

# Stuck in a moment you can't get out of: the psychological effects of expatriates' coping with a crisis situation

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – We draw upon stress theory and utilize the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to investigate how various coping strategies employed by expatriates affect their psychological stress, subsequently influencing their expatriation satisfaction and intention to withdraw from the host country.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We utilize structural equation modeling to analyze a sample of 453 expatriates residing and working in the United Arab Emirates during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Findings** – Our analysis shows that the effects of different coping strategies on expatriates vary. Depending on the nature of the strategy, they can have either positive or negative effects. While coping via problem-focused and denial strategies decreases expatriates' stress, coping by distancing increases it. Social support-seeking is not found to be an effective stress-coping strategy. In terms of implications, the problem-focused strategy leads to the most positive outcomes, whereas distancing leads to the most negative outcomes.

**Originality/value** – Our study provides significant theoretical and practical insights into expatriates' coping mechanisms within the context of natural crises.

**Keywords** Coping strategies, Natural crisis, COVID-19, Expatriates, Psychological stress, Stress theory

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Expatriation, broadly defined as a process whereby individuals temporarily relocate to a host country for work with or without the support of an employing organization, is generally associated with high levels of psychological stress (e.g. [Silbiger and Pines, 2014](#)). Previous literature has underscored the expatriates' ability to manage stress as a critical factor for their successful adjustment to the host country (e.g. [Bader and Berg, 2013](#); [Andresen et al., 2018](#)). It has also provided valuable insights into effective management and support strategies of expatriates (e.g. [Van der Laken et al., 2019](#)). However, contemporary expatriates increasingly find themselves affected by natural crises (e.g. pandemics) and man-made crises (e.g. terrorist attacks, wars), which significantly exacerbate their stress levels compared to "normal" conditions. While the nature of expatriation and outcomes of expatriates' coping under "normal" conditions have been explored in previous research (see [Selmer, 2001a, b, 2002](#); [Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005](#)), the recent COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new, previously unexplored stressors for expatriates, such as health concerns, quarantine lockdowns, social



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exclusion, and job insecurity (Haist and Kurth, 2022; Tripathi and Singh, 2022). More specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the theoretical and practical need to better understand how expatriate coping mechanisms operate and their related outcomes, particularly in the context of natural crises. While several recent studies have addressed this topic (see Haist and Kurth, 2022; Végh *et al.*, 2023), to the best of our knowledge, none have examined how different coping strategies influence expatriates' stress levels and these strategies' implications for expatriation outcomes. In this paper, we do so.

We draw on stress theory to examine the effects of expatriates' coping strategies on expatriation-related stress and outcomes during a major natural crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic (Bader *et al.*, 2022; Végh *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, we pose the following research questions: (1) *how effective are different coping strategies employed by expatriates in the context of natural crises characterized by low controllability, and* (2) *what outcomes do different coping strategies produce?* Specifically, we explore the impact of four widely employed coping strategies—namely, problem-focused, social support-seeking, distancing, and denial – on expatriates' psychological stress levels, and subsequently, on their subjective experiences in terms of expatriation satisfaction and their behavioral responses in terms of host country withdrawal intention. The former is defined as the degree to which expatriates feel content with their overall expatriation experience and serves as a crucial indicator of expatriate wellbeing (Biswas *et al.*, 2022). The latter refers to the psychological intention of expatriates to relocate away from the host country and is an important symptom of their genuine intention to quit the relocation process altogether (Koveshnikov *et al.*, 2022).

Empirically, our study examines a sample of 453 expatriates residing and working in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a major global expatriation hub (e.g. Budhwar *et al.*, 2019), where approximately 90% of the population is of foreign origin. Data collection took place during May–June 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak in the UAE, and stringent quarantine measures were implemented in hopes of curbing the spread of the virus. This was an optimal time window to study the effects of coping strategies on expatriates' stress levels and expatriation outcomes, as expatriates needed to quickly appraise the evolving situation and select appropriate coping strategies.

The present study contributes in two significant ways to the limited existing knowledge about coping strategies among expatriates. First, it quantitatively examines the effectiveness and implications of various coping strategies employed by expatriates in natural crises characterized by a low degree of controllability (for qualitative explorations of this phenomenon, see Haist and Kurth, 2022; Végh *et al.*, 2023). It also investigates whether the psychological stress experienced by expatriates during such crises emerges from or depends on their chosen coping strategies. This analysis enhances our understanding of the nature and diverse implications of different coping strategies among expatriates in stress-inducing environments. Second, the study delves into the context-dependent nature of individual coping strategies' functioning and implications in the context of expatriation. In doing so, it engages both theoretically and empirically with the notion that the COVID-19 pandemic and the novel stressors it introduced may significantly alter the effects of various coping strategies. Overall, given the strong consensus within the scientific community about the potential for new pandemics (e.g. Focosi *et al.*, 2024), our study provides a strong basis for future studies to extend our body of knowledge on how globally mobile individuals and the effectiveness of their coping strategies might be affected by future pandemics (Bader *et al.*, 2022).

## Theoretical foundations and hypotheses development

### *Stress theory and coping*

Theoretically, our study is grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's stress theory, which adopts a transactional approach to psychological stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984;

Lazarus, 1991). Coping is defined as “efforts . . . to manage (i.e. master, tolerate, reduce, minimize) environmental and internal demands . . . , which tax or exceed a person’s resources” (Lazarus and Launier, 1978, p. 311). This transactional approach posits that before selecting and executing any coping strategy to address a particular stressor, an individual must first cognitively appraise the stakes and possible solutions. Thus, the choice of a coping strategy is not merely an individual reaction aimed at alleviating stress but a response to cognitive appraisals of a stressor or a stressful situation. Since these appraisals can vary with different stressors, the coping strategies chosen are likely to differ as well.

