

Stranded at Home: Lived Experiences of Ilonggo Seafarers.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study delves into the distinctive experiences of Ilonggo seafarers who unexpectedly found themselves stranded at home due to the disruptive COVID-19 pandemic. Before the global outbreak, these individuals led transient lives as migrant explorers, traversing the world's oceans as seafarers. However, their lives took an abrupt turn when they were grounded due to various pandemic-related factors and containment measures.

The research commences by providing an insightful exploration of their pre-pandemic lives, vividly portraying the dynamics of the seafaring industry they were an integral part of. It then sharply contrasts these experiences with the arduous challenges they faced while confined to their homes during the pandemic's onset.

Employing in-depth interviews and rigorous thematic analysis, this study unveils the multifaceted struggles, stresses, and emotional challenges that these seafarers grappled with during their unanticipated hiatus. It also sheds light on the diverse coping mechanisms they resorted to, including venturing into business, seeking online employment, embracing newfound recreational activities, strengthening familial bonds, and actively engaging in community outreach initiatives.

Grounded in the remarkable resilience and adaptability demonstrated by these seafarers, puts forth practical recommendations such as advocating for the recognition of seafarers as "Key or Essential Workers" and endorsing measures such as accessible online training, and the establishment of the Philippines Port as a Crew Change Hub. These initiatives collectively aim to fortify seafarer well-being and enhance the overall resilience of the maritime industry.

Key Words: Seafarers, COVID-19 pandemic, Qualitative phenomenological study, Coping mechanisms, Maritime industry

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, is a global infectious disease that spreads through contaminated air droplets and small particles. While most infected individuals experience mild to moderate respiratory symptoms and recover without special treatment, those with pre-existing conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, or cancer are at higher risk of developing severe illness. The Philippine Government implemented a total lockdown on March 19, 2020, to prevent the virus's spread, and many countries worldwide implemented similar measures.

The Maritime Industry, specifically international seafarers, faced challenges during the pandemic. Some seafarers were stranded at home due to travel restrictions and health protocols, while others were extended at sea, prolonging their time away from their families. The high costs associated with crew turnovers during

docking and the banning of seafarers from leaving ships contributed to the stranded situation of seafarers. Studies show that crews on boards suffer from different work-related, social, and emotional stress due to fear of infection by the virus and the uncertainty and prolonged stay at work due to slow turnover of crews because of the COVID-19 health protocol and travel restrictions (Heinrich, 2021; Sliskovic, 2020; Mittal et al., 2020; Jerai, 2020; Qin et al., 2021).

This drastic change resulted in a different level of downgrade changes in the economy. According to the report of Statista as of April 8, 2021, the Covid-19 Pandemic resulted in a loss of 2.9 million lives after contracting the respiratory virus and had spread to six continents. Approximately 215 countries and territories worldwide have been affected by the COVID-19 disease. Furthermore, fresh travel restrictions have been implemented following the discovery of new variants, particularly those first identified in the UK and South Africa (Elflein, 2021).

According to the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2020), the global economy contracted by a staggering 4.3 percent in 2020. Millions of jobs have been lost, millions of livelihoods are at risk, and an estimated additional 130 million people will be living in extreme poverty if the crisis persists. These figures reflect the immense challenges and human suffering caused by this pandemic. The end of this pandemic is not yet in sight.

Much uncertainty remains about how and when the pandemic will run its course, but the unprecedented economic shock generated by the global health emergency has already sharply exposed the global economy's pre-existing weaknesses, severely setting back development progress around the world (UNCTAD, 2020).

According to Economic Literature Review (2020), these pandemics are expected to have a severe negative impact on economic activities, at least in the short run. According to Jonas (2013), the impact ranges from avoidance reaction due to social distancing measures (e.g., individuals might forgo consumption and purchases of certain goods and services), small direct costs (e.g., hospitalization and medical costs), larger indirect costs (loss of labor, production), and offsetting and cascading effects (disruption of services, travel and others).

