which issues each participant notably emphasized on, as well as the points they unconsciously mentioned or more hesitantly opened up about. I immersed myself in the repeated replaying of the audio recordings aside from just the re-reading of the transcriptions to also rely on verbal cues, pauses, and intonations. I repeatedly compared patterns with the responses of the other participants as well as to my own personal experiences during the lockdown period here in Singapore for contrast and validation.

From the repeated contrasts and comparisons of the interview narratives and in the analysis of the data, emerging themes and sub-themes in the lived experiences of FDWs were derived. I analysed these themes not only according to what was common in the explicit statements from the participants but also according to my own interpretations of what was shared between their experiences, including points that the participants themselves were not aware of.

Ethical Considerations

The nature, background, and significance of this study were explained to the participants beforehand. They were informed that their participation is voluntary and that they can cease or withdraw from the interview at any given time. The interview was only between me and the participant, with no one else present to listen in during the discussion unless requested by the participant. The recording had to be permitted first by the participant through the signed Informed Consent Form before any verbal or written information was taken during the interviews. I read and explained the details of the Informed Consent Form to the participants before the start of the interview proper and before any recording commenced. Two printed copies of the Informed Consent Form were prepared for each interview. A copy of the Informed Consent Form with my contact details and signature as the researcher was given to the participant as their own personal copy and reference.

Participants were informed that the duration of the interview may take between 10 to 30 minutes, or longer should they wish to continue with the discussion and share more information. There will be no direct benefit from participating in this

study beyond the opportunity for the participant to share their experiences. However, this research hopes to give a voice, communicate, and bridge the concerns and predicaments of Filipino domestic workers to the stakeholders and policymakers that can give a solution to their issues and improve their working conditions. Though there will be no monetary compensation, food and drinks were provided to ease the participants and in gratitude for their given time and contribution to the study.

I have also prepared for the possibility of a participant becoming distressed or that strong emotion may arise from the sharing of difficult experiences during the interview. In the event of this occurrence, the discussion will be diverted to more factual questions or a break will be offered to the participant or the interview can be resumed at a different time.

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, the gathered dataset is to be kept anonymous. Code names and numbers (Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) were assigned to the participants and I will only be addressing or referring to them as such in the study discussion to further prevent identification. For additional protection of data, handling of raw interview recordings, transcriptions, and discussion notes was done solely by myself and the name list or any personal dataset on the identity of the participants was not shared with any third party.

All written data from the interviews, including the signed Informed Consent Form were scanned and saved together with the audio files or recorded data solely in my personal Google Drive which requires log-in access and a password. Hard copies of the written documents are kept in a locked drawer. All my saved interview

data will be kept only until this thesis has been approved. Once there is no longer any need to defend my research study, the collected data of the participants will be permanently purged and deleted from my Google Drive and drawers.

No names or direct information of any form that may identify the participants were included in the study discussion to ensure complete anonymity and avoid recognition of the participants in the event that that study goes public. Access to research results will also be given to the participants should they be interested in having a copy of the findings.

My contact details were also provided to the participants for any need of future contact and in the event that the participant wishes to add/revise/exclude any information from the conducted interview.

I have conducted this study with no conflicts of interest arising from financial, familial, or proprietary considerations as the principal investigator, with sponsors, or at the study site.

The conduct of this study was reviewed and approved by the University of the Philippines Open University Institutional Research Ethics Committee, Los Baños, Laguna.

Chapter IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study sought to find answers to two research questions: (1) What were the experiences in communication dynamics of Filipino domestic workers in Singapore during their social isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic? and (2) How were the intercultural communication dynamics between foreign employers and Filipino domestic workers during their “stay-at-home” period?

In the reflection of the naïve understanding and the emerging themes and sub-themes from the structural analysis of the data collected, these questions were addressed by the participants in their own words and through the shared narratives of their own personal experiences. But there was more to be explored in my interpretation of the text as the researcher after applying the lens of a hermeneutical phenomenological approach and the theoretical frameworks of (a) Theory of Interpretation (Ricoeur, 1976) and (b) Interpretative Theory of Culture (Geertz, 1973), as discussed in the Literature Review in Chapter 2. I applied a reconceptualization of the narrated text by getting validations from other related theories as narratives can have several meanings and can be interpreted differently. Emulation and comparison with previous studies on foreign domestic workers and live-in women migrant workers were also used to identify and highlight commonalities, changes, and differences influenced by COVID-19 in the lived experiences of FDWs during the pandemic and after restrictions have been eased to derive a more comprehensive understanding of the findings and give a holistic response to the research questions.

Communication Dynamics and Experiences of FDWs While "Staying at Home"

From the repeated re-reading, re-listening, reflection, and analysis of the audio recordings and interview transcriptions of the five participants, 3 Themes and 7 Sub-Themes prominently emerged about the communication dynamics and lived experiences of the FDW participants during their "staying at home" period with foreign employers of different ethnicities during the COVID-19 lockdown. These were summarized in the table below:

Table 3: Emerging Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
#1. Silence as a Reluctant Yes	• The Culture of Overwork • Power Play Inside the Home • Unspoken Pleas for Freedom
#2. Striving for Multicultural Coexistence	• Reading Body Language and Emotions • The Fear of COVID-19 as a Communication Barrier
#3. Interpersonal Communication During a Double Pandemic	• Communication with Support Systems • Online Communication and ICTs

I have interpreted from the participants and their narratives that their experiences in communication dynamics during social isolation (research question #1) were exhibited through the sub-themes of Unspoken Pleas for Freedom (Theme

1), The Fear of COVID-19 as a Communication Barrier (Theme 2), and Interpersonal Communication during a Double Pandemic (Theme 3).

The intercultural communication dynamics of the FDWs with their foreign employers during their stay-at-home period (research question #2) was seen in their narratives on The Culture of Overwork (Theme 1), Power Play inside the Home (Theme 1), Reading Body Language and Emotions (Theme 2) and Kinning as part of interpersonal communication (Theme 3).

Table 4: Summary of Discussions

Research Question #1 **Communication Dynamics of FDWs During Social Isolation**	
○ **Unspoken Pleas for Freedom**	Theme 1
○ **The Fear of COVID-19 as a Communication Barrier**	Theme 2
○ **Interpersonal Communication during a Double Pandemic**	Theme 3
Research Question #2 **Intercultural Communication Dynamics of FDWs with Foreign Employers**	
○ **The Culture of Overwork**	Theme 1
○ **Power Play Inside the Home**	Theme 1
○ **Reading Body Language and Emotions**	Theme 2
○ **Interpersonal Communication during a Double Pandemic (Kinning)**	Theme 3

Theme 1: Silence as a Reluctant Yes

Silence is complicated. Sometimes, it may mean yes. At other times, it may mean no. It can be considered a “yes”, because when the other party is not outright disagreeing, then it means that they actually somewhat agree to a certain degree. But silence can also mean “no” because when there is no direct consent given, it means the other party may actually be reluctant to give it. Hence the interpretation of silence is never straightforward and is highly relative, often depending on the context being communicated and the underlying circumstances.

For the FDW participants, I interpreted from their narratives that their silence often meant a reluctant yes when it came to matters inside the homes they were working for, as it reflected their disposition and inability to say no. Staying silent meant accepting the wider range of chores and responsibilities given to them from day until night, overworking themselves as compared to how it was pre-pandemic. It also meant keeping quiet against the exploitations and forms of abuse some of them encountered during their “stay at home” period as power inequalities inside the household manifested more often.

Serving mandatory social isolation 24/7 in the premises of their employers was both work-changing and dynamics-changing for the participants because tension varied either in the tangible sense of being “physically stretched tight” to cover their additional workload or in the intangible sense of being “emotionally strained” as the pandemic restrictions also induced frictions because of the more frequent companionship forced upon all members of the family.

The Culture of Overwork

Hard work and long work hours are part of the extreme **workaholic culture** in Singapore. Due to Singapore's high competitiveness in the international market, overwork and overtime have long been integrated into its business culture. "Suffering at work" is considered normal in office settings and work environments in Singapore, which came out as the 3rd most sleep-deprived city (amongst 43 others) in a 2014 study by Jawbone, a maker of fitness watches. Thus, this culture and mindset are oftentimes inevitably carried home by employers and projected in an intercultural exchange with the foreign domestic workers in their households.

From the increased interaction and communication between foreign employers and FDWs during their stay-at-home experience, employers had more time to be around and oversee the household work of their FDWs. It can be said that their integrated culture of overworking has become an amplified expectation from the change of pace and dynamics inside the home and what employers perceived as a standard of life further became a pressure point as FDWs were pushed to work to their limits during their social isolation period.