The theory also posits that it is important to evaluate the efficacy of coping strategies chosen in stressful situations (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Folkman, 1992). Coping strategies might change individuals’ psychological mood, further exacerbate their psychological stress, or have no effect on the stressor or the stressful situation. Over time, these immediate effects can lead to more lasting outcomes such as psychological well-being, general satisfaction with the overall post-coping situation, or an intention to escape from the post-coping situation altogether (Folkman, 1992; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Moreover, evaluating the effectiveness of coping strategies should consider not only their outcomes but also the quality of the coping process itself (e.g. Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004). This is critical because certain stressors, such as a serious illness or death, are so intense that an individual might be unable to alter the outcome (Folkman, 1992). The theory proposes that two aspects are crucial for the effectiveness of a particular coping strategy. First, the match between the stressful situation an individual faces and their appraisal of the personal significance of this situation is essential (e.g. Schroevers *et al.*, 2007). An incorrect appraisal may lead an individual to either exaggerate or underestimate the seriousness of the situation, perhaps by ignoring it instead of considering how to handle the situation’s unavoidable consequences. Second, the congruence between the situational appraisals of controllability and the chosen coping strategies is vital (e.g. Valentiner *et al.*, 1994). The theory suggests that active and problem-focused coping strategies are more effective when the stressful situation is appraised as, or is objectively, controllable; conversely, avoidance and behavioral/mental withdrawal coping strategies are more effective when the situation is perceived as, or is objectively, difficult or impossible to control (Conway and Terry, 1992). Taken together, issues related to controllability and stress are critical especially for expatriates who, due to having relocated abroad, often find it difficult to avoid stressful situations. Thus, in the next section we focus specifically on prior research on expatriates’ coping.

### *Expatriation, COVID-19, and coping*

Stress theory and the concept of coping are particularly relevant to the field of expatriation, which is widely recognized as a stressful experience (Silbiger and Pines, 2014; McNulty *et al.*, 2019). Expatriation-related stress often results in low levels of adjustment (Aycan, 1997) and expatriation satisfaction (Stoermer *et al.*, 2018), as well as high intentions to quit expatriation (Andresen *et al.*, 2018). Scholars have identified several coping mechanisms for expatriates dealing with expatriation-related stress, ranging from organizational and supervisor support (Van der Laken *et al.*, 2019) to the consumption of alcohol and drugs (Wurtz, 2018).

Previous literature has provided valuable insights into the inherently stressful nature of expatriation and the various strategies expatriates use to manage stress. Additionally, research has noted that, beyond the typical stressors associated with relocation, natural crises introduce new stressors for expatriates. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these included health concerns and fear of contagion, quarantine lockdowns and travel bans, remote work and social exclusion, and financial challenges and job insecurity (Haist and Kurth, 2022; Koveshnikov *et al.*, 2022; Tripathi and Singh, 2022). As a result, expatriates were described as one of the groups most severely affected by the pandemic, many feeling anxious,

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vulnerable, and isolated in their host countries (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020; Bailey, 2021). Naturally, expatriates employed various coping strategies to manage the stressors caused by the pandemic. However, research has yet to fully understand how these chosen coping strategies influence the levels of stress experienced by expatriates and the subsequent implications for expatriation outcomes in the context of natural crises like this pandemic.

In general, expatriates use coping strategies to manage, reduce, or overcome both environmental (e.g. cultural differences, health concerns) and internal demands (e.g. role conflict, job insecurity). Previous research in international management has largely focused on two types of coping strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (for a discussion of these strategies, see Carver *et al.*, 1989). Problem-focused coping involves altering or reinterpreting the source of the problem, thereby positively changing the perception of the situation. In contrast, emotion-focused coping, typically employed in uncontrollable situations, aims to reduce the emotional distress associated with the problem. Building on these concepts, researchers (e.g. Endler and Parker, 1990) have introduced a third strategy: avoidance-oriented coping, which involves efforts and actions to divert attention away from the stress source, with the intention of distancing oneself from or avoiding confronting the problem (Stanton and Franz, 1999).

Interestingly, previous studies on expatriates' coping have revealed the dual nature of coping strategies as both potential sources of stress and valuable resources for stress reduction. In the former case, improperly chosen coping strategies are seen as potential stressors that elevate stress levels, potentially triggering destructive behaviors and adverse outcomes, such as substance abuse and maladjustment (McNulty *et al.*, 2019). Conversely, in the latter and more common case, appropriately chosen coping strategies serve as effective tools for stress management and reduction (Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005; Chen and Shaffer, 2018; Haist and Kurth, 2022).

Notably, prior research has primarily focused on expatriates' coping under what can be considered "normal" expatriation circumstances. There is a notable gap in research regarding how expatriates cope, and the implications thereof, in crisis situations (for a qualitative exception, see Haist and Kurth, 2022). However, there is reason to believe that expatriates' coping in the context of natural crises may operate differently compared to "normal" and stable conditions. To address this significant oversight in the current body of knowledge, this study examines the effectiveness and outcomes of various coping strategies employed by expatriates in crisis situations characterized by low controllability, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A better understanding of how expatriate coping functions in crisis situations is crucial for expatriates to be better prepared for future crises and pandemics. We will now proceed to derive our hypotheses.

### *Hypothesis development*

In what follows, we build on stress theory to hypothesize the effects of four individual coping strategies identified by Folkman and Lazarus (1988): *problem-focused*, *social support seeking*, *distancing*, and *denial*.

*Problem-focused* coping involves a deliberate focus on using careful analysis to solve problems and generate possible solutions. This strategy has consistently been shown to yield positive outcomes across various situations. By approaching a problem or crisis situation rationally and analyzing the potential positive and negative outcomes of different choices, individuals can achieve higher emotional stability and psychological endurance (e.g. Outten *et al.*, 2009). Several studies have found this strategy effective among non-expatriate individuals during COVID-19, helping them reduce psychological distress (Eisenbeck *et al.*, 2022), improve well-being and sleep (Saalwirth and Leipold, 2021), enhance mental health (Chen *et al.*, 2022), and improve overall quality of life (Cohrdes *et al.*, 2023).

Problem-focused coping has also proven effective among expatriates in non-crisis situations. [Stahl and Caligiuri \(2005\)](#) found that a problem-focused coping strategy effectively predicts expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment, though it is not related to expatriates' intentions to remain on assignment. [Chen and Shaffer \(2018\)](#) showed that this strategy positively influences all types of spouse adjustment—personal, interactional, and cultural—and, through this, positively affects expatriate adjustment. Additionally, [Selmer \(2001a\)](#) identified a positive association between problem-focused coping and both sociocultural and psychological adjustment among Western expatriates in Hong Kong.