Several studies tried to anticipate the economic loss from a pandemic. For example, Jonung, and Roeger (2006) forecasted that a hypothetical global pandemic would lead to a 1.6 percent drop in GDP for the European Union (EU) (Boissy&Rungcharoenkitkul (2020), due to both demand and supply-side factors. Other studies analyze the impact with historical comparison. For example, 'how would the casualty numbers during the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic transpire today?' Barro et al. (2020) estimate that holding everything else constant, the 2.1 percent death rate during the Spanish Influenza pandemic in 1918-1920 would translate to roughly 150 million deaths worldwide (compared to the World's population of 7.5 billion in 2020) during COVID-19 pandemic. The authors also find that, on average, the 2.1 percent death rate corresponds to a 6 percent decline in GDP and an 8 percent fall in private consumption (Brodeur et al, 2020).

International travel played a role in the transmission of COVID-19, as seen in cases like the Ruby Princess and Diamond Princess cruise ships. (Dolven et al., 2020) These incidents highlighted the importance of strict compliance with health protocols and testing requirements. Ruby Princess had 28 deaths linked to her and controversy erupted over the management and handling of the initial outbreak (Holland, 2020).

In another report, in April 2020, the unemployment rate reached 14.8%—the highest rate observed since data collection began in 1948. In May 2021, unemployment remained higher (5.8%) than it had been in February 2020 (3.5%) (Falk, et al, 2021).

ABS-CBN News (2020) reported that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, around 10.9 million Filipino workers lost their jobs as the COVID-19 pandemic affected the economy. Two-thirds of 7.2 million of the 10.9 million vulnerable Filipino workers were displaced as the Philippines shift towards online. The International Labor Organization (ILO) reported that underemployment surged millions of workers because they were asked to reduce work hours. Among the high-risk sectors are manufacturing, transportation, storage, accommodation and food services, arts, entertainment, and recreation. 81 million jobs were lost last year, which can bring up the unemployment rate in the region to as high as 5.7 percent from 4.4 percent in 2019. Incomes also decreased by up to 10 percent in the first three quarters of 2020, which meant that 22 million to 25 million workers may go beyond the poverty line, the report cited. Working hours fell by an estimated 15.2 percent in the second quarter, and 10.7 percent in the third quarter, compared to pre-COVID levels. These factors led to a higher number of 98 million “working poor” in the Asia-Pacific region this year. Working poor are classified as people living on less than \$1.90 or around P90 a day, according to the ILO. Sara Elder, another senior economist at the ILO Asia-Pacific, said governments in the Asia-Pacific including the Philippines need to invest more in social protection, employment programs, and services to help job seekers. As of October 2021, 3.8 million Filipinos are jobless due to the persistent effects of the pandemic.

Reports, articles reviews, journals, and several research studies described the plight of seafarers either in cruising, passenger, cargo, or dry bulk shipping. They both faced different levels of challenges, mental, social, and economic stresses due to COVID -19 Pandemic (Yazir, et al, 2020; Premti&Asariotis, 2021; Henry, 2020; Mittal et al.,2020; Jerai,2020; Qin et al.,2021; International Shipping News, 2020; Holland et al., 2021; Maritime Insight, 2020; Bailey et al.,2021; Okeleke&Aponjolosum, 2020; Soaaai et al.,2020; Galam, 2020; Stannard, 2020; Sliskovic, 2020; Whiting, 2020; Heinrich, 2021).

The maritime industry and its crews, the seafarers start from the higher rank to the lowest one were greatly hit by the Covid 19 Pandemic. Studies show that crews on boards suffer from different work-related, social, and emotional stress due to fear of infection by the virus and the uncertainty and prolonged stayed at work due to slow turnover of crews because of the COVID-19 health protocol and travel restrictions (Heinrich, 2021; Sliskovic, 2020; Henry, 2020; Mittal et al., 2020; Jerai, 2020; Qin et al., 2021).

