

Resilience and well-being among expatriate entrepreneurs: Envisioning life after a global crisis

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Abstract

Expatriate entrepreneurs are exposed to greater risk than 'local' entrepreneurs, particularly during exogenous crises. Their psychological characteristics can influence how they view such threats and may inform resultant coping strategies. Reflecting on pre-entrepreneurship experiences and envisioning life post-crisis allows identification of 'what worked' for entrepreneurs throughout their career journeys. This exploratory study investigated the career reflections and future planning of 12 purposively sampled for-profit expatriate entrepreneurs based in the United Arab Emirates, a country with a primarily expatriate workforce. Reflexive Thematic Analysis of semi-structured interview data revealed two overarching themes, "resilience" and "valuing relationships." These were evident in participants' career development narratives, demonstrating the centrality of these positive psychology constructs throughout their career journeys in impacting business outcomes and well-being. Despite facing significant challenges, participants were hopeful due to intrinsic (resilience) and extrinsic (relationship) factors, both of which may support psychological health and aid future career efforts. These findings are relevant to career counselors and entrepreneurship educators, who can promote the role of soft skills, including relationship-building, and positive psychological constructs as buffers against future challenges.

KEYWORDS

entrepreneurial resilience, exogenous shock, expatriate entrepreneurs, psychological well-being, relationships

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the unique business ecosystem of the United Arab Emirates, there is little known about how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted expatriate entrepreneurs. Although entrepreneurs might have anticipated endogenous challenges when embarking on their careers, the exogenous shock of the pandemic disrupted systems worldwide

(Kuckertz et al., 2020). Concerns regarding personal health and well-being, and the concomitant need for strict safety measures, exacerbated the wider economic effects (Thorgren & Williams, 2020). The implications of this could be compounded in the Arab world, where interpersonal relationships and emotional connectedness are central to business operations (Berger et al., 2015; Elbanna et al., 2020). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has a workforce

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comprising primarily migrant workers, with over 90% non-Emiratis residing in the emirate of Dubai (Dubai Statistics Center, 2019). Personal relationships play a vital role in building businesses in the region, so the impact of pandemic-related restrictions on enterprises might have exerted considerable influence on entrepreneurial well-being and the ability to rebound from the pandemic's adverse psychological, social, and economic effects.

Although the UAE is among the most economically liberal countries in Western Asia and ranks high on the competitiveness index (Eshtrefi, 2022; Santos et al., 2021), fewer UAE nationals than expatriates are involved in the private sector (Tipu & Ryan, 2016). As such, expatriate contributions to the GDP can be seen as unique in the UAE context. Moreover, in the Emirate of Dubai just before the pandemic, SMEs employed over 40% of the workforce (Jones & Mosteanu, 2019). An investigation of the well-being of UAE-based expatriate entrepreneurs during a global crisis (i.e., as migrant workers facing pandemic-related restrictions) would potentially allow the development of entrepreneurial education to benefit the UAE economy.

Well-being is relevant to entrepreneurs because the ever-changing nature of their work affects their emotional, cognitive, and social responses. Beneficial crossovers between profit and society occur as entrepreneurs respond to societal needs (Grube & Storr, 2018), bringing entrepreneurs closer to the communities in which they operate, strengthening their networks, and improving business for existing ventures in the ecosystem. This highlights their dual positions as givers and takers of support. The two-fold effect of crises on entrepreneurs as members of society and business owners amplify the need to examine factors contributing to their professional and personal well-being. Scheu and Kuckertz (2023) call upon researchers to explore the motivations of expatriate entrepreneurs. This study, focusing on psychological well-being, aimed to explore UAE-based expatriate entrepreneurs' reflections on their business journey up to, during, and looking beyond the coronavirus pandemic. In doing so, this study investigated the chronology of "becoming" an entrepreneur, how expatriate entrepreneurs were prepared for, and how they responded to, crisis.

RQ1 How do expatriate entrepreneurs view their journey from life before launching their business to date?

RQ2 What are their lessons learned and their expectations for life, post-pandemic?