When this sub-theme was felt and experienced by the participants, none of them openly voiced out to their foreign employers about their burdens on overworking during the lockdown period, usually due to their fear of creating conflict and creating a gap in their intercultural communication dynamics They admitted to feeling reluctance in accepting the additional chores, after all, nobody wanted to do more work in exchange for little to no additional pay. But they have chosen to keep

their lips sealed with some expressing their defiance only through closed fists, working lackluster, or choosing to talk out their tensions and complain to people outside of their employers' homes instead.

I have asked the participants to describe their work experiences since the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison to how it was pre-pandemic and answers varied between having some slight difference to having a totally different work experience, with participants sharing that despite the attempts of some of their employers to be considerate with their foreign domestic workers, it was simply unavoidable to have more work involved when all members of the family were constantly at home. The increase in household chores included the preparation of additional meals, doing more laundry, and having to clean around the house more often. In the succeeding narratives below, the participants discussed which aspects of their work were especially difficult for them to say no to.

"Kasi mas kailangan magluto ng lunch and breakfast. Pero nung nag-opisina sila nung wala pang lockdown, hindi kailangan magluto ng breakfast and lunch."

– Participant 3

"Because it became necessary to cook lunch and breakfast. But when they were working before when there was no lockdown, there was no need to cook breakfast and lunch."

For participant 3, cooking for the seven members of her employer's family also used to be less strenuous because her employers are fond of eating out or bringing home outside food. I realized that the additional preparation of meals due to COVID-19 had much impact on Singaporean households due to Singapore's

predominant “hawker” culture. Frequently eating out in “hawkers” or eatery stalls with a wide selection of reasonably-priced food nearby residential buildings are heavily patronized even by middle-income and high-income Singaporeans as part of their culture. With the closing of both normal restaurants as well as “hawkers” during the lockdown period, even the option of take-out or takeaway food was no longer available for FDWs as a reprieve from cooking.

Extra work in childcare was also taken in by the participants as the lockdown caused the closure of schools and childcare centers. Participant 5 had to assist in the online classes of her employer’s three-year-old daughter because her employers were also busy with working-from-home and this caused a shorter time for her to finish her now more numerous chores. She said, *“at least when there was no COVID before, the child goes to school. You cook, you clean, and then you just fetch the child.”* She admitted to having cramps every night due to the constant “babad sa tubig” or soaking in water of her tired hands and feet.

At first, I was confused by her statement, thinking that the child she was taking care of was fond of making a mess with water, causing her to be constantly exposed to it. But she clarified that while it was true that the child was fond of playing with ice cubes, it was the constant washing of hands even when simply inside the house that most frustrated her. She had to teach and guide during online lessons plus be constantly mindful of the sanitation of the three-year-old, as her Indian employers were very particular about it.

“Kapag humawak ka lang ng ballpen or papel, tapos hawakan mo yung bata, hugas ka ng kamay. So parang, ano ba to? Konting ano mo lang, hugas ka ng kamay.” – Participant 5

“Even just from holding a ballpen or paper, before you hold the child, you need to wash your hands first. So I’m like, what is this? From minimal touching, you need to wash your hands again.”

Data collected from my other interviews also showed that increased focus on hygiene and sanitation to prevent the spread of the virus amongst the family was another commonality in almost all households. This was to be expected as cleaning and disinfecting has been a general response of the public against COVID-19. But again, this shift had a much heavier impact on FDWs who had to deal with the additional laundry from the frequent changing of clothes, especially for the participants whose employers have small children, and the non-stop cleaning of surfaces.

For some households, it was not childcare but elderly care that the foreign domestic workers had to deal with. Participant 1 shared that it was a struggle to take care of the mother of her employer when the elderly was diagnosed with intestinal cancer during the pandemic. On top of her household work, she had to act as a caregiver during the chemotherapy sessions and manage the patient whom she shared a room with at home. Her struggle didn’t end there. After the lockdown, her elderly employer also contracted COVID-19 and she had to take care of her then too, all while worrying for her own safety from the continued close proximity to a positive case. This finding reflected me that while an extended or longer stay with employers may mean that the FDW is almost considered as a member of the family, it can also

have ramifications like in the case of Participant 1 who had been with her Chinese employers for 14 years. The **familiarity and confidence** of her employers in her capability as core support in their home meant that the sensitive care of their ailing mother and the additional role of a caregiver automatically fell onto her, without much deliberation or negotiation on any added compensation from the new work scope.

Power Play Inside the Home

Saying no was also made especially difficult for FDWs because of the natural order of an employer-employee relationship. When doing upwards communication, denying orders or rejecting suggestions can be easily seen as an overstepping of a role or an act of rebellion when not done effectively. That's why it is often referred to as "the art of saying no." While power dynamics are inevitable in relationships, they often impact how people communicate and show unconscious biases toward others. Whether deliberate or not, this difference in people's innate cross-cultural perceptions can cause the display of power difference, especially between groups of different social classes. **Power play** shows how some cultures value different hierarchies or social statuses unequally. In certain cultures, more value is given to relationships, and power is considered more flexible. While in other cultures, rules and authority are more valued than relationships.

The exercise of power play from the succeeding narratives of the participants regarding work exploitation, verbal abuse, and constant bodily surveillance can be

seen as a cultural difference in how power and hierarchy in the home were perceived differently by Filipino domestic workers and their foreign employers.

"Minsan nakikialam ako, kasi matagal na ako sa kanila. Yung relasyon ko kay lola, parang nanay ko. Kung pagsabihan niya ng mga ganon, inaawat ko yung amo ko. Alam mo ba, darating sa punto na "You are just a maid. Who are you? Don't care! Katulong ka lang." Syempre masakit sa akin yun. Yung nag wo-worry ka sa nanay, mamasamain ka pa." – Participant 1

"Sometimes I intervene, because I have been with them for a long time. I treat grandma like my own mother. So I try to stop my boss when she says hurtful things. But it came to a point that I was told 'You are just a maid. Who are you? Don't care! You're just a helper.' And of course that hurt me. I worry about her mom, yet that's still taken against me."

While it can be said that Participant 1 was simply reminded by her employer of their hierarchical levels in the home, the narrative showed that there is a **cultural difference in the relational perspectives** between Participant 1 and her foreign employer. After 14 years of staying with them, Participant 1 viewed her employers as family and thus communicated openly and perceived that she has a space to intervene and speak out during their discussion. She exhibited familial ties to her employers that aren't her blood relatives since the family in the Filipino culture oftentimes extended beyond immediate genetic relationships.

But this perspective was not reciprocated by her employer as her statement clearly drew the line between who was seen as a family to her and who was not, creating a disconnect of their intercultural communication dynamics. The employer not sharing the same level of familial attachment as her FDW is also a product of her

own cultural upbringing. Singaporeans also have strong familial ties but oftentimes have a clearer distinction between family, neighbors, and community, explaining why the Filipino culture of “pakikisama” or smooth interpersonal relationship (SIR) can be sometimes perceived as being too nosy or stepping out of place for them.

Rest days or day-offs during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during the lockdown period were also affected by the power dynamics inside the household. While implementation varied between participants, rest days mostly depended on the prerogative of employers, with some choosing to let their FDWs rest and be free the whole day as long as the FDWs were at home, while some offered monetary compensation in exchange for working on alternate rest days. Unfairly for some participants, their rest days were not followed or compensated at all. Participant 1 shared that her Sunday day off during the lockdown period was almost non-existent and that her employer even made her work longer hours on Saturdays since she wasn’t going out the next day anyway.

“Pero nung nagka-COVID, kasi hindi na daw ako nagsisimba, ibalik daw sa 10. So dun, for almost 3 months, nawala yung 8 o’clock na knock-off ko pag Saturday. And dun ako… Na sabi ko, bakit anong kinalaman ng COVID e yun yung pinirmahan namin?” – Participant 1

“But when COVID happened, because I didn’t go to church anymore, they changed it back to 10. So for almost 3 months, I lost my 8 o'clock knock-off on Saturdays. And there I said, what does COVID have to do with what we signed on?”

The impact of the pandemic on Singapore’s economy was also greatly felt in some households as employees suffered from the inability to generate their usual

amount of wealth and income. Some, including myself, experienced pay cuts from monthly salaries, while some lost their jobs or were forced to close their businesses entirely. Jobs of foreign talents were also amongst those who were in jeopardy the most, especially with government assistance mostly focused on protecting Singaporean citizens. But with the economy at a stand-still during the lockdown, both Singaporeans and foreigners alike experienced some form of adjustment when it came to finances. Pandemic restrictions hindered some employees in the business sector from physically meeting with clients and in the case of one participant, the lack of sales of her employer who was working as a realtor led to her not receiving any salary for months and eating inadequate meals during the lockdown.

"Minsan nga kulang yung pagkain kasi kulang nga yung pera. Siyempre ina-ano, binabudget. Minsan nga yung mga para sa akin, wala na. Pera ko na ang ibibili ko." – Participant 1

"Sometimes there's not enough food because there's not enough money. Of course, they try to budget. But sometimes there is none for me. I end up buying with my own money."