Crew Change Crisis, Travel Restrictions, and Repatriation

The aspects of traveling, crew changes and repatriation had become so complicated during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Some seafarers were having their contract extended and have done months at sea; had 18 months at sea exceeded from the required contract, at expecting to be off work but the relief crew has been stuck in lockdown in their home country. Airborne airlines that facilitated the movement of the crew seemed to be diminishing by the day. Fourteen days of quarantine before departure/and arrival for a further 14 days quarantine before going to work had become so impossible for other seafarers even at the latter part they were recognized as key workers (International Shipping News, 2020; IATF Resolution No. 142 s.2021).

The outbreak of COVID-19 severely impacted shipping company operations. Approximately 400,000 seafarers were stranded at sea worldwide, with an equal number waiting to replace them during crew changes. Another 400,000 seafarers were stuck at home, unable to join ships due to travel restrictions. These circumstances had significant implications for the welfare and livelihoods of seafarers and their families. (The Manila Times, 2021; International Shipping News, 2020; Bailey et al., 2021; Maritime Insight, 2020; Whiting, 2020).

In the Philippines alone, over 60,000 seafarers (Garcia, 2020) were stranded globally, leading to financial constraints for their families. The exact impact of the pandemic on Ilonggo seafarers stranded at home and extended at sea has not been extensively studied.

Epistemological and Theoretical Perspectives of the Study

This study is grounded in the theories of Social Constructivism, Interpretivism, Phenomenology, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and Family Systems Theory. Social Constructivism Theory suggests that individuals seek understanding of the world based on their lived experiences and the meanings they assign to those experiences (Creswell, 2009). The study emphasizes the importance of the subjective meanings created by seafarers who were stranded at home due to the pandemic.

Interpretivism is a research philosophy that focuses on the researcher's ability to interpret every aspect of the study, integrating human interest into the research focus. It emphasizes the use of multiple methods to reflect different aspects of the issue and aims to gain insight into the experiences of individuals and groups.

Phenomenology is used as the methodology in this study to capture the lived experiences of Ilonggo seafarers who were stranded at home due to the pandemic. The researcher used transcendental phenomenology, which involves describing the meaning of a phenomenon through imaginative variation and exploring different perspectives.

The study also incorporates Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which suggests that fundamental human desires are similar and arranged in a hierarchy (Zalenski & Raspa, 2006). The study also considers the Family Systems Theory, which views the family as an emotional system where each member plays a role and impacts others' behavior (Kerr and Bowen, 1988; Devlin, 2021).

In terms of struggles, challenges, and coping mechanisms, the Lazarus Theory of Stress is employed to explain the experiences related to stress and coping. It emphasizes the individual's perception of a stress-inducing situation and the interpretation of stressful events.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design to capture the life experiences of Ilonggo seafarers who were stranded at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By using a qualitative approach, the research was more open to changes and refinement of ideas as it progressed. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with the participants to explore their struggles, stresses, challenges, coping mechanisms, and perceptions during this confinement period. The participants were 9 Ilonggo seafarers who were stranded at home for months and even more than a year due to many factors surrounding the COVID-19 Pandemic. They were supposed to be offshore under normal circumstances but due to a health crisis, they were not able to be on board at a given schedule by their companies. The data collected through online interviews were analyzed deductively through the use of Delve's software in organizing data based on the research questions in order to develop themes. The NVivo software for qualitative research was utilized in order to inductively analyze data to construct a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences. The focus was on how they perceived their situations, their attitudes towards their struggles, and how they made sense of their lives when movement was limited. The Leximancer software was also used to develop concept mapping, to show how different concepts were connected to each other.

The research study focused on utilizing the phenomenological methodology to explore the inner experiences of seafarers who were stranded at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodology involved understanding and analyzing the meanings behind the human experience related to the phenomenon of struggles, challenges, coping mechanisms, and lessons learned by seafarers. The researchers aimed to uncover and describe the struggles, challenges, coping mechanisms, and lessons learned that these seafarers experienced during the period of being stranded at home (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Creswell, 2009; Frankel & Wallen, 2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The presentation of this study was divided into 3 major themes and with different sub-themes. The themes were developed according to the following stages such as the Ilonggo Seafarers Before being stranded at home, Ilonggo Seafarers During being stranded at home and Ilonggo Seafarers after being stranded at home.