The application of psychological theories and models while analyzing entrepreneurial responses to the pandemic connects business with psychology and society and widens the lens through which entrepreneurship is studied. Entrepreneurship impacts job creation, innovation, and trade (Ahlstrom et al., 2019; Lindholm-Dahlstrand

et al., 2019), and the UAE business ecosystem benefits significantly from expatriate entrepreneurs' contributions. The pandemic's impact on expatriates has been broached by researchers including Mello and Tomei (2021) and Sahoo et al. (2022) who noted the importance of support from family, the organization, and the host country. This current study aims to further these important discussions.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Models of resilience

Garmezy et al. (1984) proposed three models of resilience: "compensatory," in which individual factors offset risk exposure, "challenge," in which adversity can facilitate adjustment to a new context, and "protective," in which negative consequences of events are reduced due to healthy personality characteristics. These resilience models form a framework to investigate "thriving," one of the concepts around which positive psychology is based and which can examine adaptability and positive transformation after adverse events. Ratten (2020) recognized that resilience in the form of financial and social capital can cushion against crises and that this means some are better equipped to respond than others. Establishing and maintaining relationships in unavoidable challenges is critical in building resilience (Afifi et al., 2016; Carr & Kellas, 2018). Relationships are vital at all stages, from pre-crisis to crisis to recovery (Giones et al., 2020). Social support extended by family, friends, and colleagues increases resilience through trust, interaction, and sharing, and consequently, reduces loneliness and poor emotional regulation (Wills & Bantum, 2012). Such exogenous crises can impact entrepreneurs, particularly international entrepreneurs who lack the "safety net" of being in their home country with established social support networks. To understand entrepreneurial resilience, this research provides an in-depth analysis of influences on entrepreneurial psychosocial well-being at the intersection of expatriation and crisis.

2.2 | Entrepreneurial success

The past two decades witnessed a wealth of research on how personal characteristics can support entrepreneurship and enhance the likelihood of business set-up and sustainability success (Baluku et al., 2016; Cross & Travaglione, 2003; Fisher et al., 2016; Tang, 2020). Alongside objective financial outcomes, other forms of success for the entrepreneur such as positive psychological impacts (Angel et al., 2018; Stephan, 2018), may also

be explainable through personal characteristics. Both are important in terms of success as many entrepreneurs do not solely seek financial outcomes but also autonomy and better life quality than found in other types of employment (Su et al., 2020). However, entrepreneurship is rarely an easy career path. Entrepreneurs are differently susceptible to the effects of major crises. While SMEs may be more agile in their response, they are also more exposed due to limited cash reserves (Rashid & Ratten, 2021). This was evident during the coronavirus pandemic. Government-mandated lockdowns and an uncertain economic outlook (Song & Zhou, 2020) wrought negative psychological implications (Mahase, 2020). The severity of this impact on entrepreneurs depended on multiple individual and environmental factors, including the site of their business. Entrepreneurs who perceive exogenous challenges as insurmountable and close their businesses as a result may experience negative psychological outcomes (Sherman et al., 2015), potentially influencing future decision-making (Foo et al., 2009).

2.3 | Entrepreneurs as migrant workers

Self-initiated migration for work has increased in recent years (Vance et al., 2017), yet “expat-preneurs”—those who develop business ventures outside their home country—are understudied compared with other migrant workers (Scheu & Kuckertz, 2023; Vissak & Zhang, 2014). These professionals contribute to the host country’s economy, recognize opportunities in emerging markets, and are labeled “opportunity entrepreneurs” instead of “necessity entrepreneurs”—the latter label ascribed to low-skilled migrant workers forced into entrepreneurship through economic hardship (Borozan & Pflieger, 2014). Despite the more positive label of “expat-preneur” implying beneficial risk-taking characteristics, migrant workers, including expatriates and entrepreneurs, are subject to loss, uncertainty, and lifestyle disruption during crises.

Business opportunities absent in one’s home country may be available in other countries, but accessing these can be difficult, requiring personal transformation and social involvement on the part of the entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs are regarded as resourceful and courageous in capitalizing on possibilities (Murphy et al., 2006). In international contexts, they can be more innovative than “local” entrepreneurs (Nathan & Lee, 2013). Bringing their unique cultural perspectives to the host country, they participate in the social practice of developing new ideas (Mainela et al., 2015), adding value to existing ecosystems (Mainela et al., 2014; Selden & Fletcher 2015; Venkataraman et al., 2012). Expat-preneurs are not con-

nected with the host country in the way that “local” entrepreneurs might be—if their business is challenged, they may not have the necessary support within the host country (Yokoyama & Birchley, 2020). Expatriate success is significantly related to sources of support across work and family domains (van der Laken et al., 2019). During crises, high repatriation rates highlight a need to investigate expatriates’ circumstances, as adverse outcomes can be long-lasting and significant. Upon returning to their home countries, people may struggle to re-establish their careers and their old lifestyle (Breitenmoser & Bader, 2021), and there can be social and cultural adaptation issues (Szkudlarek, 2010). The very real prospect of such sudden disruption to expatriate life can affect psychological well-being.