Participant 1 shared that when her salary stopped, she still had to continue sending remittances to her family in the Philippines. Money issues got so tight that it came to the point that she barely had any left for her own personal needs. She was able to recover financially only when the work of her employer stabilized after the lockdown and she was reimbursed for the months she worked unpaid. I mentioned to her that this was technically illegal, but she simply shook her head saying that she didn't consider reporting her employers to the Ministry of Manpower not just because of her loyalty to them, but also because it was very impractical and challenging to

transfer employers in the middle of a lockdown and her choice at that time was only to hang on and endure.

"Naranasan ko nga na wala akong napkin nung nag period ako. Yan [points at her friend], tinransferan lang ako. Hanggang sa ano nalang, towel ba. O yung lumang damit ang itapal ko, kasi kung hindi mo anuhin, bubuhos. Wala na kasi talaga akong pera that time." – Participant 1

"I even experienced not having any napkin when I had my period. She [points at her friend], just transferred [money] to me. Until I had to use a towel or old clothes, because if I won't, it will overflow. Because I really didn't have any more money at that time."

Participant 5 shared a different type of struggle when it came to food and meals during the pandemic. While food was sufficient, she had to deal with the watchful scrutiny of the mother of her employer. In the instances that she had to eat first since her employers weren't available yet, the amount of food she took was constantly being monitored.

"Tyaka yung ugali niya na lahat ng galaw mo, nakabantay siya. Tapos konting kamali mo lang, magsusumbong. Tapos gagawan ka ng kwento para yung amo ko, pagalitan ako." – Participant 5

"Then her habit of watching your every move. If you make just a little mistake, you will be reported. Then she will make up stories so my boss will scold me."

The excessive monitoring, nit-picking, and constant bodily surveillance extended to the participant's work, making them feel constrained and "too guarded."

In the end, Participant 5 shared with me that this was what pushed her to no longer renew her contract and finally decide to change to a new employer.

"Bantay sarado ka. Ang tawag [ko] nga sa kanya, 'O kamusta kana security guard?' Kasi anjan palagi. Yung minomonitor ka." – Participant 1

"You are closely-guarded. I even call out to her, 'How are you, security guard?' Because she's always there monitoring you."

According to a study by Batool & Bhat (2021), stress can be influenced by six significant causes: *Social, Physiological, Psychological, Environmental, Significant Event, and Organizational*. Under this first emerging theme, all participants of the study admitted during their interviews to experiencing feelings of stress throughout and even after the lockdown period. Living through a pandemic is no pleasant feat, hence most would argue that experiencing stress may be normal or expected. However, my further analysis showed that some foreign domestic workers were not just exposed to mere normal or regular stress while "staying at home". My discussions with the participants unveiled that this theme completely covered all six causes of stress for FDWs, suggesting that FDWs were exposed to multidimensional levels of stress throughout this period.

"Pati rin ako. Isa narin ako… Tatalon. Kasi sa hirap. Sa hirap ng dinanas ko." – Participant 1

"Me too. I wanted to jump. Because of the hardships, from the hardships I suffered."

Derived from the relationship of an individual with others, social stress is experienced by FDWs in the fulfilment of their different social roles as helpers,

caregivers, educators, and second parents to the children at the homes of their employers. These roles can feel burdensome and enormous for FDWs, especially when performed all at the same time, as reflected by the narratives of Participant 1 & Participant 5.

Physiological stress from situations that directly affect the body included poor nutrition from inadequate meals, sleep disturbances from co-sharing a room, and illnesses in the case of those who contracted the COVID-19 virus. The blurring between the work hours and rest hours of the FDWs also had much impact on their physiological states, especially for those whose rest days were not properly implemented.

Psychological stress, which was the most prominent cause discussed in the interviews was brought about as an emotional response from negative situations that were beyond the ability of FDWs to cope, like instances of ill-treatment, verbal abuse, financial crises, or family problems back home. This also included the mental battle against self-harm and thoughts of suicide shared by some participants.

"Ang ingay, ang liit ng bahay. Ang ingay nila, ng TV, ang ingay nilang pamilya. Kaya wala rin talaga. Sobrang stressed nung time na yun." – Participant 5

"It was noisy since the house is small. They were noisy, the TV, the noise of their family. It was very stressful at that time."

Environmental stress for FDWs is caused by environmental factors like noise, crowding inside the room, or substandard living conditions. Space was one issue that the participants repeatedly brought up during the discussions. While it was

inevitable that not all FDWs get to have their own room, crowding inside the household was especially felt during the time when every family member was “staying at home”.

Significant Event Stress was from impactful events like the death of a loved one or public humiliation resulting from a traumatic experience. This also includes experiences of severe illnesses in the family, like in the case of Participant 1 where the mother of her employer got sick with intestinal cancer and COVID-19 during the pandemic, shifting their family dynamics and adding to the stress levels in their household.

In a company setting, Organizational Stress is derived from restrictions given by authorities or the management side. For FDWs, this would be similar to the stress from the “power play” inside the home, including the increased amount of work and extended working hours instructed by their employers, or their inability to participate and “have a say” in the decision-making inside the household.

This finding on multi-dimensional levels of stress as a disruption in the communication dynamics inside the home is also consistent in my study because the participants or FDWs, in general, are not at leisure to simply “leave behind” or “detach” from their sources of stress. Compared to regular workers for example, who can create a distance from their stressors or stressful work environments by simply ignoring phone calls or emails, stepping out of the site, or leaving the office after work hours, FDWs inhabit their stressful environments and live with some of their

stressors. Turning off these causes of stress is not as easy as merely “punching out of the clock” or “stepping out of the office to sign off for the day”.

Stress during the “staying-at-home” period was also not something exclusive to foreign domestic workers. Disruptions to work and new telecommuting work arrangements also caused a lot of stress to employers and inadvertently fed the growing tensions inside the home not just between the FDWs and their employers but also between family members. This rift between family members impacted the participants when they showed bias towards one side, receiving backlash from the other. And thus, instances of verbal abuse were also aggravated by the pandemic, not sparing even participants who have been working under their employers for long periods of time. Participant 1 shared that her employer became “very sensitive” from the lack of income, blaming even the expenses of the cancer treatments of the employer’s elderly mother, and she as the FDW often received the brunt of her employer’s frustrations. Unfortunately because of the lower power hierarchy of FDWs inside the home, some of them often become an outlet for the bottled-up stress of their foreign employers.

Unspoken Pleas for Freedom

Boundary negotiation (Kreiner, 2006), the process of a routine negotiation of the time and activities bound for work vs. the time and activities bound for home in an individual’s day is violated when events or behaviors cross what is supposed to be allotted either for the work-life or for private life (Kermal et al., 2021). This subtheme is the realization of the lack of a work and life segmentation or the failure

of boundary negotiation for FDWs, especially for those who still had to work during their off days. The tipping of this balance was common in the narratives of some of the participants, especially those who found their “stay-at-home” experience very taxing on their physical and mental well-being. The literature review in Chapter 2 (Antona, 2020; Summers, 2020) also describes similar experiences of other foreign domestic workers in Singapore and also in Hong Kong having significantly increased failure of work and life segmentation and violations when it comes to rest hours ever since the pandemic began. The narratives of the participants also made me acknowledge that **power dynamics** play a big role in this imbalance between work and life segmentation. The inability of the participants to say no to the work either deliberately given or subtly suggested to them during their rest days is also from the disproportion of power in their relationship with their employers. In an equal relationship, more work would straightforwardly mean more compensation, or not doing the work would mean no repercussions because it is already beyond what is in the work contracted. But because of this power inequality, with FDWs obviously getting a much lesser say in the relationship, it was easy for the encroachment of work-life imbalance to occur.

“Staying at home” during the pandemic predominantly led to challenges in the **work and life segmentation** of the FDW participants. For them, work was truly turned off only after leaving their employer’s home during their rest days. But when strictly “staying-at-home”, work and personal life hours easily get mixed up. During a rest day that they are not supposed to be working, FDWs are faced with unclear rules and boundaries. Some of the grey areas that the participants highlighted and questioned during our discussion were as follows: *Is it okay to not wash the dishes*

left in the sink because it's a Sunday off? Is it okay to nap through the afternoon even though I can hear the baby I usually take care of crying and wailing beyond my door because the parents can't find the baby's favorite toy? Can I take a break from changing the adult diaper of my elderly employer since it's my rest day and even though the smell is already obvious? If I do change the diaper, should I just bathe the elderly as well and also wash the soiled laundry since I started doing it anyway and the stain will be even more difficult to deal with if I leave it for tomorrow?