Ilonggo Seafarers Before Being Stranded at Home.

Ilonggo Seafarers before being stranded at home has the following theme:

Travelling easily

It discusses the life experiences of an Ilonggo seafarers before being stranded at home due to COVID -19 Pandemic. It presents, discusses and interprets the themes Traveling Easily. Traveling Easily is about the experience of Ilonggo seafarers before the pandemic strikes, the experiences of travelling freely and easily, where there were no restrictions and freely, they could work on their requirements on board and could easily travel for work. The theme also covers shore leave is the time given to the crews to off-board and leaves the shore to enjoy shopping in the country where their ships dock. It is like touring around another country, enjoying a new place. This is the break of seafarers from a long voyage and it's time for them to relax on land. Here, they enjoyed the place and its luxurious splendor. Mostly, with ships docked on first world countries, Ilonggo got to enjoy the places.

Demand at work

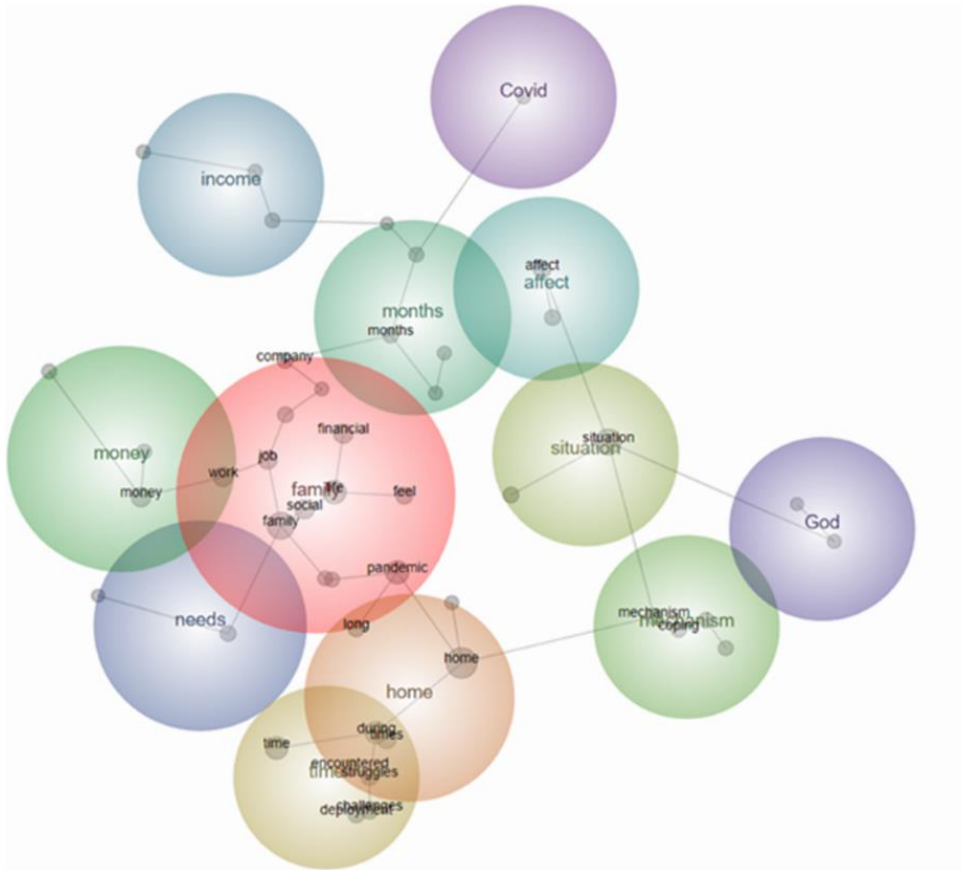
Another theme named "Demand at Work" discusses Ilonggo seafarers' experiences on Port State Control Inspection, and Flag State Inspection and how they cope with and respond on the demand of their work.