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Research framework and participant recruitment

This mono-method qualitative, cross-sectional study applied an exploratory inductive approach (Saunders et al., 2016), appropriate for topics less explored with specific populations (Creswell, 2003)—for example, expatriate entrepreneurs in the UAE. A social constructionist approach assumed that entrepreneurs’ lived realities are dynamic and are constructed using subjective experiences. Language is the medium through which researchers can assess participant experiences, but more importantly, these interviews permit insight into meanings ascribed to their experiences (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Participants who displayed geographical and life history homogeneity (Robinson, 2014)—that is, who were UAE-based, expatriate entrepreneurs—were selected through criterion sampling. For the purpose of this study, entrepreneurs were defined as those who create new businesses, those who are self-employed, and owner-managers (Neumann, 2021). A sample of 12 entrepreneurs was recruited for participation, eight of whom are male (Table 1). Their businesses ranged in age from less than 6 months to over 10 years. Participants come from four continents, and their diverse cultural backgrounds represent the general population of the United Arab Emirates.

3.2 | Materials

A semi-structured interview guide, informed by the work of Kallio et al. (2016), was developed by the research team to explore expatriate entrepreneurs’ experiences of engaging in their business ventures before and during

TABLE 1 Pseudonyms and demographic characteristics of participants.

Name given	Sex	Type of industry
Alfred	Male	Technology
Josef	Male	Education/personal development
Edward	Male	Entertainment
Adam	Male	Entertainment
Lara	Female	Health and wellness
Emma	Female	Public relations
Dima	Female	Health and wellness
Abdul	Male	Technology
Pierre	Male	Entertainment
Simon	Male	Fashion
Nadim	Male	Technology
Elizabeth	Female	Education/personal development

TABLE 2 Interview guide.

Past
1. What was life like before you started your first venture?
2. How did you develop the idea for your first venture?
3. Please describe your current venture- e.g., type of clients/customers, product(s)/service(s)
4. How was the idea of entrepreneurship linked to your well-being before you started?
Past to present
1. What do you believe makes a company in the UAE successful?
2. What was the biggest success factor for your business?
3. What have been the biggest challenges your business has faced?
Present to future
1. How would you describe your life now?
2. How is entrepreneurship linked to your well-being now?
3. How do you see your life moving forward?

the pandemic and looking towards the future. As previously discussed, the development of one's business is not solely of financial concern but also personal significance. This informed the choice to use semi-structured interviews, a data collection mode appropriate for potentially sensitive topics (Barriball & While, 1994). This approach is "participant-driven" allowing flexibility to explore participants' responses in greater depth (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

The interview guide comprised three sections—see Table 2. Past questions pertained to the origins of participants' business ventures and their experiences before starting their business venture, for example, "What was life like before you started your first venture?" Past-to-present questions focused on information about their current venture, success indicators and challenges of being an entrepreneur, for example, "What was the biggest suc-

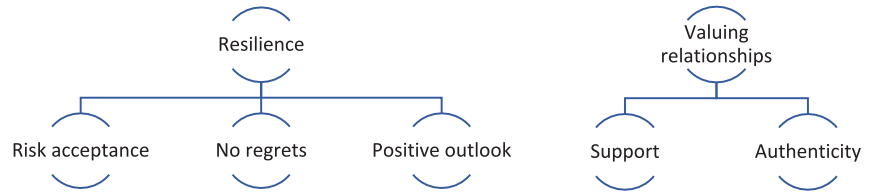
cess factor for your business?" Present-to-future questions (i.e., during and after the pandemic) asked participants to describe prospects for their lives and businesses, for example, "How do you see your life moving forward?" The interviewers used non-directive probes to elicit detailed responses and enhance rapport.

3.3 | Data collection and analysis

Participants were selected from extended professional networks (second- and third-degree LinkedIn connections) through purposive sampling. They were contacted through email and briefed about the study before giving informed consent. Semi-structured interviews, ranging in length from 30–60 min, were conducted online through a video-conferencing platform. They were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed, allocating pseudonyms to all participants to ensure confidentiality.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis was chosen for this study owing to its organic theme development process (Terry et al., 2017). Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun et al., 2022), in which researchers engaged in a recursive process of familiarization with data, identification of initial codes, code review, and theme generation. Themes were discussed within the research team, defined, named, and related to academic literature. Reflexive Thematic Analysis does not subscribe to the positivist quality criteria of reliability calculations, data saturation, and generalizability (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun et al., 2022). Instead, the researchers engaged in ongoing reflexive practice, ensuring rigor was prioritized in all stages of the research. For example, at the data analysis stage, decisions regarding codes and themes were critically discussed within the team and were documented in an audit trail. The purpose of this was not to reach a consensus but to demonstrate transparency and ensure participants' own voices were prioritized. An inductive, data-driven approach allowed researchers to listen to participants' real-life experiences. They shared success indicators, challenges faced, and their venture's role in their physical and psychological well-being. Since this form of analysis is an active process, the researchers acknowledge how their own experiences and preconceptions could influence the themes. While the authors concede that negative career shocks can lead to positive developments (Akkermans et al., 2020; Rummel et al., 2019), the way some participants positively framed the detrimental impacts of COVID-19 on their businesses challenged the researchers' preconceptions. Through continuous engagement with the data, participants' experiences have come to the fore, represented in two overarching themes.