[Faeth and Kittler \(2017\)](#) explored how expatriates cope with their fears in dangerous environments and found problem-focused coping effectively employed by expatriates in the high-crime environment of Johannesburg. Based on their study of low-skilled expatriates coping during COVID-19, [Haist and Kurth \(2022\)](#) argued for the need for host organizations to implement training to help such expatriates develop their problem-focused coping strategies. This would enable them to network with host country nationals and other expatriates, thereby accruing both social and career capital. Thus, prior research is relatively consistent in depicting problem-focused coping as having positive psychological effects on expatriates.

We also expect this type of coping to be effective in the distinct context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the low controllability of the pandemic, expatriates still had to find ways to continue their lives amid lockdowns, travel bans, and remote work. They had to engage with “the new normal” as effectively as possible to manage feelings of detachment, discontinuity, decreased control, transition, and conflict, and thereby manage their stress levels. Thus, we put forth the following hypothesis:

*H1a.* In the context of natural crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, coping via problem-focused strategy relates negatively to psychological stress among expatriates.

*Seeking social support* refers to efforts to seek informational, tangible, and emotional support. Usually, this strategy effectively helps individuals to find resources to tackle the psychological demands caused by a specific situation or stressor (see [Shimazu and Kosugi, 2003](#)). However, the nature of COVID-19 at its peak meant that everyone was affected by it in some way. Informational support was limited because authorities lacked a clear understanding of the virus and its implications for public health and the economy. Many governments withheld information or disclosed it only partially, leading to widespread speculation as the virus spread globally (see [Krastev, 2020](#)). Tangible support was often of little use as travel restrictions were imposed, and officials urged people to minimize most social contacts. Emotional support was also scarce, as everyone was coping with the pandemic, making it difficult to offer consolation to others (e.g. [Vindegaard and Benros, 2020](#)).

Hence, we argue that the coping strategy of seeking social support, while recognized as effective in many other situations (e.g. [Son et al., 2020](#)), is likely to be ineffective for expatriates coping with the prolonged and life-threatening conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, seeking social support may exacerbate the psychological stress experienced by expatriates. Hearing about others' challenges and difficulties related to the pandemic could heighten expatriates' awareness of COVID-19's omnipresent and unavoidable nature, thus reducing their sense of control over their lives. Moreover, in their qualitative study, [Haist and Kurth \(2022\)](#) found that many interviewed expatriates turned to digital platforms to seek support during the pandemic. While this provided some emotional support, it was ineffective in helping expatriates obtain timely, trustworthy information, thereby increasing their stress levels. In non-expatriate samples, seeking social support during COVID-19 was similarly found to lead to decreased well-being and sleep quality ([Saalwirth and Leipold, 2021](#)).

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Recent research (Islam *et al.*, 2022) focusing on the increased use of social network sites during the pandemic for emotional support-seeking coping found that such coping leads to negative consequences. These include increased opportunities for rumination (Thompson *et al.*, 2010), a lack of social affordances, the overwhelming volume of social information, and feelings of obligation to provide excessive social support (Maier *et al.*, 2015). Subsequently, Gao *et al.* (2020) linked the use of social network sites during the pandemic to mental health issues, and Islam *et al.* (2020) showed that these sites were used to spread misinformation about COVID-19, further contributing to COVID-19-induced stress among individuals. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

*H1b.* In the context of natural crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, coping via seeking social support relates positively to psychological stress among expatriates.

Coping through *distancing* refers to cognitive efforts made by an individual to detach oneself from a stressful situation and minimize its significance. In the work context, distancing has generally been found to mitigate stress and its implications, such as emotional exhaustion (see Yip *et al.*, 2008). As such, distancing from the stressful situation gives employees an opportunity to rest and refocus their coping efforts on an appropriate aspect of the experience confronted (Shimazu and Kosugi, 2003). Similarly, Lin and Leung (2010) found distancing to have a positive effect on the mental health of individuals experiencing prolonged unemployment.

According to stress theory, when individuals have limited ability to control a stressful situation, such as during a pandemic, they are generally better served by employing coping strategies that involve avoidance or mental withdrawal. Distancing is one such form of emotional or mental balance coping. However, despite this, and in contrast to the body of research reviewed above, we argue that in the context of the prolonged and life-threatening COVID-19 pandemic, the reliance of expatriates on distancing coping is likely to increase their stress. We also note that previous studies have not found consistent support for the effects of avoidance-focused strategies, which have been shown to produce both positive and negative outcomes (e.g. Finkelstein-Fox and Park, 2019).

We argue that the stressors of COVID-19 are characteristically different from those discussed in prior studies. As the pandemic initially spread incrementally from one country to another – with countries introducing lockdown measures and travel restrictions in succession – it became increasingly stressful for expatriates to continue pretending that nothing was happening or that the dire consequences of this crisis were manageable, especially instead of accepting the need to adapt to the “new normal”. Support for this claim can be found in other fields of research. For instance, a meta-analysis has shown that women with breast cancer experience higher well-being and health when they engage in acceptance and engagement coping, while their well-being and health are lower when they engage in avoidance and disengagement coping (Kvillemo and Bränström, 2014). Similarly, research on coping among members of stigmatized groups facing discrimination finds that when these individuals attempt to cope by distancing or disengaging from the stigmatized group to minimize the significance of stressful events, it negatively affects their psychological well-being (Bourguignon *et al.*, 2020). Finally, in the context of non-expatriates coping with stress induced by COVID-19, coping via distancing was found to result in decreased well-being and sleep quality (Saalwirth and Leipold, 2021). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*H1c.* In the context of natural crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, coping via distancing relates positively to psychological stress among expatriates.

Finally, *denial* – also known as escape or avoidance mechanism – involves wishful thinking and behavioral efforts to avoid facing the problem. Dreaming away the harsh realities of the pandemic, where individuals are confined to their homes and must adapt their ways of living

and working to the “new normal”, is likely to be unproductive in a long-lasting crisis. In support of this, [Valentiner et al. \(1996\)](#) found strong positive links between wishful thinking and posttraumatic stress disorder among female victims of sexual and nonsexual assault. Similarly, [Lin and Leung \(2010\)](#) demonstrated that wishing for a stressful situation to disappear or avoiding it through excessive behaviors such as overeating or substance use negatively affects the mental health of individuals experiencing prolonged unemployment. In the same vein, several studies specifically addressing coping in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that coping by denial was associated with poorer mental health among adults in the UK ([Atchison et al., 2021](#)) and Portugal ([Jarego et al., 2021](#)). Based on these arguments, we hypothesize that denial is unlikely to be an effective coping strategy for expatriates in the case of longer lasting and inescapable crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic:

*H1d.* In the context of natural crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, coping via denial relates positively to psychological stress among expatriates.