The maritime profession requires seafarers to possess a range of personal qualities and competencies in order to succeed at sea. These qualities include humility, teachability, and a willingness to learn, as well as flexibility, resilience, intelligence, and discipline. Seafarers must acknowledge their mistakes, listen to others' opinions, and ask questions when in doubt. They must also be adaptable, tolerant, and able to cope with challenges and recover from setbacks. Being smart and disciplined is crucial for safety and success on board, as even small mistakes can have serious consequences. Additionally, seafarers must demonstrate assertiveness and competence, be prepared for inspections, and possess the necessary knowledge and skills to perform their duties. Port State Control inspections are seen as an opportunity to ensure compliance and maintain safety on board. Overall, seafarers must strive to embody these qualities to navigate the demanding and ever-changing maritime industry successfully.

Ilonggo Seafarers During Being Stranded at Home

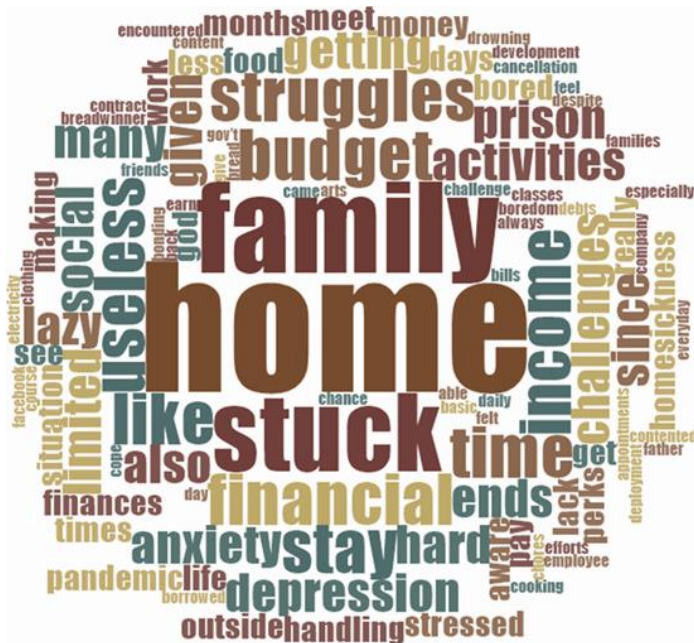
Family bonding – silver lining experiences:

It examines the positive experiences of Ilonggo seafarers who were stranded at home during the pandemic. Participants shared moments of silver lining amidst the uncertainties, focusing on their families as the beginning and end of their "battles" in life. The chapter analyzes the significance of the family unit in this study, connecting it to family theory and related literature. It explores the family system theory, highlighting how families stood united in overcoming the challenges brought about by the pandemic, with members working together to surpass the difficulties. The figure 1 on the right produced by the Leximancer software on the data given shows the interrelations of different concepts link to family. In Figure 2, shows the word cloud produced by NVivo software that analyzes qualitative data. It shows that family or home become the dominant theme that been affected by the phenomenon "being stranded at home".



Note. Concept Mapping produced by Leximancer has given a significance of the family, with the biggest ballon in pink color on the above concept map. The family is being connected with those different concepts surrounding it.

Figure 2: Word Cloud from NVIVO Software Showing Home and Family as Dominant Words



Note. The N-Vivo software has shown the life experience of Ilonggo seafarers while they were stranded at home. The figure illustrates that home and family are the dominant words followed by next bigger words

after them as based on the data from the participants. This affirms the findings that the Family or Home is the Prime Recipient of all the Upsize and Downsize of the Ilonggo seafarers' experiences during their being stranded at home due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Life Struggles and Challenges