The official lockdown or "circuit breaker" in Singapore lasted 1 month, 3 weeks, and 4 days. But for some FDWs, it seemed to stretch even longer as they were not able to immediately regain their freedom the moment the lockdown was lifted, especially when it comes to rest days. As a precautionary measure against the still-spreading pandemic, some employers continued to restrict their FDWs at home during their rest days. Some participants were only discouraged from going out, like in the case of Participant 4 who had a pregnant employer at that time, while some like Participant 5 were completely prohibited even months after the lockdown. She was allowed to go out sometimes during her rest day only to buy her own food downstairs and was constantly asked to return right away.

"Ang hirap hirap ng buhay, ng sitwasyon dito, na lockdown ka pa. Ayaw ka pang… Twice, twice na nga lang yung off mo, tapos ayaw ka pang payagan lumabas nung medyo ok na… Bigyan ka lang ng oras, "O bakit ang tagal mo sa baba?" Ganito ganyan. "Alam mo naman may bata tayo." E sila nung nag-ano na yung restrictions, lagi din naman silang lumalabas." – Participant 5

"Life and the situation here is already difficult, plus you even get locked down. You get off days only twice, yet they won't even allow you to go out when it was already quite ok... They will just give you a limited time and even question, 'Why did you take so long? You know we have a child here.' But they also always go out after the restrictions lifted."

While the safety of the family was a valid concern, the participants strongly expressed that having freedom outside of their work hours and in an environment outside of their employer's residence were of vital importance to them and that physical interaction and face-to-face socialization was "irreplaceable". Unfortunately, even though they knew the extended restriction was against their contract, some still ended up being guilt-tripped into foregoing their basic right for a rest day.

"Ang sabi niya [ng employer ko] sa akin, ang no. 1 daw talaga na kailangan ng isang helper, freedom. Magkaroon talaga siya ng isang araw na free siya na makapag-relax. Kasi eto daw ang nakakatulong sa kanya para hindi siya magkaroon ng mental illnesses." – Participant 4

"My employer told me that the no. 1 need of a helper is freedom. The helper should be given one day to be free to relax. Because this is what helps her to not have any mental illnesses." – Participant 4

It was Participant 2 I noted who had the most work-life balance during the lockdown, keeping her smiling demeanor throughout our interview and with her maintaining a positive outlook throughout her ordeal, she was able to supply me with positive experiences to contrast the narratives of the other participants. It was mostly because her employers were very mindful in the implementation of the off days of their two domestic helpers, Participant 2, and another Filipino FDW. The clear separation of her work and personal hours gave Participant 2 a much easier time at

home, along with the assistance of another FDW to share and ease her workload. While Participant 2 and her fellow Filipino FDW were still not allowed to leave the house during their Sunday off days during the lockdown, they were able to spend it in their room without doing any work at all, not even simple chores

"Yung amo ko, may consideration naman siya. Pag off day namin, off day talaga. So hindi rin kami pinapatrabaho. Pero, hindi lang kami makakalabas sa bahay. Pero sa kwarto lang kami pag off namin." – Participant 2

"My boss has consideration. When we have an off day, it's really an off day. So we are not asked to do any work, only that we can't leave the house. But we usually just stay inside our room when we're off work."

Freedom for the participants entailed not just their rest days but also extended to having a space and time for themselves. This involved having the privacy to call their loved ones after their chores and simply having that opportunity for "me-time" when they retire for the day. Freedom proved to be a challenge, especially for participants who shared a room with their employers. In the narratives of some participants, it was difficult for them to release stress and tension because aside from not being able to physically mingle with peers, it is also difficult to maintain privacy when having a phone or video call when there is always someone at a hearing distance at home. Plus their frustrations are often rooted in either their employers or their work, so it would be awkward to let their employers listen in on their complaints when they call their friends or family members.

Participant 5 shared that finally having "a space to herself" even though she shared it with her employer's baby made a big difference in her work experience,

enough to label her current employer “The Best” she’s ever had. Compared to her previous living conditions where she shared a room with her employer’s sister-in-law who woke up very early and slept very late, the space and break from surveillance gave her time to breathe.

“Oo kasi, tyaka mas nakaka-usap mo yung family mo… Nagagawa mo yung… May time ka rin para sa sarili mo kasi kapag may own room ka.” – Participant 5

“Yes, because you get to talk with your family more... You also have time for yourself when you have your own room.”

The reality is, even with COVID-19 already considered an endemic in Singapore and the restrictions significantly reduced, the participants still did not feel as if they were completely free or that things are already back to normal. We discussed during the interview that the one remaining thing that they would like to be improved was the requirements for traveling overseas.

Because of the complicated paperwork and numerous prerequisites for entry to the Philippines and for arrival back to Singapore, all the participants have not yet had the chance to visit home at the time of my interviews with them, not physically seeing their families for at least 3 years now. Booking flights was also the prerogative of their employers, whether they will do it themselves or ask for the assistance of travel agencies. And travel agencies are most commonly available only on weekdays, another hindrance for the intended processing of FDWs who mostly have rest days only on Sundays.

“Kung pwede sana passport and ticket na lang ang kailangan… Kagaya ng before, tyaka OEC. Wala ng maraming ano, butingting, as long as fully vaccinated ka naman.” – Participant 4

“If only they’ll require just passports and tickets... like before, and maybe OEC. No more extras as long as you're fully vaccinated.”

Theme 2: Striving for Multicultural Coexistence

Harmony in diversity is something society always aimed for. Even inside the household, the acknowledgment of differences and the effort to see eye-to-eye is a general response to the quest for multicultural respect and coexistence. Breaking through language barriers, analyzing non-verbal cues and messages, and discussing norms and traditions all contribute to maintaining good intercultural communication dynamics between foreign employers and FDWs. But it is near impossible to achieve perfect communication and social exchanges as human thoughts and actions do not have a set of fixed patterns. Add in the factor of an ongoing global pandemic and things outside of people’s control like restrictions and lockdowns, it was apparent in the narratives of the participants that despite the mutual effort, there were still plenty of blunders in the pursuit of multicultural coexistence during their “stay at home” period.

Singapore is a popular destination for Filipino domestic workers due to the country’s close proximity to the Philippines and the majority of the population’s ability to speak and understand English. Yet despite these advantages, the bridging of ethnical and cultural differences of individuals living under the same roof still needed to be addressed by FDWs. Body language, gestures, intonations, and such cultural

and traditional differences were equally if not more difficult to adapt to and interpret correctly than the spoken language itself.

Experiencing a lockdown in a foreign setting, repeatedly came up in the discussion of how the perspectives and norms of their foreign employers coupled with the FDWs' personal communication difficulties also significantly affected the experiences and communication dynamics of the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Close companionship during the "staying at home" period allowed habits to surface and become more noticeable. Honest thoughts and expressions became more difficult to hide. And more interactions together also led to more time and opportunities to discuss perspectives and opinions from varying cultural backgrounds.

Just as no two people are completely identical, no two households are also the same. Add in the factors of a culturally rich and ethnically diverse population in Singapore, this study uncovered varying "stay-at-home" experiences during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic for foreign domestic workers, as influenced by the uniqueness of their own foreign employers and household environments.

Interethnic interactions and intercultural communication with their foreign employers are part of the day-to-day routine of the participants. Instructions from employers may come in the form of common slang like "makan", meaning "food" or "to eat". In some Chinese or Malay families, Singlish would be more preferred and is better understood as compared to straight English. There is also the honest and direct-to-the-point manner of speaking of Caucasian employers that may sometimes seem too confrontational. This became an essential sub-theme as these were

especially enhanced during the stay-at-home period of FDWs. In my reflection on the data, I noticed that the successful counter to cultural differences inside the household required effort and compromise from both parties. A mutual give and take between the employer and their FDW were key in maintaining a cordial environment inside their home.

How employers dealt with language differences with their foreign domestic workers made a difference in the lockdown experience of the participants. For Participants 2 & 4 who were working for mixed-ethnicity families (Chinese/English & Vietnamese/Australian), their employers addressed each member of the family differently – pure English to their FDWs and local languages mixed with “Singlish” to their children. Speaking in foreign languages like Mandarin or Tamil in the presence of their FDWs was mostly done only when private or confidential information was being discussed. While this adjustment in language may seem expected or very minimal, I have reflected from the narratives of the participants that this is an essential contribution to them having a better experience inside the home. With the deliberate choice of using language that every single member of the household can understand, the home space is kept more open, especially when there’s over-presence from crowding inside the home during the lockdown and one can easily feel alienated from the communication barrier.

Some FDWs have also contributed to the breaking of the language barrier in their households. The long period of employment in a foreign environment has taught adaptability to some participants in the learning of the native tongue of their

employers over time, through their own efforts and even without proper language lessons.

"Naiintindihan ko siya. Hindi ako marunong magsalita [ng Hokkien] pero naiintidihan ko kung ano ang ibig sabihin nun… So kapag minsan, pinag uusapan nila ako, alam ko na yun." – Participant 1

"I can understand. I may not speak [Hokkien] but I can understand meanings. So sometimes when they talk about me, I can tell."