FIGURE 1 Thematic map illustrating themes and sub-themes.



4 | FINDINGS

Participants' narratives provided insight into multiple aspects of their work and personal lives and resulted in two main themes relating to their entrepreneurial journey, illustrated in Figure 1. These relate to practical constructs influencing subjective well-being, namely "resilience" and "valuing relationships."

4.1 | Resilience

This theme was central to several narratives. All participants displayed contentment with the rewards offered by life as an entrepreneur and showed how this could counteract tribulations they may face. The sub-themes of *risk acceptance*, *no regrets*, and *positive outlook* show the optimism of these entrepreneurs as they looked forward to future opportunities, despite the challenges and pandemic-related uncertainty.

4.1.1 | Risk acceptance

The first sub-theme identified was the participants' pragmatic acceptance of the pandemic restrictions. Given the business closures at the time of data collection, the discussion turned to the personal and financial implications of life as a small business owner. Interestingly, while several respondents commented on the economic environment's negative impact, all showed risk acceptance and resilience. Cardon and Patel (2015) claim that entrepreneurship is among the most stressful professions. However, while some participants acknowledged that stress and risks are inherent to an entrepreneurial career, they also noted that they would have been no less exposed to the economic effect of this exogenous shock as an employee. This was the case for Josef, who claimed "There's no real security in this world." Abdul implied that accepting risk was important, but that the onus is on entrepreneurs to be ready for it, "Business should always have risk management, so this is something that I was kind of prepared for. I did not know that a pandemic would happen, but I knew that there were risks that would come along the way and be prepared for it."

The pandemic was more challenging for nascent than established businesses (Brown & Rocha, 2020; Brown et al., 2020; Kuckertz et al., 2020), and goals set by new entrepreneurs were more difficult to achieve. Notwithstanding the general acceptance of risk shown above, some respondents were in an admittedly precarious financial position, where success would be measured by survival. This was evident in Adam's case, when he stated "I'm using my savings to survive this situation. I mean just to use that money for one year, but I'm trying in the meantime to do a backup plan. My only answer now is I have to survive one year in Dubai." Not all participants had savings to rely on; Elizabeth's situation was even more challenging. She shared "I should have been paid two months ago. I've had to stress to [the client], this is not just pocket money, this is my livelihood. I need this money in order to go to the supermarket, in order to pay my bills, and as of about next week, I'm pretty much out of money."

4.1.2 | No regrets

Transitioning to an entrepreneurial career profoundly impacted participants' well-being, and the importance of this influenced their view of the crisis. Some reflected on a pre-entrepreneurial sense of boredom; they had stable careers that brought little personal fulfillment, as evident in the narratives below. A lack of satisfaction and perceived meaning in their previous careers was a driving force in starting their businesses. Emma viewed her previous work life as unhealthy—"Before I started my first venture, life revolved around work. And personal life was not prioritized in a healthy way, so hobbies and stuff didn't really happen. It was just more work. And then you just spend money to counteract all the work that you're doing. It just was like a hamster wheel." Not all participants reported busier lives, pre-entrepreneurship, for example, Pierre—"Life was quieter before, but meaningless." The search for meaning through entrepreneurship was apparent, even among those who previously had stable and enjoyable working lives. Simon, who left an established family business shared "I would be very thankful for what happened and what [the family business] achieved, but it was not enough, so I just decided to go away and try to own my life, on my own." Simon's comment that he wished to "own"

his life was inextricable from his relocation to Dubai. Leaving his family's business was not merely a change of employment and geography; it marked an identity transition to expat-preneur. It also changed social circumstances and necessitated building new business networks.