The psychological stress induced by the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to negatively affect expatriates’ comfort and commitment to their host environment. Previous research has found such stress to increase expatriates’ safety concerns ([Harvey, 1993](#)), perceived constraints in work and non-work domains ([Bader et al., 2019](#)), and negative emotions at work toward supervisors and colleagues ([Mainiero and Gibson, 2003](#)). It has also been shown to decrease employee commitment, motivation, and involvement ([Bader and Berg, 2013](#)). Additionally, this stress is likely to negatively affect the level of satisfaction that expatriates feel about their relocation experience as a whole. Therefore, we can expect that the psychological stress induced by various coping strategies is likely to make expatriates less satisfied with their overall expatriation experience and consider leaving the host country. In support, stress theory posits that the immediate stress effects of coping tend to translate into more lasting outcomes, affecting an individual’s psychological well-being, general satisfaction with, or intention to escape from, the post-coping situation ([Lazarus and Folkman, 1984](#); [Folkman, 1992](#)). This leads us to formulate the following hypotheses:

*H2a.* In the context of natural crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, psychological stress caused by expatriates’ coping relates negatively to their expatriation satisfaction.

*H2b.* In the context of natural crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the psychological stress caused by expatriates’ coping relates positively to their host country withdrawal intention.

Furthermore, we anticipate that the resultant psychological stress caused by expatriates’ coping strategies will mediate the relationships between the four coping strategies and the two focal outcomes in our model. We have argued that these strategies will either decrease (in the case of problem-focused) or increase (in the case of support-seeking, distancing, and denial) expatriates’ psychological stress. Concurrently, prior research has convincingly demonstrated that stress generally serves as a powerful antecedent of satisfaction attitudes and the intention to quit or escape from the related stressful activity or location. For instance, [Hang-yue et al. \(2005\)](#) discovered that working in a stressful environment leads to low job satisfaction and greater intentions to leave the company. In the context of expatriation, [Andresen et al. \(2018\)](#) found that expatriates’ perceived stress related to relocation was positively associated with turnover intentions. Moreover, stress from relocating to high terrorism-risk countries has been shown to negatively affect expatriates’ attitudes towards work and host country nationals ([Bader and Berg, 2013](#)), and positively influence job turnover and intentions to leave the host country ([Bader et al., 2019](#)). This leads us to

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hypothesize that stress will mediate the relationships between expatriates' different coping strategies and satisfaction or host country withdrawal intentions.

Taking a closer look at the strategies individually, we note that coping through a problem-focused strategy is likely to reduce stress by enabling expatriates to proactively, rationally, and analytically approach the challenges at hand. This approach allows expatriates to feel more in control of their situation despite its overall low controllability (see Carver *et al.*, 1989). Consequently, they are more likely to maintain their level of expatriation satisfaction and are less inclined to contemplate leaving the host country altogether. In a recent study by Haist and Kurth (2022), several interviewees described concrete ways in which they engaged in problem-focused coping to manage stress due to COVID-19, such as deliberately avoiding high-exposure situations to reduce the risk of contracting the virus or being forward-looking in their careers by taking online classes for personal development. Interestingly, engaging in these problem-focused behaviors contributed to the expatriates' intention to stay in the host country. Therefore, we posit that the problem-focused coping strategy is likely to positively influence expatriation satisfaction and negatively affect withdrawal intentions through its stress-reducing mediating effect. Thus, we put forth the following hypotheses:

In the context of natural crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, psychological stress caused by expatriates' coping mediates the relationship between:

- H3. (a) problem-focused coping and expatriate satisfaction and (b) problem-focused coping and host country withdrawal intention.

In line with extant research (Bader and Berg, 2013) and stress theory (Lazarus, 1991), we argue that the coping strategies of *social support seeking*, *distancing*, and *denial* are likely to decrease expatriation satisfaction and increase host country withdrawal intention because they will induce stress and relational strain that will make expatriates consider leaving the stress-inducing host environment. The nature of any stress is such that being an individual's evaluation and reaction to external stressors, it develops in the absence of sufficient resources to cope with these stressors (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). To deal with stress, individuals are likely to either seek extra resources to be able to deal with the stressors or try to distance themselves from these stressors.

Thus, once stress develops, expatriates can be expected to cope with it by considering a possibility to relocate away from the stressors in question to an environment where the source(s) of stressors are absent or where expatriates might have more resources (psychological, social, emotional, etc.) at their disposal to deal with the stress (Andresen *et al.*, 2018; Bader *et al.*, 2019). Extant research on expatriation supports such reasoning, as stress related to expatriation more broadly was shown to decrease expatriates' overall wellbeing, including satisfaction levels and, consequently, increase their withdrawal intentions (e.g. Mainiero and Gibson, 2003; Silbiger and Pines, 2014).

Specifically, in the case of social support seeking, we previously noted the psychological stress experienced by expatriates who attempted to seek social support through digital platforms from their social networks or who struggled to find emotional comfort from acquaintances and colleagues in their host country (see Haist and Kurth, 2022). Instead of alleviating stress that expatriates experience due to the pandemic the lack and inadequacy of social support is likely to increase it. Such stress is likely to negatively affect the satisfaction of expatriates with their current situation and increase their intentions to leave the host country.