This showed that the language barrier played almost no hindrance to the "stay-at-home" experience of the participants, though the effort of employers to speak the language that was understood by all did help to enhance the positivity of the experience. The proficiency of the employers in speaking English and the adaptability of some FDWs to learn the local language increased not just their competence in intercultural communication but also helped to make sure that both denotative and connotative meanings are shared to reduce the chances of conflict (Hinner, 2017).

Reading Body Language and Emotions

However, unlike language differences, **differences in culture and habitual norms** still gave leeway to misunderstandings, just like how Participant 1 was criticized by her employer for her habit of putting her hand on her waist while cooking. While the hands-on-waist or hands-on-hips posture can be universally read as an arrogant or assertive demeanor, this can also be considered a mere habitual gesture in some cultures. For most Filipinos, like Participant 1, this is merely a

comfortable stance that many Filipinos do while cooking, sweeping the floor, and even when chatting or gossiping with each other. Meaning-making between cultures varies and thus both verbal and non-verbal communication can be easily misinterpreted.

"Yung nagluluto ka, siyempre minsan pagod tayo. Yung body language, bigyan niya ng kahulugan. Yung nilalagay ko dito [sa bewang] ang kamay ko, sabi niya, katulong daw ako. Bat ko daw nagaganyan?" – Participant 1

"Sometimes, you're tired when you cook. And she gives meaning to my body language. When I place my hand here [on my waist], she'll say I'm just a maid and ask why I'm acting like that."

In addition to the factors involved in a multicultural household, misunderstandings and even arguments may arise when the cultural norms presented by FDWs out of habit may be interpreted differently by foreign employers or when certain intentions are not communicated clearly. It has been mentioned that even the practice of sending "balikbayan boxes" or packages was questioned by the employer of Participant 1. She shared that she was discouraged from packing Spam, toothpaste, chocolates, shower foam, etc. to send to her family. Her employer commented, *"Why, is it not available at your place? Why do you need to box all of these?"* and was told to simply send money instead. She found the intrusion offensive and this further added to the friction between them.

Participant 4, attributed this to open communication and the open-mindedness of her employers in bridging their cultural differences at home. She shared that while

her employer doesn't interfere with her Sunday day-offs, her employer expressed genuine curiosity as to why she mostly spends her rest day in church.

"Every Sunday tinatanong niya ako, bakit dapat magsimba? So sabi ko sa kanya, since bata naman ako, tinuruan ako ng parents ko na every Sunday talaga nagsisimba kami. So yun po. So sabi ko sa kanya, it depends on your religion." – Participant 4

"She asks why I need to go to church every Sunday. So I told her that since I was young, my parents taught me about going to church every Sunday. So I told her it depends on your religion."

Participant 4 shared that the upbringing of her employers' children was also something she had to adjust to. Previously working for a Korean family who was very hands-on with their kids, her current Vietnamese employer gave her more leeway in the raising and disciplining of her children in comparison. Even during weekends when her employers were off work, the children still spent more time with her. This was not entirely a negative thing, as she loved the two children dearly.

Participant 5 shared that while she was wrongly scolded by her employer at times, it helped when she approached her employer to talk again once her temper has subsided. Usually, at night when her employer is relaxed in front of the TV, she will approach to say her side of the story and explain the actual events that occurred. This encounter will usually end with her employer listening to her clarification and apologizing for the earlier outburst.

Though in contact with the same phenomenon, the narratives of some participants can be interpreted as having notably lesser unpleasantness or negativity in their shared experiences as compared to others who were especially vocal in recounting instances of ill-treatment and verbal abuse during their “stay-at-home” period. Participant 1 opened up to me during the interview on her decision of returning home to the Philippines after her contract expires at the end of this year and Participant 5 shared that she has already transferred twice to other employers since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. I noted that employer ethnicity barely brought on any correlation to this segregation of positive vs. negative experiences. For example, while Participant 1 had substantial struggles with her long-time Chinese employer, Participant 5 actually found better working conditions only after leaving her Indian employer and transferring to a Chinese family.

Maintaining open communication, learning when and how to approach an employer, and avoiding over-sensitivity when it came to cultural issues were displays of good intercultural communication dynamics that helped in the resolution of disagreements and in the maintenance of a **multicultural coexistence** and while “staying at home”, as displayed in my discussions with Participants 4 & 5. A mutual **cultural understanding** was achieved when employers put in the effort to learn and be considerate about the beliefs and traditions (e.g. going to church every Sunday) of their foreign domestic workers and when the FDWs acculturated themselves and develop strategies to better adapt to the foreign host country and their foreign employers (e.g. learning their employer’s mother tongue). This display of mutual consideration has aided in the reduced exposure to stressful situations and

frictions inside the home and led to the enjoyment of a better quality of work life for foreign domestic workers especially.

The Fear of COVID-19 as a Communication Barrier

“Hindi ka mapalagay kung matatamaan ka ng COVID or ang pamilya mo na nasa malayo ka. Yun lang siguro ang kinakatakot ko.” – Participant 3

“It’s worrying if you or your family will be hit by COVID while you’re far away. That's what I'm afraid of."

Fear and anxiety can be a **barrier to effective communication.** With FDWs in a constant state of fear and worry, circumstances may arise where they fail to concentrate on what their employers are saying or fully comprehend the intentions and actions inside their multicultural households. Anxiety may even push some individuals to avoid social situations in general. What can be perceived by foreign employers as mere shyness or introversion of their Filipino domestic workers may actually be a manifestation of their constant fears and worries about COVID-19 for themselves and family. In contrast, anxiety may also lead to abrupt shifts in attitudes and communication tendencies. Examples are rude replies, short-temperedness, irritability, and the inability to focus. In a way, this attitude change can also be experienced by the foreign employers themselves, as they also deal with their own personal fears and anxieties from the pandemic.

A study using a Fear of COVID-19 Scale to test levels of fear specifically related to COVID-19 reported a prevalence of 18.1% to 45.2% among the general population (Quadros, et al., 2021). Therefore it was “natural” to be afraid of the

pandemic. But these numbers were expected to be considerably higher for other groups that had increased risk to the fear of the virus. This subtheme displayed exactly this in the lived experiences of the participants. I have observed and interpreted that their fear of the pandemic extended beyond just the failure of recovery from the virus. COVID-19 fears mentioned also covered the inaccessibility to ill loved ones, the stigma of being the carrier of the virus into the home of their employers, going into financial debt in the event of unavoidable hospitalization, and the chilling thought of returning home in a wooden coffin.

Imagine the fear, stress, and worry if you or a member of your family ends up getting COVID-19… the uncertainty for survival, especially during the early months of detection when no vaccines were available yet and all we could see in the news were the constantly rising number of cases and death tolls across the world. Now imagine this plus the fact that you are thousands of miles away from your loved ones and if anything happened to you or to them, you are far out of reach from each other. There was no definite cure, hospitals were overflowing, and airplanes were grounded, without even a chance for an expensive last-minute flight if worse comes to worst. These are just some of the plaguing thoughts and worries of the participants that consistently came up during my discussions with them. The experience and fear of the COVID-19 pandemic had a completely different depth for them as FDWs. COVID-19 was not just one challenging virus. It was a collection of problems and repercussions brought forth by uncertainty coupled with distance. As someone who was also working away from my family and elderly parents at that time, this was something I empathized with them.

FDWs strove for protection against the virus… for their own personal safety, for the safety of their family, and for the safety of the families of their employers. Social isolation was hard for the participants but they knew that their strict compliance with the new pandemic rules and guidelines in Singapore was monumental in keeping everyone safe. No one wanted to be the one to "take home the virus" or to get sick in a country where healthcare for foreigners was beyond costly and will most likely eat up their life-long savings. It was the fear of COVID-19 that made some participants give up some of their own privileges, voluntarily lessening their free time on their rest days to stay close to their employers' homes or to stay away from crowded places. It was a battle to keep your immune system strong despite being physically drained from manual labour and to keep your spirits up despite the fear of an unknown virus.

"So since nagstart yung pandemic hanggang ngayon, nandun yung fear to be cautious. Yung ganun. Fear na mag-ingat." – Participant 3

"So since the start of the pandemic until now, there is the fear to be cautious. That's it. The fear to be careful."

Participant 5 shared that news showing OFWs coming home as corpses in boxes frightened her and that she couldn't blame her FDW friends in Dubai when they started going home one by one once repatriation in the Middle East started. When asked if there was something she wanted to avoid or improve in the event of another pandemic, in a case for example the new Monkeypox outbreak also gets out of control, she said that she simply "never wants to experience another pandemic or lockdown ever again." This sentiment was strongly echoed by the other participants.

“Ang kinakatakutan ko lang kung… Touch wood naman, sana hindi pa ituloy ni Lord, makarating dito yung monkeypox, kasi ayaw ko nang ma lockdown. Kasi yung pinagdaanan ko mahirap.” – Participant 1

“The only thing I'm afraid of is... touch wood, I hope the Lord won’t let it continue, is if the monkeypox will get here, because I don't want to be locked down again. Because what I went through was difficult.”