Lara launched her business in early 2020, receiving her business license on the first day of the lockdown in Dubai. Acknowledging the challenges this would bring, she was adamant that this was the right time for her to start her venture. "A lot of people tend to ask me 'do you regret opening your business considering what happened in the world?' I answer almost immediately 'No, I actually don't.' I really felt like it was meant to be, and it happened at the right time." While their entrepreneurial careers were not without challenges, Lara and others noted the inherent value their career choices brought to their lives. Their reflections were replete with examples of personal growth, such as that shared by Lara "I feel beautiful when, whenever, I feel like I've done something different, I'm like 'this is all worth it'. When things go well, it's all worth it." Simon, too, noted:

For me, it's not working- it's enjoying every day. Every day I'm learning everything from scratch. Every meeting, every person that I meet, every gathering, every networking event that I go to, it's something incredible. It's not working like before, 8 am to 6 pm. Now, it's working almost double. So, my days are very long, but I'm super, super passionate. And for me, it's not working.

The concept of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975)—complete absorption in an activity—is evident in Simon's account. Similarly, Lara's choice of words illustrates her entrepreneurial role's embodied nature—although very recently established as an entrepreneur, it was already central to her identity. She looked forward to future growth opportunities. Josef diversified early on; these entrepreneurial experiences shaped and enriched his life.

The knowledge that I gained, the places I saw, the people I met through my entrepreneurship journey, it's been just fantastic. And if I had known that my life would have been just one of these elements, I know that I would have missed out on quite a lot of things. That's for sure.

4.1.3 | Positive outlook

Although critically aware of the pandemic's consequences, participants' narratives were optimistic. They reflected

a range of proactive strategies, from focusing on their business models to diversifying and innovating, enhancing networks, and reframing the situation as a learning experience. Alfred's narrative characterized this, when he said "We need to think of not what is today but what will be there tomorrow. And I see many opportunities now." Pierre went a step further, identifying optimism and opportunism as central to "being" an entrepreneur:

My glass is always half full. This is the most important thing. Some people see changes as challenging and difficult. I see changes as opportunities. If you are open-minded, you can try to be the first one who thinks about a new way to do something. To make use of the opportunity in the market. That is what it means to be an entrepreneur.

Dahles and Susilowati (2015) differentiate between businesses that "survive" crises and those that innovate, noting that the latter group lowered their vulnerability to future challenges. Martiz et al. (2020) argues that agile entrepreneurs who pivot their business model possess a growth mindset and further suggests that this skill will be important in future crises—not just to survive but to thrive. Participants in the current study displayed the same "bricolage" response to the pandemic as shown by Kuckertz et al. (2020), using the opportunity to plan future development and diversification. Their view of the crisis was one of critical reflection on potential opportunities. This striking optimism in the face of unprecedented difficulties was also noted by Thorgren and Williams (2020). The latter authors also commented that those whose response to the crisis was to innovate and invest (actively address) rather than conserve (passively address) would likely have better organizational and psychological outcomes in the longer run. In the current study, Edward opted to "Stay positive and optimistic, and never be negative about the whole issue." Emma, while mindful of global economic challenges, felt confident that her intrinsic abilities would allow her business to survive: "I do worry about the state of the world economy and everything, but I feel like the skills I have as an entrepreneur and the mindset, ultimately will work in my favor. I've always landed on my feet, and this is no different."

4.2 | Valuing relationships

The second theme identified focused on the value attributed to relationships. Participants appreciated *support* and the need for *authenticity* in networking and relationship-building in navigating through the crisis.

4.2.1 | Support

Participants described social support as crucial in their growth and resilience. References to professional and personal support were made, with participants reiterating their gratitude for this. Several participants, such as Edward, referred to support from their employees as the main success factor, and did not view themselves as hierarchically distanced from their team, “You’re only as good as the best team that you have.” Alfred acknowledged that he was not the only one with potential to shape and grow his business; “I’d rather remind myself of what I don’t know, that there’s a team that has probably equal amounts of ideas, if not better ideas, and reflect on those.”

While not negating their efforts to start and grow their businesses, participants recognized their good fortune. Partially attributing success to luck, they displayed humility—a comparatively less explored construct in entrepreneurial experiences, certainly in the for-profit sector. Entrepreneurial humility can increase resilience, both for the individual (DeVries & Shields, 2006) and for employees of humble leaders (Zhu et al., 2019). The current study’s findings show that, as Ratiu et al. (2014) proposed, humble entrepreneurs did not think less of themselves but less *about* themselves, acknowledging positive impacts of others on their businesses.

Some pointed to support in their personal lives as a backdrop for their success and underlined their luck in finding this support around them. The belief in good luck might offset how some aspects of the crisis affect well-being (Day et al., 1999). Indeed, being grateful for one’s relationships may be part of a virtuous cycle- gratitude can be linked to relationship-building (Algoe et al., 2008), and those relationships increase gratitude. Simon’s account exemplified this:

I’m very, very lucky to have a partner, my fiancée. That she’s very supportive... I would never be able to achieve what I achieved so far without her help... You need somebody that’s supporting you psychologically because sometimes it’s tough.