Similarly, as we argued above, coping via distancing and/or denial was prone to be stressful for expatriates because the nature of the pandemic was such that it was impossible to completely disengage from its harsh realities, especially in the context of novel host country environments. Both strategies were likely to lead to a lack of engagement with the consequences of the pandemic that required attention. Individuals relying on these strategies



were found to accumulate unresolved stressors triggering decreased wellbeing and mental health (Saalwirth and Leipold, 2021), both of which are strong indicators of (dis)satisfaction and intentions to escape the stressful situation. Thus, we hypothesize as follows:

In the context of natural crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic psychological stress caused by expatriates' coping mediates the relationship between:

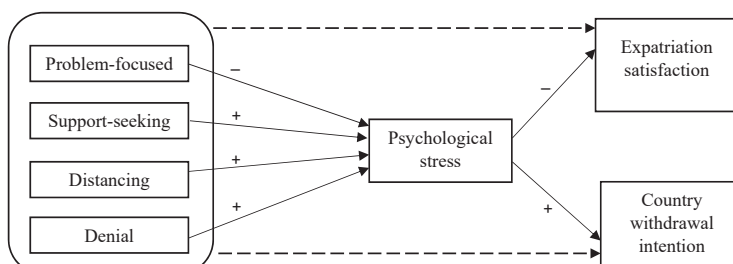
- H4. (a) social support seeking and expatriate satisfaction and (b) social support seeking and host country withdrawal intention.
- H5. (a) distancing and expatriate satisfaction and (b) distancing and host country withdrawal intention.
- H6. (a) denial and expatriate satisfaction and (b) denial and host country withdrawal intention.

The overall model tested in this study is depicted in Figure 1 below.

### Methodology and research design

*Research context – the UAE.* First COVID-19 cases in the UAE were reported at the end of January 2020, and after a couple of months each of the seven Emirates imposed travel restrictions and soft lockdowns (i.e. while the word lockdown was hardly ever used, in essence there were times when people were requested not to leave their home). As the pandemic statistics provided by the officials reveal, it seems the governmental measures were able to prevent the virus from spreading rampantly in the early phases of the pandemic. However, the psychological effects of such measures were dramatic; in their study on COVID-19 lockdowns in the UAE, Cheikh Ismail *et al.* (2021) found that both host country nationals and especially expatriates experienced work, domestic, and financial anxiety stemming from lockdowns and the virus in general.

*Sample and procedure.* Data for this study was collected from expatriates residing and working in the UAE, one of the global expatriation hubs (e.g. Budhwar *et al.*, 2019). Data collection took place in May–June 2020 when the pandemic was at its first peak in the UAE and heavy quarantine measures were put in place. For this study, we created an online questionnaire in English that was distributed to potential respondents fulfilling our sampling criteria which were in line with Cerdin and Selmer (2014): the respondents had to be of foreign origin, living and working in the UAE fulltime due to their independent or organizationally-supported relocation, staying in the UAE for less than 10 years (to minimize the “going native” effect), and having at least an undergraduate degree. We used these criteria, to create a targeted advertisement on Facebook (as per Kosinski *et al.*, 2015), which led to the distribution of the questionnaire to 4,868 expatriates. In total, we received 453 usable



Source(s): Authors' work

Figure 1.  
Theoretical model

responses, yielding a response rate of 9%. [Table 1](#) presents an overview of the sample in terms of its demographic profile.

*Measures.* The measures used in this study have been validated in previous studies. The key statistics as well as Cronbach's alphas for all constructs are presented in [Table 2](#).

*Coping strategies.* The coping strategies were measured using the scale originally developed by [Folkman and Lazarus \(1988\)](#). To select items from the comprehensive original scale we chose the items with the best loadings as reported in the study of [Parker et al. \(1993\)](#) that offers a validation of the scale. We measured coping as follows: *problem-focused* (six items, sample item: "I make a plan of action and follow it"), *social support seeking* (five items, sample item: "I talk to someone about how I am feeling"), *distancing* (six items, sample item: "I daydream or imagine a better time or place than the one I am in"), and *denial* (five items, sample item: "I try to forget the whole thing"). We asked our respondents to reflect on their ways of dealing with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Psychological stress.* We measured stress using a 14-item construct from [Cohen et al. \(1983: p. 385\)](#) originally developed "to measure the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful". We asked our respondents the following: "Please assess how frequently you experienced the following feelings in the last three months". The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from "1" – "never" to "5" – "very often". Sample item: ". . . felt that you were unable to control important things in your life?".

*Host country withdrawal intentions.* We measured intentions by three items as they were adapted by [Bader et al. \(2019\)](#) from [Zhang et al. \(2006\)](#) on a 5-point Likert scale from "1" – "not at all" to "5" – "extremely". The original [Zhang et al.'s \(2006\)](#) construct measured the turnover intentions of employees in multinational organizations. Later, [Bader et al. \(2019\)](#) has adapted

<i>Industry category</i>			
Education and research		18%	
Healthcare		14%	
Tourism and hospitality		14%	
Sales and retail		9%	
Heavy industry and manufacturing		8%	
Technology and engineering		8%	
Logistics and transportation		8%	
Banking and real estate		7%	
Others (e.g. design, construction, agriculture)		14%	
<i>Respondent category</i>			
<i>Gender (%)</i>		<i>Average age (in years)</i>	
Male	50	38.86 (range 23–64)	
Female	50	<i>Children under 18 years (%)</i>	
<i>Marital status (%)</i>		Yes	24
Married	78	No	76
Single	22	<i>Job category (%)</i>	
<i>Average time spent in the UAE (in years)</i>		Supervisor	23
4.13		Specialist	29
		Service position (e.g. teacher, salesperson, nurse, etc.)	48
<i>Nationality (%)</i>			
Africa	8	South Asia	28
Europe	15	Southeast Asia	44
North America and Australia	5		

**Table 1.**  
Sample description

**Source(s):** Authors' work

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Coping – distancing	3.382	0.714	<i>(0.73)</i>											
2. Coping – social support seeking	3.412	0.851	0.428**	<i>(0.86)</i>										
3. Coping – problem-focused	3.594	0.685	0.194**	0.336**	<i>(0.79)</i>									
4. Coping – denial	2.881	0.761	0.195**	0.091	0.168**	<i>(0.75)</i>								
5. Psychological stress	2.859	0.583	0.394**	0.097*	-0.147**	-0.097*	<i>(0.89)</i>							
6. Expatriation satisfaction	3.654	0.810	-0.129**	0.105*	0.210**	0.113*	-0.347**	<i>(0.90)</i>						
7. Country withdrawal	2.949	1.078	0.242**	-0.003	-0.097*	0.049	0.344**	-0.495**	<i>(0.88)</i>					
8. Gender (female = 0)	0.500	0.501	-0.146**	-0.131**	-0.057	0.030	-0.123**	-0.011	0.100*					
9. Age (years)	38.983	9.210	-0.297**	-0.238**	-0.049	-0.093*	-0.243**	0.132**	-0.186**	0.073				
10. Time spent in the country (years)	4.128	2.871	-0.072	-0.062	-0.098*	0.000	-0.056	0.138**	-0.002	-0.048	0.050			
11. Marital status/family (single = 0)	0.665	0.473	-0.122**	-0.133**	-0.128**	-0.121**	-0.057	0.028	-0.074	0.086	0.334**	0.042		
12. Type of expatriation (SIE = 0)	0.1634	0.370	-0.033	0.060	0.018	0.027	-0.035	0.111*	0.001	0.053	-0.013	0.080	0.010	
13. Job position (white collar = 0)	0.329	0.471	0.270**	0.210**	0.124	0.206*	0.068	-0.076	0.102	-0.140	-0.201*	-0.038	-0.066	0.299**