Beyond their personal struggles and individual challenges inside the home, bear in mind that FDWs are also facing the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic in general. This subtheme offered a holistic overview of the lived experiences of the participants throughout this pandemic – that foreign domestic workers had to struggle with a dangerous unknown virus while spending isolation without physical access to their support groups. It manifested a 2-in-1 battle with both **a viral and a “behavioral” pandemic** (Jeste et al., 2020) for FDWs, a difficult predicament to relate to for those who spent isolation with their loved ones.

Theme 3: Interpersonal Communication During a Double Pandemic

Aside from intercultural communication or communication between different cultures, I also studied the other types of interactions and exchanges of the participants in their narratives, especially since foreign employers aren’t the only people FDWs communicated with during this period. Interpersonal communication, both inside and outside the household during their social isolation is important to understand considering the complexity of their experience of a “double pandemic”.

This concept of a “double pandemic” was realized when a participant exasperatedly commented before our actual interview that she felt like she was “facing two enemies” and she was losing out to depression more than to COVID-19 itself. From the lockdown period to today’s “new normal”, FDWs have been experiencing a deterioration of their physical, mental, and emotional well-being aside from fighting for their safety from the virus. Some may have been fortunate enough to be spared from the virus all this time but had to be subjected to long periods of social isolation and confinement while enduring the verbal abuse of their employers. Some may have come unscathed from ill-treatment but had to deal with the emotional turmoil of their whole family getting sick from COVID-19 in the Philippines. It was a back-to-back struggle for those who were experiencing the pandemic away from their homes, but especially for FDWs who at the same time, had an array of problems to deal with from living with foreign employers in an overseas country.

Quality communication and good communication dynamics with others play high importance in the survivability and the gaining of positive lived experiences of the participants especially since the co-occurrence of loneliness and social isolation has already been identified pre-pandemic and COVID-19 had caused incidences to spread and worsen (Hwang, 2020). Some groups were identified to be more vulnerable to the effects of social distancing, for example, older adults who suffered from stricter isolation as they were considered the most high-risk and with the lowest survivability against the virus (Luchetti, et al., 2020) and during our interviews, the participants also expressed to me feelings equivalent to this vulnerable group.

Limitations on communication channels and spaces for socialization due to their line of work meant that loneliness and homesickness were already an existing issue to FDWs pre-pandemic, but the strict social isolation during the lockdown worsened their feelings to never-before-experienced levels. Also, the biggest change that COVID-19 brought was the lack of knowledge on “when the loneliness and the social isolation will end”, “when they can see their families again in person” and the fear of a “volatile future” considering no one can answer when and if things will ever go back to normal.

Not all may have encountered abuse during the lockdown period and challenges varied in every household, but all participants have shared about encountering feelings of anxiety, loneliness, weariness, or boredom during the time of their social isolation. Interpersonal communication buffered such negative feelings as they interacted and kept in touch with their support groups both inside and outside of the home.

Communication with Support Systems

“Ay oo, hindi siya nakakalungkot kasi may mga bata kang kasama na kinakausap.” – Participant 4

“Ah yes, it’s not sad because there are the children to be with and talk with.”

The **Culture of Kinning** or the development of a family-like relationship between caregivers and their patients or between domestic workers and their employers (Baldassar et al., 2017) was displayed by some participants in their narratives of intercultural communication dynamics, making a difference in lockdown

experiences. Some felt like they were simply staying in a “second home” instead of feeling “alien” or like a stranger in someone else’s home. Kinning not only improves relations inside the home, but it also alleviates the mental wellness of both parties (Ho, et al., 2018). Due to the maintenance of the gap in an employer-employee relationship, the participants often practiced kinning more on the elderly or younger family members in their employer’s household. Especially for FDWs who started the early care of the children (with babies as young as only a few days old for some participants), strong closeness from their upbringing and their treatment of the children as “real family” influenced the FDWs into a sense of spending more time with a second family instead of simply being isolated from their real one. In comparison to FDWs in a mostly adult households, there were considerably lesser narratives of friction between family members. The blurring of the segmentation between real families (the family back home) and temporary families (the employer’s family) resulted in a “reduction in the feeling of foreignness” for live-in domestic workers who have adopted their temporary families as their own and “fully immersed into their employers’ family life” (Au et al., 2019).

“Sa dami ng mga pinagdaanan, I remain faithful kasi pag nagserve tayo kay Lord, hindi na tao ang sineserve natin eh, si God kasi.” – Participant 1

“Through the many things I have been through, I remain faithful because when we serve the Lord, we are no longer serving people, but God.”

Praying is also considered a form of interpersonal communication even though the other entity is an unseen being. Religion, especially Catholicism and Christianity, is very prominent in the Philippines and as an expression of their Filipino

roots, participants have continued to rely on their faith during hard times even after moving to work in a foreign country.

"Ano na lang, iyak, and then pray." – Participant 5

"Just cry, and then pray."

A few participants shared that in their darkest and hardest of times during the pandemic, they reached a point where self-harm and suicide eventually crossed their minds, but it was their faith, along with thoughts of the family they will leave behind that prevented them from doing the act. This was an emotional moment during our interviews and at this point, the participants were more cautious when opening up about the experience. But after I had offered them a break and passed tissues to those who were teary-eyed, they were able to resume the discussion. I had to remind them that they were free to skip questions and narratives that they found too difficult or too personal, but they were all okay to continue considering it was a moment that in a way, they were also proud to conquer and overcome. A participant shared that even in her church, she is aware that other Filipino domestic workers were also having the same negative outlook and sentiment and it was her "moment of low" that allowed her to empathize and support others.

"Maraming na de-depress. Na yung tatangka na silang tatalon. Pero syempre sa mga Word of God na naririnig, yun ang nagpapa ano sa kanila... Nagpapatatag." – Participant 1

"Many are depressed, to the point that they attempt to jump. But of course when hearing the Word of God, it makes them... stronger."

Religion carries intervening factors evidenced to influence subjective well-being (Kim-Prieto & Miller, 2018) as religious coping and religious support groups can directly impact one's health, resistance, and outlook, and can work as a buffer against stressful or negative events (Brewer et al., 2014). *Faith, prayer,* and *God* were common responses from the participants during their interviews, especially when asked about dealing with difficulties and hard times.

"Sinasarili ko [ang problema]. Minsan nga, parang manlamig ako sa Lord. Pero sabi ko, kung manlalamig ako Sayo, saan nalang ako pupulutin? Kasi ang kailangan lang natin is ang Panginoon eh." – Participant 1

"I keep it [the problem] to myself. Sometimes, I grow cold to the Lord. But then I'll say, if I'm cold to You, where will I end up? Because all we need is the Lord."

With the rest days of most FDWs in Singapore often falling on Sundays, those who seek religious groups and gatherings have been presented with better opportunities to join, hence, allowing them to continue the Filipino custom and upbringing of attending church on Sundays. I did consider that my selected participants could have been coincidentally a niche of religious believers so I interviewed them further regarding their faith and religious activities. While some were open about their active involvement in church fellowships and activities, some also admitted to being only occasional churchgoers, attending mass only during Christmas or Holy Week for example, and would not really consider themselves overly religious. But despite the participants having mixed sentiments on the strength of their beliefs and the activeness of their religious participation, they gave agreeing on responses that when times get difficult, they pray.

Aside from the strengthening of faith and beliefs, church communities also act as a significant opportunity for FDWs to meet and socialize with other Filipinos and fellow FDWs. Such socialization in religious communities is often not limited to the church setting, but also extends to outside activities after masses or services.

Another important avenue for interpersonal communication in the narratives of the participants as their sources of support was their fellowships with other FDWS. **Communication with fellow FDWs** was a valuable contributor to the well-being of the participants due to the reciprocal help and the sharing of coping strategies between people with common needs and concerns. This is further supported by other literature reviews as peers also allow for the building of a platform of mutuality and belongingness in the lives of FDWs (Ho et al., 2022).

While fellow FDWs were not explicitly stated by some participants as a support group in their interviews, I have observed the undeniable impact of the similarities or differences between the work and living conditions of their peers in the perceived wants and needs of the participants and their outlook on how their own living and working conditions should also be.

"Nag envy ako sa ibang mga katulong na may sariling kwarto. May tamang pagpahinga. Ako, wala." – Participant 1

"I envy the other maids who have their own room. They get proper rest. I don't."

Camaraderie with fellow FDWs under the same employer offered a sharing of work responsibilities and companionship during the isolation period (Participant 2)

and conflict between FDW peers in the same household can further impede work and dampen living conditions even if the fellow FDW is from the same nationality (Participant 5 from her second employer). Overall, having a strong connection with a friend or companion working with the same responsibilities and experiencing the same isolation in a foreign country was evidently impactful in the lived experiences of the participants.