The idea that personal support is necessary for entrepreneurial journeys is repeated in Simon and Lara’s accounts- entrepreneurship can be difficult. Lara stated “You get to see the support around you. Everybody looks at you and says ‘Don’t worry. Believe in yourself more’. And that’s a nice reminder to have as an entrepreneur, because an entrepreneur’s life is a very, very lonely life.” This entrepreneurial loneliness can be compounded by expatriate status during economic challenges, such as

the pandemic. Satisfying the need to connect genuinely with others can predict well-being (Chen et al., 2014), and respondents hoped to continue to do this in spite of a crisis that required physical distancing.

4.2.2 | Authenticity

The discussion of success factors also centered on relationship-building in the UAE, and the importance of authenticity, a construct linked to wellness. Those who show more authenticity tend to reflect realistically on their own needs and those of others (Baker et al., 2017), which can benefit both in building professional trust and dealing with crises. Authenticity contributes to better mental health and psychological responses to challenging events (Bryan et al., 2017). Participants’ understanding of authenticity in initiating and maintaining important interpersonal relationships contributed to their overall well-being and crisis management. Edward claimed “There are certain clients who would go with you no matter what the competition offers, that’s only because of... the trust the client has in your company and your team.” Trust was also a feature of Emma’s account: “I see the importance of building relationships for my clients, and the work that we do in terms of stakeholder engagement and... helping to foster those relationships. So I think that’s one of the key things—building trust and having a solid relationship.” This was echoed by Pierre, who recognized the impact of trust (even more than price and quality) on generating and sustaining business.

Your network is your net worth, especially in this part of the world. Because I realize one thing; in Europe, you go for quality- the best person, the best quality, for the lowest price. But, in this part of the world, it is very different. People go by friendship. This is also a good way of doing things for sure. But it is not about selecting the best person. It’s about recommendations from someone else because you trust this person. It goes much more by referrals in this country, as well as this part of the world.

In line with previous findings (Berger et al., 2015; Elbanna et al., 2020), participants specified that the UAE creates both the need to develop relationships and networks through authenticity and to become more authentic through the process of relationship building. Participants believed that doing this in a country largely populated by expatriates without long-established networks, presented opportunities:

I think that having a good network is definitely a success factor in the UAE more than any other part of the world... and being authentic. (Josef)

What we've found is word of mouth is number one. You need to connect with people on a much deeper level... actually listening to them and having conversations. And our client circle is usually the same people or their friends or their family... that's how it spreads. Here, I think, making an impact on somebody's life story, and having them actually spread the word that way. (Dima)

We sell to businesses, business leaders. So there needs to be connection on the human level. People buy into people. (Alfred)

In the UAE, it's very much a networking game. We gravitate towards those that we know, we gravitate towards those that we like, and we care about, which is a great thing because it says that we are friends. The more people know you and genuinely know you as a person, the more they're willing to take a chance on you. That's what my success has been very much built on - building these relationships, not just on a professional level, but very much on a personal level. Seeing that you authentically, genuinely want them to help... it becomes that, that balance of, I know you, I care for you, and I care about your success. (Lara)

It was evident from participants' accounts that they sought positive, meaningful relationships with their clients and customers and that such relationships can be protective. In an intervention based on Seligman's well-being theory (2011), positive relationships lessened negative emotions (Gander et al., 2016). Relationships can also be a motivating factor in pursuing an international venture (Selmer et al., 2018). They can expand social networks (Selmer & Lauring, 2010), contributing to entrepreneurial success and a positive outlook during a crisis.

5 | DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore UAE-based expatriate entrepreneurs' experiences of their career journey to date, reflecting upon the origins of their business, their impact

of COVID-19, to envisioning life post-pandemic. This exogenous shock touched their business and personal lives in multiple, often unexpected ways. Despite exposure to the immediate financial effects, no participant in this study voiced regret about their entrepreneurial career choice. The pandemic was part of their entrepreneurial journey but not its defining feature. Indeed, the first theme, "resilience," illustrated how participants were ready for the uncertain trajectory of entrepreneurial life. Positive accounts of the foundation of their businesses framed how they later discussed their experiences of managing the crisis. The second theme, "valuing relationships," focused on the dual importance of having strong, authentic relationships in business functioning and enhancing participants' psychological well-being. Buoyed by the belief that crises foster innovation and grateful for supportive relationships that aided the development of their business, participants demonstrated optimism and resilience.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