**Note(s):**  $N = 453$ . Cronbach's alphas italicized in parentheses. \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

**Source(s):** Authors' work

**Table 2.**  
Descriptive statistics,  
measures validity, and  
correlations

it to measure the host country withdrawal intention among expatriates. Sample item: “*I cannot imagine that I shall live in the UAE for a long time*”.

**Expatriation satisfaction.** We measured expatriation satisfaction using five items originally developed by Diener *et al.* (1985) to measure life satisfaction but rephrased to refer explicitly to expatriation (i.e. we substituted the phrase “*my life*” in the items with “*my experience in the UAE*”). Sample item: “*I am satisfied with my experience in the UAE*”.

**Controls.** We controlled for demographics, such as age (measured in years) and gender (a dummy variable where “1” stands for “male” and “0” for “female”), time in the host country (measured in years), expatriation type (“self-initiated expatriate” was coded as “0” and “assigned expatriate” as “1”), job position (“white collar” was coded as “0” and “blue collar” as “1”), and marital status (“single” was coded as “0” and “married or in a relationship” as “1”).

**Confirmatory Analyses and Common Method Bias.** To assess the quality of our model, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) using AMOS version 29 and compared our theoretical model with other alternatives, as shown in Table 3. We found that the theoretical model (seven-factor model) had a better fit than other configurations. Also, as our data is self-reported, we tested for the common method variance bias using the ULMC (unmeasured latent method construct) method (Williams and McGonagle, 2016). We performed an additional CFA where each item in the model was associated with both its theoretical construct and with a latent method construct. The analysis showed that even though the ULMC model had a slightly better fit than the chosen seven-factor model (CFI: 0.92 vs 0.91 and RMSEA: 0.04 vs 0.05), the variance associated with the latent method construct was inferior to 10%, therefore much smaller than the threshold of 25% (Williams and McGonagle, 2016). Thus, we conclude that common method bias does not represent a substantial threat for the interpretation of our results.

### Empirical results

To test our hypotheses, we conducted structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS version 29. The structural seven-factor model fitted our data well: chi-square = 1973.95,  $df = 875$ , CFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.05. The results are presented in Table 4. Among the controls, only age was negatively associated with stress meaning that older expatriates experienced less stress than their younger colleagues. Hypotheses 1a and 1c, stating, respectively, that, *problem-focused coping* will relate negatively to psychological stress and *distancing coping* will relate positively to psychological stress, were supported ( $b = -0.227$ ,  $p < 0.001$  and  $b = 0.529$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, Hypotheses 1b and 1d, stating that *social support seeking coping* will be positively related to psychological stress and *denial coping* will relate positively to psychological stress, were not supported ( $b = 0.000$ , ns. and  $b = -0.210$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Whereas the effect of *social support seeking* was nonsignificant, the effect of *denial* was the opposite to the hypothesized one. We found that *denial coping* decreases expatriates’

	Chi-square	df	CFI	RMSEA
One-factor model	6301.72	896	0.36	0.12
Four-factor model	3436.87	890	0.70	0.08
Seven-factor model	1973.95	875	0.91	0.05
ULMC model	1525.25	831	0.92	0.04

**Table 3.** Confirmatory analyses and common method variance examination

**Note(s):** One-factor model: all items on one single factor; Four-factor model: the four coping strategies together; Seven-factor model: each item on their theoretical construct (chosen model); ULMC model: each item on their theoretical construct and a latent method construct

**Source(s):** Authors’ work

Relationship	Effect ( <i>p</i> sign)	Indirect effect via stress [95% CI]	Total effect
<i>Controls (only significant)</i>			
Age → stress	-0.116*		
<i>Direct relationships</i>			
Problem-focused → stress	-0.227***		
Social support → stress	0.000		
Distancing → stress	0.529***		
Denial → stress	-0.210***		
Stress → Expat satisfaction	-0.302***		
Stress → Country withdrawal	0.312***		
<i>Indirect relationships</i>			
Problem-focused → expat satisfaction	0.191***	0.089** [0.029; 0.177]	0.336**
Social support → expat satisfaction	0.144*	0.000 [-0.051; 0.029]	0.127*
Distancing → expat satisfaction	-0.156*	-0.301* [-0.490; -0.145]	-0.595**
Denial → expat satisfaction	0.069	0.058** [0.022; 0.129]	0.121*
Problem-focused → withdrawal	-0.137*	-0.129** [-0.270; -0.045]	-0.378**
Social support → withdrawal	-0.105	0.000 [-0.039; 0.073]	-0.129
Distancing → withdrawal	0.203**	0.437** [0.237; 0.694]	0.976**
Denial → withdrawal	0.064	-0.085** [-0.173; -0.035]	-0.002

**Note(s):** \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ . CI – Confidence Interval

*R* sq.: Psychological stress – 36%, Withdrawal intention – 21%, Expatriation satisfaction – 23%

**Source(s):** Authors work

**Table 4.**  
SEM results

stress. [Hypothesis 2a](#), stating that expatriates' stress will be negatively associated with their expatriation satisfaction, was supported ( $b = -0.302, p < 0.001$ ). Also, [Hypothesis 2b](#), stating that stress will be positively associated with expatriates' host country withdrawal intention, was supported ( $b = 0.312, p < 0.001$ ).