Struggles

Financial difficulties

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ilonggo seafarers faced financial difficulties as a result of prolonged lockdowns and the failure of the Maritime Industry to recognize them as essential workers. Many seafarers lost their jobs and income for over a year, leading to limited finances and the inability to meet basic needs. The literature supports the impact of the pandemic on the maritime sector, including a decrease in employment rates and economic loss. Studies also predicted the economic consequences of a pandemic, with historical comparisons showing a decline in GDP and private consumption. Measures such as payroll tax reduction and additional money supply were suggested to mitigate the economic downfall caused by the pandemic. The pandemic also caused a significant increase in unemployment rates worldwide, including in the maritime sector. In the Philippines, millions of workers lost their jobs, and underemployment surged, affecting various sectors. The mental and physical well-being of seafarers suffered as they faced worries about finances and job uncertainty. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs explains the impact of financial struggles on seafarers' emotional well-being, emphasizing the importance of meeting physiological needs. The motivation to survive and earn income led some seafarers to explore online businesses and other means of earning while stranded at home. However, the mental stress and anxiety about safety persisted. Seafarers stranded at sea, on the other hand, did not face financial concerns but experienced emotional turmoil due to prolonged separation from their families amid the virus threat.

Personal crises: anxiety, boredom, fear, helplessness, sadness, social isolation, uncertainty, and worries

Ilonggo seafarers faced various personal crises during the COVID-19 pandemic, including anxiety, boredom, fear, helplessness, sadness, social isolation, uncertainty, and worries. The participants shared their experiences, with one seafarer expressing anxiety about his children's well-being while he was stranded in Manila due to the lockdown. The seafarers found solace in their faith in God, which helped them overcome the challenges. Boredom and isolation were also difficult to deal with, but some seafarers managed to find activities such as cooking and art to overcome these feelings. The fear of financial instability and the possibility of losing their jobs weighed heavily on their mental health, causing sadness and depression. The fear of contracting the virus and the financial burden of hospitalization also added to their worries. The stress and uncertainty affected their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. According to Lazarus theory, stress arises when individuals perceive that the demands exceed their personal and social resources. Coping mechanisms were employed to minimize stress, but it ultimately depends on the individual's perception and context.

Challenges

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ilonggo seafarers faced numerous challenges in their work. They experienced delays in going on board, inability to change their crew, and difficulties in processing necessary documents and certificates due to lockdowns and travel restrictions. Oiler Peter described the hardships he faced in renewing his expired documents and the frustration of being confined at home. The seafarers were not recognized as essential workers and were unable to travel for work. Engineer Carlos highlighted that the guidelines imposed by the US government for the cruising industry prolonged his stay at home. The travel restrictions and crew change crisis severely impacted seafarers worldwide, with many stranded-on ships or

social constructivist.

Savings

Participants' Saving Experiences

During the COVID-19 pandemic, seafarers found themselves stranded at home for over a year, leading them to realize the importance of saving. Unlike other professions, seafarers only receive pay when they are deployed offshore or working onshore, making it crucial for them to have savings during times of unemployment. The pandemic had severe negative impacts on economic activities, resulting in loss of labor, production, disruption of services, and travel, among other things. One seafarer, ETO Cybert, was able to support his family during the lockdown because he had savings to rely on. However, Bosun Stephen faced difficulties as his income was not enough to cover all their expenses, including sending his children to private school and paying monthly mortgages. The seafarers' experiences align with the life cycle theory of savings, where individuals aim to balance their spending throughout their lifetimes based on their future income. ETO Cybert, with a higher salary, was able to save more compared to Bosun Stephen, who had a larger family and more financial obligations. The seafarers emphasized the importance of savings in dealing with uncertainties and unexpected events in life, such as the current pandemic. Saving not only provides financial security but also helps reduce stress and ensures that families have something to fall back on in times of need.

Trusting god's heart and that he is in control

Participants' Trusting Experiences

Millions of Filipino workers lost their jobs and faced economic struggles. However, the Ilonggos, a specific group of Filipinos, demonstrated their strong faith in God and trust in His control over the situation. They embraced the "bahalana" attitude, which means "let go and let God," and relied on their spirituality to cope with the crisis. They engaged in religious activities such as prayers and worship, finding comfort and protection in their faith. The Ilonggos' experiences during the pandemic taught them to improve and aspire for a better future. Despite the uncertainties brought by the pandemic, they learned to trust God's heart and believe that He is too wise and good to make mistakes. Trusting in God gave them hope and peace amid the challenges they faced.