First, findings from this study support the challenge model of resilience, one of the three models proposed by Garmezy et al. (1984), which describe responses to risk that might increase future success by strengthening competence and learning from challenges. This model can be applied to UAE-based expatriate entrepreneurs' perspectives in assessing crisis-related risk. Entrepreneurs in the current study did not regard the economic repercussions of the global pandemic as adverse enough to stop their progress; indeed, it allowed them to channel their entrepreneurial spirit and goals through planning diverse ventures. The circumstances created by the pandemic presented opportunities for growth through personal and social capital, encouraging development as opposed to only recovery (O'Leary, 1998). This was also noted by Schepers et al., who found that some entrepreneurs used the crisis to move forward with their business ventures (2021). Development of this kind is termed "thriving" in the positive psychology and resilience literature (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995); it is dependent on the capacity to overcome challenges in a way that builds strength to deal with future adversity and risk (Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). Resilience and thriving aid in overall well-being, and aspects of these concepts were repeatedly found in participants' responses.

Second, gratitude for relationships demonstrated respondents' behavioral and cognitive approaches that enhanced their subjective well-being. Gratitude predicts resilience (Isaacs et al., 2017), positive coping (e.g., seeking support, positive reframing of challenges, planning; Wood et al., 2007), and hope (Witvliet et al., 2019). Additionally,

there is an association between gratitude and life satisfaction (e.g., Barton et al., 2015; Grant & Gino, 2010). Grateful people are happier (Watkins, 2004), partly due to having positive memories of past experiences (Zhang, 2020). In turn, happier people have more social connections (Diener & Seligman, 2002), a point worth noting at the time of data collection when maintaining relationships was considered essential for entrepreneurial venture survival. The capacity to build networks was indeed noted as requiring further investigation in order to understand the differences in entrepreneurial resilience during a crisis (Sharma et al., 2022).

5.2 | Managerial implications

In line with previous research on businesses in the Arab world (Berger et al., 2015), participant responses suggested that entrepreneurial ventures in the UAE exist in a context whereby their success requires networking, trust, and authenticity in relationships. During the pandemic, the lockdown periods interrupted opportunities to build new relationships naturally, and the sudden online-only interaction interfered with the ability to perceive, and demonstrate, authenticity. Despite, or perhaps because of, their expatriate status, participants repeatedly mentioned support. During the pandemic, people who viewed themselves as having social support have shown more resilience (Killgore et al., 2020), a construct correlated with lower levels of depression and anxiety (Liu et al., 2020). Relationships have a significant impact on responses to negative life situations and can encourage resilience and positivity (Afifi, 2018). A positive outlook during stressful events can prevent future depressive symptoms (Aschbacher et al., 2012), allowing risks to be viewed as less extreme, and increasing persistence to overcome challenges. Relationships might also buffer the complications of expatriate status, particularly during a crisis that involved social distance and isolation. In the UAE, some communities found that the pandemic circumstances pushed them into entrepreneurship through their social cohesion and group responses to social needs (Bacason et al., 2022). If the entrepreneurs in the current study viewed their future in the UAE as bleak, they might be less likely to innovate new business ideas or show the resilience outlined in the challenge model. Garmezy's (1984) compensatory and protective models of resilience illustrate how promotive factors neutralize and moderate risks (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Entrepreneurs can use this to their advantage; maintaining a positive outlook can build supportive networks to grow their business in "good" times and act as buffers in times of need. Kawai et al. (2023) found that family support for entrepreneurs can counteract regret and con-

sequent negative outcomes. Indeed, the negative aspects of expatriate entrepreneurship during this crisis seemed to be compensated by respondents' gratitude for their relationships and they are further protected by a "no regrets" view of their career choices.

Nonetheless, this was not an easy time for expatriate entrepreneurs. Whilst maintaining a relatively positive outlook, all participants acknowledged negative impacts on their ventures, with some questioning their ability to offer their products or services. Stay-at-home orders altered how society connected (Paredes et al., 2021), with significant implications for the residency status of UAE expatriate entrepreneurs. For some business owners, this threatened their social and professional networks. Greater perceived risk is associated with lower well-being, and pandemic-related risks include a range of possible adverse life outcomes (Paredes et al., 2021). However, as noted under the challenge model, risks viewed as moderate can be used to bounce "forward" into new ideas, networks, and ventures. Entrepreneurs could not predict what they would accomplish after the crisis. Still, their views set the path for possible future success, perhaps explainable by the curvilinear relationship between stressors and capacity (Garmezy et al., 1984). The perception of circumstances as an opportunity—for example, to digitally reactivate former connections that might be geographically distant (Giones et al., 2020)—is important to well-being. The positive psychology constructs shared by participants showed how they viewed the pandemic as something that could be overcome. Thriving is not a static occurrence but involves changes over place, time, and circumstances. Challenges foster thriving as they thrust people past their original equilibrium, developing subsequent ability to deal with, and gain from, such difficulties (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995). Although this may be cold comfort for those whose businesses have not survived the pandemic, the learning that occurred over this period may prove beneficial for subsequent ventures.