Then, to test for mediation, we followed [Zhao et al. \(2010\)](#) who recommend using bootstrapping to determine whether an indirect effect is significant as the way to establish mediation. Concretely, we used a user-defined script in AMOS version 29 to run a bootstrap analysis with a 95% confidence interval to estimate direct, indirect, and total effects in the focal relationships. We applied the classification of mediation effects offered by [Zhao et al. \(2010\)](#) to classify the identified mediation effects. The direct effects of the four coping strategies on expatriation satisfaction were as follows: *problem-focused* ( $b = 0.191, p < 0.001$ ), *social support seeking* ( $b = 0.144, p < 0.05$ ), *distancing* ( $b = -0.156, p < 0.05$ ), and *denial* ( $b = 0.069, ns$ ). Then, the indirect and total effects of the four coping strategies via stress on expatriation satisfaction were as follows: *problem-focused* (indirect:  $b = 0.089, p < 0.01$ ; total:  $b = 0.336, p < 0.01$ ; complementary mediation [[Zhao et al., 2010](#)]), *social support seeking* (indirect:  $b = 0.000, ns$ ; total:  $b = 0.127, p < 0.05$ ; direct-only non-mediation), *distancing* (indirect:  $b = -0.301, p < 0.05$ ; total:  $b = -0.595, p < 0.01$ ; complementary mediation), and *denial* (indirect:  $b = 0.058, p < 0.01$ ; total:  $b = 0.121, p < 0.05$ ; indirect-only mediation). Therefore, [Hypotheses 3a, 5a and 6a](#) but not [4a](#) were supported.

The direct effects of the four coping strategies on expatriation withdrawal intention were as follows: *problem-focused* ( $b = -0.137, p < 0.05$ ), *social support seeking* ( $b = -0.105, ns$ ), *distancing* ( $b = 0.203, p < 0.01$ ), and *denial* ( $b = 0.064, ns$ ). Then, the indirect and total effects of the four coping strategies via stress on withdrawal intention were as follows: *problem-focused* (indirect:  $b = -0.129, p < 0.01$ ; total:  $b = -0.378, p < 0.01$ ; complementary mediation), *social support seeking* (indirect:  $b = 0.000, ns$ ; total:  $b = -0.129, ns$ ; no mediation), *distancing* (indirect:  $b = 0.437, p < 0.01$ ; total:  $b = 0.976, p < 0.01$ ; complementary mediation), and *denial* (indirect:  $b = -0.085, p < 0.01$ ; total:  $b = -0.002, ns$ ; indirect-only mediation). Therefore, [Hypotheses 3b, 5b and 6b](#) but not [4b](#) were supported.

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## Discussion

First, our findings corroborate the limited previous research (Selmer, 2001a, b; Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005) that has shown the problem-focused coping strategy to be advantageous for expatriates as it leads to positive outcomes. We find that problem-focused coping decreases stress and positively affects expatriates' expatriation satisfaction, while negatively influencing withdrawal intention. This implies that approaching the challenges related to COVID-19 rationally and thinking about possible solutions or ways to minimize their effects pays off for expatriates by leading to better psychological resilience and lower stress.

Second, surprisingly, we found similar effects among expatriates pursuing a denial coping strategy. Although this strategy did not have any direct effects on expatriate outcomes – meaning that denying the challenges of COVID-19 did not make expatriates feel better about their expatriation or less inclined to repatriate – it did lower the level of psychological stress that expatriates experienced amid the pandemic. This is an unexpected finding, given that previous literature, although in contexts other than expatriation during crisis situations, has predominantly found such a strategy to be stress-inducing (e.g. Valentinier *et al.*, 1996; Lin and Leung, 2010). We speculate that the duration, omnipresence, and unavoidability of the COVID-19 pandemic may have made it healthier for expatriates to imagine a different reality devoid of the virus, thus engaging in some wishful thinking. Arguably, this coping strategy was particularly helpful for expatriates at the very beginning of the pandemic when initial quarantine measures were put in place and the full significance and duration of what was to come were not yet realized. For example, downplaying the severity of the pandemic or the necessity to adhere to social distancing protocols are examples of coping via denial that might have been effective at this stage. More concretely, COVID-19 generated a significant growth in the consumption of entertainment (e.g. music, film, and games), illustrating a strong need to deny the harsh realities of the pandemic. In support, a relatively large group of interviewees in Haist and Kurth's (2022) study claimed that to cope with the pandemic they chose to ignore its effects or distract themselves by focusing on new activities.

Third, the findings discussed above intriguingly contradict another unexpected result of our study – the significant negative effects of the distancing coping strategy (e.g. attempting to limit exposure to news about the pandemic or avoiding discussions about it to reduce anxiety). Contrary to the premises of stress theory, we hypothesized that distancing would increase expatriates' stress, and indeed, our results suggest that it is the least effective possible coping strategy for expatriates during the pandemic. It significantly adds to the level of stress and, through that, affects expatriates' expatriation satisfaction and withdrawal intention. Again, we speculate that the nature of COVID-19 is a possible explanation for this finding and the drastic difference in effects between denial and distancing. The unavoidable omnipresence of the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible and ultimately stressful for expatriates to distance themselves, whereas engaging in wishful thinking and focusing on other available or accessible activities like new hobbies or novel experiences to distract one's attention from the pandemic and its consequences allowed expatriates to decrease stress, at least in the short-term perspective.

Finally, we found that seeking social support had no effect on either stress levels or the focal outcome of host country withdrawal intention among expatriates. In this regard, the findings in this paper seem to contradict Tripathi and Singh's (2022) conceptualization that social support mitigates stress experienced by expatriates. We interpret these counterintuitive findings as stemming from the omnipresence of the pandemic. Since the pandemic affected almost everyone, expatriates' attempts to seek social support from others who were also struggling with the harsh reality of the pandemic proved to be unhelpful. In contrast, Son *et al.* (2020) reported that college students managed to cope with the pandemic and partially succeed by seeking support from their peers. The discrepancy here might arise from the notion that college students may have a stronger sense of community and belonging,

whereas expatriates, often sent abroad or recruited to a host organization alone (with or without their family), must be mostly self-reliant when faced with crisis situations. Regardless, the impact of social support seeking on expatriates' psychological stress warrants further inquiry.