Creating Happiness

This section discusses the concept of happiness and its importance, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights the learning experiences of Ilonggo seafarers who were stranded at home during the pandemic. One of their key takeaways was the need to create happiness and make valuable memories with their families. The text also explores the Filipino understanding of happiness, which is rooted in strong family ties, good food, friendships, and faith. It emphasizes the importance of prioritizing family, enjoying quality time together, and being there for one another in times of need. The text concludes by emphasizing the need to invest in health, life insurance, and personal well-being, as well as to practice cleanliness and avoid crowded places.

Caring for Physical and Mental Health

During the pandemic, individuals have become more conscious of their physical and mental health. Dennis, for example, focused on maintaining a healthy diet and taking supplements to boost his immune system and protect himself from the virus. He recognized that making healthy food choices and practicing precautionary measures were essential in staying safe from the invisible threat. Similarly, Peter, an oiler, emphasized the

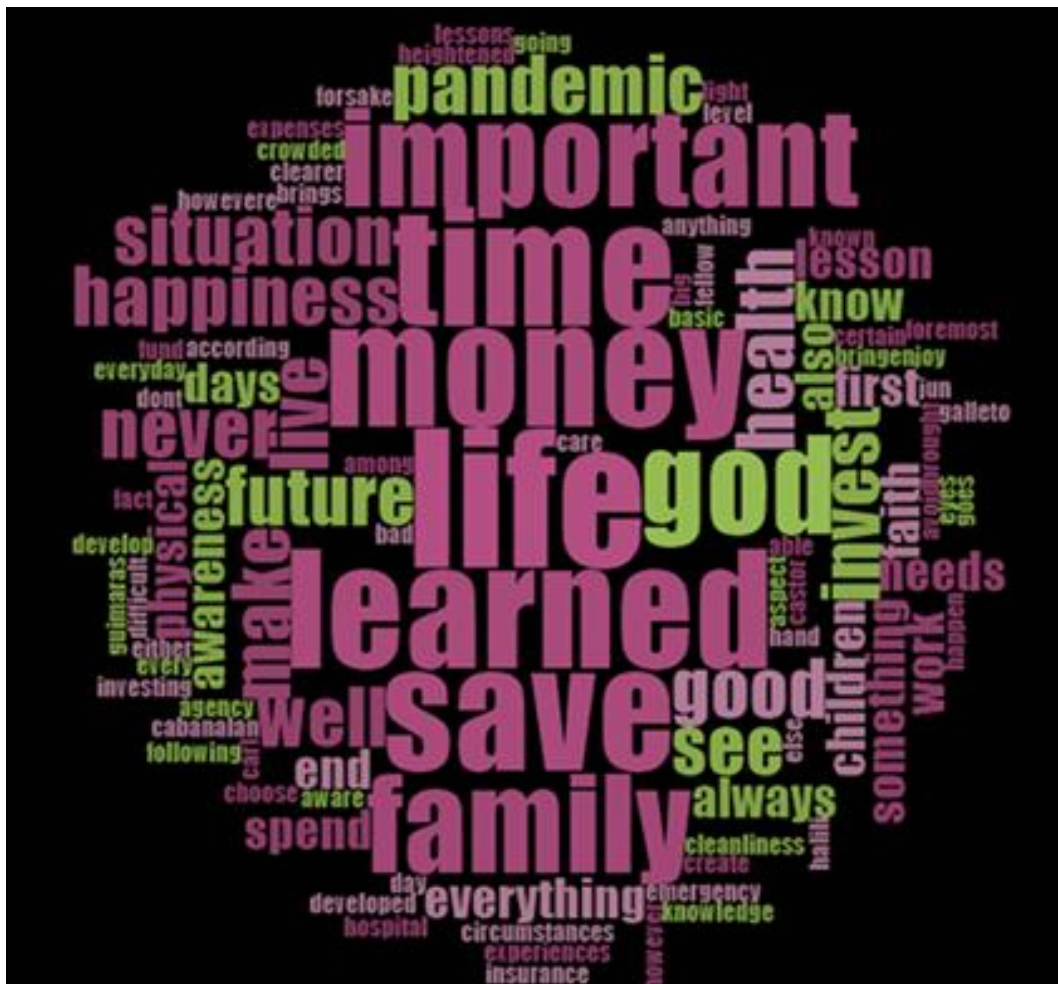
significance of prioritizing physical and mental well-being. He advocated for living a simpler life, spending only on basic needs, and saving for uncertain times. Peter believed that by valuing one’s job and appreciating its importance, individuals could find security and stability.