Having someone to open up to, especially someone who understood your circumstances, like a fellow domestic worker also played a big help in the mental and emotional wellness of the participants. For Participant 2, the companionship of her fellow FDW roommate not just helped to alleviate her workload but also gave her someone to share her time with as she spent her rest days stuck at her employer's home. For Participant 1, well-timed phone calls to her best friend who was also a Filipino domestic worker gave her an outlet to release her inner frustrations with her employer. She described their friendship as "very honest", saying that her friend knew even of her over-pampering of her 40-year-old employer like a baby.

"Minsan pag nag-uusap kami [ng best friend ko], sabi ko, gising na amo ko. Palitan muna ang diaper, painumin na ng gatas." – Participant 1

"Sometimes when we [my best friend and I] are talking, I'll say 'My boss is already awake. I'll change her diaper first, and let her drink milk.' "

The close interpersonal relationship between Participant 1 and her best friend was even displayed during our discussion for this study, as her best friend even joined our table for moral support throughout the interview. I was actually prepared to politely ask her to wait at a different table or stop and reschedule our discussion

when her best friend started to approach us, but Participant 1 was quick to grab her and told her to sit with us before continuing with her narrative as if nothing has changed. In the end, her best friend gave insightful comments and validations during my discussion with Participant 1 as she too contrasted some of the unfairness that Participant 1 had to deal with, in comparison with her own foreign employer.

Online Communication & ICTs

Communication with family was the anchor point, the one main thing keeping FDWs grounded during the lockdown period and throughout their experience of the pandemic. Getting in touch with their families through Messenger applications kept them motivated to endure, and seeing the posts and updates of their loved ones on social media platforms like Facebook kept the participants going. This led to an increase in the participants' usage of their digital devices outside of their work hours. Participant 4 said that her family in the Philippines also had more opportunities to listen to her now that they were "more focused on their phones" as compared to when they were constantly outside pre-pandemic. This allowed her to have a deeper closeness with her children, even sharing the Word of God with them. She shared that another significant help for her mental state was the Kindle and Netflix subscriptions given to her by her employers. Watching movies with "life lessons" during her free time helped her relax and made her feel uplifted despite the stress of not being able to meet friends or attend church physically.

"Kasi siyempre yung anak ko hindi na siya pumupunta ng school kasi diba naglockdown din sa Pilipinas, so kung baga, focus sila sa phone na. Kasi nga online din yung pag-aaral nila. So naging okay siya kasi parang naging more closer ako sa kanila. At dahil sa lockdown na to, dun ko talaga na-share sa kanila yung ano, commitment kay Lord." – Participant 4

"Because my son doesn't go to school anymore since there's also a lockdown in the Philippines, he's focusing on his phone, because his studies are also online. So it's better because I became closer to them. And because of this lockdown, I was able to impart with them my commitment to the Lord."

The "**toll of family absence**" is considered to have devastating effects, especially for those who were forced into stricter isolation (Voo et al., 2020 & Luchetti, et al., 2020) and this was bridged by FDWs in Singapore solely through **ICTs and digital communication** via popular social media platforms like Facebook, Messenger, and WhatsApp. I asked the participants if they found themselves using their digital devices more often because of the pandemic, and most answered that if they were not working, they were usually on their phones and that for them "cellphone time" was their rest time. I also asked if their frequent usage was perhaps an issue with their employers, but all participants said that they maintained usage of their devices only during appropriate times so that they would not be reprimanded for it.

"After lunch may pahinga, tapos pwede kang gumamit ng cellphone."
– Participant 3

"There's a break after lunch, and you can use your cellphone."

"Open naman yung cellphone sa amin. Pwede din naming tawagan. Basta tapos na yung trabaho namin, makakatawag kami. Pag pahinga namin, makakatawag kami sa family." – Participant 2

"Our cellphones are open. We can also call. As long as our work is done, we can call. When we rest, we can call our family."

ICTs and having the ability to communicate with the outside world even just through digital and virtual means was an immeasurable help for FDWs during the pandemic. It gave them the opportunity not just to get in touch with their families but also to explore possibilities outside of their confinement and look beyond their current predicament. When I asked if there was a particularly pleasant experience during the isolation period that can be shared with me for the study, Participant 2 opened up that while she struggled with her inability to go out during her rest days, she took the lockdown as an opportunity to lessen her expenses and turned it into something good. The expenses she usually incurred from being outside gradually saved up and she used it to finally start the construction of her own house in the Philippines. Focusing her mindset on the positive and having something to look forward to when she finally goes home made the lockdown bearable and eventually a pleasant experience for her.

"Kasi ano, nung naglockdown, dun ako nagstart na makapagpatayo ng bahay ko… Less gastos dito… So yung gastos ko dapat na lumalabas, naipon para sa pagpapatayo ng bahay." – Participant 2

"Because of the lockdown, I was able to start the construction of my house... from the lesser expenses here... So the expenses from going out got saved for the building of the house."

FDWs are not foreign to the concept of online communication as even before COVID-19, they are used to relying on ICTs to reach friends and family members back home. My observation from the interview transcripts was that the significant change was more on the frequency and the viewing of ICTs now as a sole lifeline since physical interaction was not an option during the lockdown. The participants experienced varying circumstances when it came to opportunities to communicate online or spend time on the internet. Habitual-long video calls while doing chores for some FDWs were eliminated when their employer started staying at home. While for some, it was their employers themselves who encouraged the use of ICTs like **Kindle and Netflix subscriptions** for entertainment and reprieve during their free time. Communication with family members also undertook a different depth as conversations became more focused and "present-centered", shaped and influenced by fears, concerns, and what-ifs from the ongoing pandemic.

Getting through a double pandemic was not something the participants adhered to only for themselves. According to the data gathered, a key narrative in the interviews of the participants was that enduring overwork and stress was for the families they were working so hard for, and letting go of thoughts of self-harm was for the loved ones they will potentially leave behind.

"Ako, kasi para sa akin naman, nung time na eto nga nagka-COVID, dun ako kumuha ng lakas or inspiration sa family po." – Participant 4

"For me, when COVID happened, I got strength or inspiration from my family."

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign domestic workers considered their work as migrant workers, hired foreigners, or domestic helpers, as a way “to be able to care for their families back home” (Au et al., 2019) and now after experiencing COVID-19 and living in today’s “new normal”, this core fact remains the same. While the threat of another pandemic or lockdown may instill a unique and familiar fear in them, no type or variant of the virus will be able to take away this drive to sacrifice for their loved ones, especially from the foreign domestic workers who have endured *and* survived.

Chapter V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reflections

As a researcher, I considered the data on communication dynamics from this study to be important because of its possible contributions to the body of knowledge about the subject. But at a personal level, the data was invaluable to me also because these are actual life stories and actual experiences of real people who have suffered, struggled, endured, and survived a truly difficult time in their lives.

The sharing of their narratives was more than just scientific evidence, it was about them opening up about instances of real communication problems and divulging private hardships to an outsider. While the risk of emotional triggers was explained to the participants beforehand through the reading and signing of the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) and I prepared for such inevitabilities through compliance with requirements and the processing of the ethics approval for this study, it still hits differently when someone shares about something as deep as abuse and self-harm. The experience strengthened my passion to be an advocate for communication and change, especially for the FDWs closest to myself, who is also an Overseas Filipino Worker, and to further connect them to available support communities.

Also through this study, I was able to address my initial biases on certain ethnicities that were previously simply based on anecdotal evidence.

Conclusion

With the dynamics of the lives of foreign domestic workers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, it came as no surprise that their communication dynamics during social isolation experienced changes as well. The lived experiences of the participating Filipino FDWs in this study highlighted that FDWs were subjected to a reluctant silence as they faced the culture of overwork, and power play inside the home and their pleas for freedom remained unspoken, despite being in a progressive first-world country like Singapore (Theme 1). As employers and FDWs alike were forced into a lengthy togetherness during the COVID-19 lockdown, differences inside the home were emphasized as displays of power imbalances manifested along with cultural differences in relational perspectives.

Lockdown restrictions were especially impactful in the worsening of social isolation and violation of worker rights, especially when it came to the proper implementation of a weekly day of rest for FDWs. Again, power dynamics played a role in the inability of some FDWs to have work and life segmentation. Having a lower hierarchy inside the home meant FDWs were often on the losing end when it came to boundary negotiation and their personal hours often encroached with additional chores and household roles. This also meant that they were unable to completely regain their freedom even after the official lockdown was lifted.

Employer consideration and mutual cultural understanding, like in the form of kinning and correctly reading body language and emotions played an important part

in the improvement of work conditions and the garnering of a positive experience despite the global pandemic for both foreign employers and their FDWs, especially for the ethnically and culturally diverse households in Singapore (Theme 2). With COVID-19 and social isolation as a 2-in-1 pandemic, it was important to maintain a multicultural coexistence as people inside the home struggled with barriers to effective communication brought on by their fears from COVID-19 and since access to support systems were limited mostly to online social media platforms, digital communication, and ICTs (Theme 3).