### *Theoretical contributions*

With the findings discussed above, our study contributes to the existing literature on expatriate coping in two significant ways. First, we expand upon research into expatriates' coping strategies (Selmer, 2001a, b, 2002; Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005) by examining how expatriates cope in the context of natural crises. We complement the few recent studies that have begun to explore – either conceptually or qualitatively – how expatriates manage crisis-induced stress (e.g. McNulty *et al.*, 2019; Haist and Kurth, 2022; Tripathi and Singh, 2022). By extending the current body of knowledge, we specifically elucidate the effectiveness and outcomes (namely, expatriation satisfaction and host country withdrawal intention) of expatriates' different coping strategies when dealing with crisis situations characterized by low controllability, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This analysis enhances our understanding of the nature of various coping strategies and their diverse implications for expatriates in stress-inducing environments. It also sheds additional light on the varied experiences of expatriates during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Koveshnikov *et al.*, 2022; Tripathi and Singh, 2022), suggesting that in addition to the critical issues highlighted in other studies – such as job insecurity (Haist and Kurth, 2022), health-related concerns (Koveshnikov *et al.*, 2022), and travel restrictions and lockdowns (Tripathi and Singh, 2022) – the personal psychological approach expatriates take towards coping with crises also plays a significant role. Depending on the chosen strategy, the coping process can either induce stress (e.g. McNulty *et al.*, 2019) or reduce it (e.g. Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005; Chen and Shaffer, 2018; Haist and Kurth, 2022).

Second, our analysis shows that the nature of coping and its effects among expatriates in the context of natural crises are to some extent distinct compared to individual coping in other contexts. Our study highlights the negative implications of coping via distancing for expatriates' stress and outcomes, and the stress-reducing nature of coping via denial. Natural crises tend to be large-scale events from which it is impossible to meaningfully distance oneself, especially for expatriates who find themselves confined in an unfamiliar and uncertain host environment. Attempts to distance oneself from the emerging demands of the environment become stressful for expatriates, ultimately negatively affecting their expatriation experience. In contrast, it appears that expatriates' ability to distract themselves – rather than merely distance themselves – from the harsh realities of natural crises by engaging in wishful thinking or shifting attention to other possible distractions (e.g. hobbies) reduces stress, at least in the short term. However, the long-term influence of denial as a coping strategy remains unclear. Given that denial requires considerable cognitive resources (e.g. postponing dealing with emotional stress, immersing oneself in various forms of entertainment), it is possible that over time denial can lead to an increase in stress. Overall, our analysis demonstrates that several coping strategies function differently in the context of natural crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic compared to more “normal” circumstances. Thus, our study confirms that the uniquely novel stressors introduced by the pandemic, to some extent, alter the nature and implications of expatriate coping through various strategies (see also Haist and Kurth, 2022; Tripathi and Singh, 2022). This underscores the contextual nature of the functioning and effects of coping strategies in the context of expatriation.

### *Practical implications*

Our study highlights the psychological aspects of expatriates' responses to crisis situations and their implications. It is important to note that although COVID-19 has been reclassified as

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a non-severe disease in many countries as of 2023, there remains a high probability of new pandemics emerging in the near future (e.g. Bader *et al.*, 2022; Focosi *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, data from the World Health Organization (2024) indicates the presence of numerous multi-country outbreaks (e.g. mpox, cholera) that could develop into pandemics. Therefore, the findings from this study should be viewed as a strong indication of the need for further research to inform response and preparation strategies for globally mobile individuals, their employers, and policymakers.

Based on our findings, we suggest that organizations need to prepare contingency plans that address the well-being and retention of expatriates during stress-inducing crisis situations of various types. Organizations are advised to invest time and HR resources in devising ways to monitor the levels of psychological stress experienced by expatriates, not only in the workplace but also outside of it. Regular pulse surveys, informal discussions with expatriates about their and possibly their family's situations, and work-life balance initiatives are examples of such measures.

Furthermore, organizations are advised to design and implement organizational stress management options and/or interventions to ensure their preparedness and ability to respond effectively when support is required by expatriates. Some potential measures for organizations include offering training for managers, devising employee assistance programs, and developing effective communication channels. Finally, from the expatriates' perspective, given that our analysis indicates that the choice of coping strategy is a key factor in managing stress during crises, it is advisable for organizations to engage expatriates in psychological training. Such training should focus on preparing expatriates to be more psychologically resilient during crises and/or to cope with stress in a more problem-focused manner.

#### *Limitations and future research suggestions*

Our study has several limitations that also point toward potential avenues for future research. First, our analysis relies on single-source data. To assess the risk of common method variance bias, we conducted a statistical test that indicated the risk is marginal, and the bias does not significantly disturb the interpretation of our results. Second, our sample consisted of expatriates with diverse profiles. We controlled for demographic (age, gender, marital status) and expatriation-related (job position, assigned vs self-initiated, time abroad) factors and, except for age, found their effects on our focal relationships to be nonsignificant. However, future research might examine more closely the possible differences in coping strategies among different types of expatriates. Third, there may be important moderating factors that could influence how different coping strategies affect levels of expatriate stress. For instance, expatriate work adjustment or spouse adjustment could be tested in future studies. Additionally, since previous research has found some differences in stress handling between males and females, as well as between younger and older people, future research could explore possible moderation effects of gender and age on the relationships between coping strategies, stress, and expatriate outcomes.

Fourth, in our study, we followed several other scholars (Park *et al.*, 2001; Chua *et al.*, 2022) and assumed the low controllability of the pandemic as more or less given due to its objective omnipresence, extent, and the low ability of any single individual to control and influence its consequences. However, future research would be well-advised to examine how the implications of various coping strategies might be moderated by the degree of controllability as perceived by expatriates, rather than assumed *a priori*. Fifth, given that we used social media to collect our data, there might be a certain selection bias among our respondents. Nevertheless, statistics for the UAE indicate that close to 97% of people residing and working



in the UAE use various social networks (GMI, 2022), suggesting that the actual selection bias might be minimal.

Finally, in this study, we utilized the COVID-19 pandemic as our empirical setting to examine the focal relationships in our model. The global crisis triggered by COVID-19 provided a unique empirical setting for examining how expatriates psychologically cope during natural crises. Although we found some empirical support for the unprecedented and distinct nature of the COVID-19 pandemic as an extreme crisis example, we argue that our research findings are, at least to some extent, applicable beyond the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic to more general crisis situations. As there is a strong consensus within the scientific community regarding the possibility of new pandemics emerging in the not-so-distant future (e.g. Focosi *et al.*, 2024), the generalizability of our results should be validated and corroborated in the context of other crisis situations.

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