Valuing the Job

The impact of the pandemic has led people, particularly Ilonggo seafarers, to value their jobs even more. They acknowledged that having a job was crucial for their livelihoods and recognized the effort they had put into acquiring their positions. The seafarers understood that while their jobs may not be easy or stress-free, they offered financial satisfaction and benefits that ordinary shore employees did not have. The pandemic served as a reminder for individuals to appreciate and give importance to their jobs, as many others were losing theirs. Overall, people have realized the significance of maintaining good physical and mental health and valuing their employment during these challenging times.

The figure below indicates the responses of the participants when asked regarding their learning experiences and aspirations.

Figure 5 Word Cloud Showing Ilonggo Seafarers’ Learning Experiences and Aspirations



Lessons learned are classified into three: God, Self and Family, and others. Lessons learned concerning God is to have faith or trust in Him in all that is happening, the crisis brought about by the virus had changed everything globally from normal to new normal. Trusting or putting faith in God makes the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic bearable.

Lessons Learned concerning self and Family are saving experiences, creating happiness and quality time with family, creating valuable memories, saving money for the rainy season, choosing to be healthy, both body and mind, and valuing a job. The lessons learned concerning self and family are inseparable; the Ilonggo seafarers look at it as one. Everything done to self is also done or accounted to the family.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The summary of findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations of the study. With the aim to find out the lived experiences of the stranded-at-home Ilonggo seafarers during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study specifically sought answers to the following questions:

1. How was the life experience of Ilonggo seafarers before they were stranded at home?
2. How was the life experience of Ilonggo seafarers while they were stranded at home?
3. What were the struggles, stresses, and challenges encountered by the Ilonggo seafarers stranded at home?
4. What were the coping strategies they experienced when they were stranded at home?
5. What learning experiences Ilonggo seafarers had when they were stranded at home?

Summary of Findings

The data gathered from interviews with Ilonggo seafarers revealed significant findings:

1. Before the pandemic, Ilonggo seafarers embarked on their journeys with the goal of improving their family's economic situation. They were willing to be away from their families in order to earn a higher income compared to other professions. Their ability to travel easily and temporarily migrate to other countries allowed them to provide a comfortable life for their families.
2. When Ilonggo seafarers were stranded at home, their experiences were closely tied to their families. Despite the negative impact of not receiving a salary, being with their families during this time was a silver lining. They were able to bond with their family members and make up for lost time. The support of their families kept them going during this challenging period.
3. Family bonding became a positive outcome of the pandemic for Ilonggo seafarers. The nature of their work often keeps them away from their families, so being able to spend more time together was a valuable opportunity. Bonding with their families helped them cope with the financial hardships and stresses of being stranded at home without work or income.
4. To address the financial difficulties of being stranded at home, Ilonggo seafarers explored various business ventures, such as selling plants, online jobs, joining the stock market, and taking out loans. They sought alternative ways to earn money and meet their everyday financial needs. They also engaged in community outreach activities and recreational activities to combat social isolation caused by lockdown measures.

In conclusion, this study examined the experiences of Ilonggo seafarers who were stranded at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings showed both negative and positive aspects of their experiences, highlighting their resilience and the importance of family support. The implications of this research include recommendations to declare seafarers as essential workers, provide online training opportunities, increase seafarers' happiness index, and make the Philippine port a crew change hub.

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