Pandemic restrictions are under the full discretion of lawmakers and authorities but this study supplied empirical data that certain vulnerable groups like FDWs and other migrant workers are susceptible to increased risk of communication suppression, social isolation, and cultural misconceptions. While future lockdowns to safeguard the general populace may be unavoidable with the continuous emergence of other forms of viruses and diseases, certain considerations might be warranted for those who have the shorter end of the stick in power inequalities and have a much smaller voice in society.

Recommendations

There are many ways that the findings of this study can be utilized to improve the well-being of foreign domestic workers, especially those in Singapore. The most basic of these is the strict and proper implementation of the mandatory day off of FDWs. The execution of the Ministry of Manpower (MOM)'s one compulsory day off for FDWs each month that cannot be compensated with cash taking effect by the

end of 2022 is a good start, but this new law must also be well communicated to foreign domestic workers so that they will not remain unaware of their rights and also to the employers so that they will be well informed to make adjustments in the work arrangements of their FDWs and be made aware of the consequences if they are to dismiss this mandate. The dissemination of such important information through proper and visible communication channels such as employment agencies and official portals of the Embassy of the Philippines will also help to quickly propagate updates and verify the authenticity of the information being distributed. Periodic SMS alerts can also be a way to disseminate important labor mandates and changes to both employers and FDWs considering over-information from internet usage.

My additional recommendation is to also have government guidelines to follow on how day offs or rest days can be adjusted in emergency situations like sudden lockdowns. This is to help both employers and FDWs alike in the event of future unforeseen circumstances, like another pandemic, when making changes regarding their home and work conditions and to lessen the chances of one party being put at a disadvantage.

During initial hiring or during renewals, webinars for employers to introduce basics about the culture, tradition, and norms of their foreign domestic workers would also aid in the mutual cultural understanding in the household. This can also be an avenue for foreign employers to raise questions or clarifications to experts and authorities regarding their own personal experiences with FDWs.

Lastly, establishing a proper communication hub or center for the general concerns of migrant workers will help to teach FDWs who are the authorities from their own country that they can contact and how they can relay their issues, whether big or small, whenever they need a helpline.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW OF FILIPINO DOMESTIC WORKERS IN SINGAPORE

Researcher: Ma. Cristel G. Jance
Organization: University of the Philippines Open University
Thesis Project Title: "Lived Experiences of Filipino Domestic Workers in Social Isolation during COVID-19 – A Hermeneutical Study"

PART I – INFORMATION SHEET

INTRODUCTION
Thank you for giving time to read through this informed consent form.
I am Ma. Cristel G. Jance, a research student under the University of the Philippines Open University and I would like to extend an open invitation to the participant to join this study about the experiences of Filipino domestic workers in Singapore during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially about the time spent with their employers when the lockdown or circuit breaker took place.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH
This research aims to explore and describe the lived experiences of Filipino domestic workers in Singapore during the COVID-19 pandemic and to examine instances of social isolation due to implemented travel and social gathering restrictions.

TYPE OF RESEARCH INTERVENTION
This research will involve an in-depth and unstructured one-on-one interview with the participant conducted either in English or Filipino to facilitate mutual discussion with the interviewer. Participants are encouraged to speak and converse in Filipino during the interview if this enables them to better express themselves and their experiences. Any unfamiliar words or concepts will be explained and the participant can ask questions at any time.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION
Selection of participant was based on the criteria that she is a Filipino working as a domestic worker during the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore under a Chinese/Malay/Indian/Caucasian employer. This study will have 4-6 participants in total.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION
Participation in this interview is voluntary and consent is to be given freely. Signed consent will be acquired before any verbal or written information will be recorded during the interviews. Recording must be permitted first by the participant before any data will be collected.

PROCEDURES
The interview will be conducted in an open public setting like a café or restaurant at a time of convenience to the participant and will be conducted personally and solely by the researcher. Written notes will be taken down and audio recording will be

conducted during the course of the interview. Should the participant wish to not answer certain questions, the interviewer will simply move on to the next question. Data will only be kept during the duration of the research and will be disposed after the study is completed.

DURATION
The interview may take between 10 to 30 minutes, or longer should the participant wish to continue with the discussion and share more information.

RISKS
Some questions during the interview may trigger strong feelings of discomfort, fear, embarrassment, trauma, or anger. The participant may opt not to answer such questions if she feels that they are too personal or if these make her feel uncomfortable.

BENEFITS
There will be no direct benefit from participating in this study beyond the opportunity of the participant to share their experiences. However, this research will give a voice, communicate, and bridge the concerns and predicaments of Filipino domestic workers to the stakeholders and policymakers that can give a solution to their issues and improve their working conditions.

INCENTIVES OR COMPENSATION
Though there will be no monetary compensation, food and drinks will be provided by the researcher to ease the participant and in gratitude for their given time and contribution to the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY
To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, the dataset to be gathered is to be kept anonymous. Code names and numbers (e.g. Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) will be assigned to the participants and they will only be addressed or referred to as such in the study to further prevent identification. In the event that the assistance of an external consultant or data specialist is required for further analysis, the name list and any personal dataset on the identity of the participants will not be shared.

SHARING THE RESULTS
The research findings will be presented for thesis publication and access will be given to the participant should she be interested in having a copy of the results. No names or direct information of any form that may identify the participant will be included in the published study to ensure complete anonymity and avoid recognition of the participant in the event that that study goes public.

RIGHT TO REFUSE OR WITHDRAW
The participant may stop or withdraw from the interview at any given time. Interview notes will be shared with the participant at the end of the discussion for an opportunity to review and verify the data collected.

DATA MANAGEMENT
For additional protection of data, handling of interview recordings and discussion notes will be done solely by the researcher. All written data from the interviews,

including this signed Informed Consent Form will be scanned and saved together with the audio files or recorded data solely in in the researcher's Google Drive which requires log-in access and a password. Hard copies of the written documents will then be finely shredded and disposed. All saved data will be kept only until the thesis has been approved. Once there is no longer any need to defend the research study or 1 month after final thesis approval has been received by the researcher, the collected data of the participants will be permanently purged and deleted from the researcher's Google Drive.

WHO TO CONTACT

Researcher: Ma. Cristel G. Jance
Contact No.:
Email Address: mgjance@up.edu.ph

ETHICS COMMITTEE

The conduct of this study is to be overseen by:

UPOU Institutional Research Ethics Committee
University of the Philippines Open University
Los Baños, Laguna, Philippines, 4031
Email address: irec@upou.edu.ph

PART II – CERTIFICATE OF CONSENT

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Printed Name of Participant: _____
Signature of Participant: _____
Date: _____

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands that the following will be done:

1. A one-on-one unstructured interview with written notes and an audio recording will be conducted at a time and place of convenience to the participant.
2. Data will be collected but confidential information like the identity and personal details of the participant will be kept anonymous.
3. The results of the research will be shared for thesis publication and possible further scientific studies.

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly

and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Printed Name of Researcher: _____
Signature of Researcher: _____
Date: _____

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE GUIDE

Due to the unstructured nature of the interview to be conducted, discussion is expected to differ and vary per participant. But below are some guide questions for the flow of questioning and discussion to be led by the researcher towards the participant.

Researcher: Ma. Cristel G. Jance
Organization: University of the Philippines Open University
Thesis Project Title: "Lived Experiences of Filipino Domestic Workers in Social Isolation during COVID-19 – A Hermeneutical Study"

1) **Can I know how long you have been working as a foreign domestic worker in Singapore?**

2) **Can you share about the ethnicity of your employers? Which language is commonly spoken at their home?**

3) **How has the shift to "staying-at-home" from the COVID-19 pandemic affected your working hours? Is this set-up still the same until today?**

4) **How has this shift affected your rest day or off day? Were you allowed to leave your employers' premises the moment the lockdown / circuit breaker was lifted?**

5) **COVID-19 has also severely affected our ability to travel, especially overseas. How did you communicate with your family and friends during the pandemic? Was this different with how you communicated with them before the pandemic?**

6) **Was there a particularly pleasant experience during the isolation from the lockdown / circuit breaker period that you can share?**

7) **Was there a particularly unpleasant experience during the isolation from the lockdown / circuit breaker period that you can share?**

8) **What is the biggest change in your work environment before vs. after COVID-19 and the implemented pandemic restrictions?**

9) **Can you say that the lockdown / circuit breaker has impacted your physical or mental well-being? Why or why not?**

10) **COVID-19 is already considered an endemic here in Singapore but is there any aspect in your work (work scope/hours/responsibilities/etc.) that you wish could be changed, addressed, or improved?**