6 | CONCLUSION

This study offers insight into UAE-based entrepreneurs' experiences at an unprecedented time. While it is well-accepted that soft skills and personal characteristics are important for entrepreneurs, these findings show how such strengths can help expatriate entrepreneurs beyond the development of their businesses into navigating, and surviving, crises. The findings provided a lens into how resilience and relationships impacted the experiences of expatriate entrepreneurs: how they viewed the pandemic's impact on their business, outlook, and well-being. Some foresaw an opportunity instead of a crisis, emphasizing

their ability to innovate. Expatriate entrepreneurs are essential to the UAE business ecosystem, so resilience and endurance were important, particularly due to the lack of knowledge regarding the crisis's duration. While this study does not aim to represent all migrant entrepreneurs' pandemic experiences in the UAE, it illustrates how authentic, supportive relationships and positive psychological traits may buffer against uncertainty and how future entrepreneurial growth can originate during a crisis.

6.1 | Key takeaways

The findings from the current study highlight how, for our small sample of expatriate entrepreneurs in the UAE, identifying as resilient and having a network of support were vital in navigating the pandemic. This is in line with emerging research and supports several calls to reimagine, or reset, entrepreneurial education (e.g., Langston, 2020; Ratten & Jones, 2021). For example, higher education and government support programs can integrate a focus on resilience when working with budding entrepreneurs (Chadwick & Raver, 2020; Ratten & Jones, 2021). Beyond the lecture halls, Maree (2021) calls on career counselors to promote entrepreneurship among university students. We also believe they have a clear role to play in career decision making among students and graduates, and in emphasizing the soft skills that complement business acumen. They may also foster self-perceived employability, which has recently been shown to relate with entrepreneurial intentions (Knezović, 2023). Additionally, given the pandemic's wide impact, support will likely be needed throughout the career lifespan. Career shocks exert different effects in the immediate and longer-term, and how established someone is in their occupation is also important (Akkermans et al., 2020). Career counselors will have an essential role to play in helping people “successfully navigate the newly emerging transition challenges, to develop and reinforce career management skills, such as career adaptability and resilience, and to reinvent careers by capitalizing on unplanned positive and even negative events” (Ananiadou et al., 2020, p. 22). Aly et al. (2018) call upon leaders to “nourish the human face of entrepreneurship” and recommend a range of strategies for entrepreneurs including emotional education to prepare them for their career, and the development of communities of emotional support (p. 13). We echo these recommendations. Establishing authentic supportive networks can be vital, particularly in countries with a large expatriate population, such as the site of current study. Indeed, rather than endangering their ventures, the long-standing importance of relationship-building in UAE businesses may have protected entrepreneurs from the adverse effects of lack-

TABLE 3 Summary table.

Established knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expatriate entrepreneurs are more exposed to challenges than local entrepreneurs. Personal traits influence the drive to set up and sustain businesses.
This study's findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive psychology constructs and social connectedness emerged as influential in expatriate entrepreneurs' career journeys. Specifically, resilience and valuing relationships were important buffers against the impacts of an unforeseen exogenous shock.
Implications and impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our findings emphasize the need for soft-skill development and emphasis on positive psychology traits among expatriate entrepreneurs. Business/entrepreneurship educators and career counselors should focus on these qualities which support entrepreneurial success.

ing “traditional” support during the pandemic. Although small-scale, this qualitative study provides insight into the importance of resilience and supportive relationships in buffering against what has arguably been the most severe career shock in participants' lives. In summary, Table 3 illustrates this study's main contributions.

6.2 | Future research directions

Entrepreneurial education, particularly experiential learning, can help foster resilience (Langston, 2020). This protective construct can aid entrepreneurs as they continue, move, grow, or restart their businesses post-COVID. While the current study did not initially aim to explore entrepreneurs' social and professional relationships, their narratives illustrated how fundamental these were to their experiences during the crisis. The longer-term effects of relationships as buffers against negative psychological outcomes of the pandemic require further exploration.

The diverse industries represented in the current study differentially experienced the pandemic's impact. Patel and Rietveld (2020, p. 10) note that “gig workers facing significant uncertainty and that sustained exposure to uncertainty may have longer-term health and financial consequences than high-skilled freelancers.” Moreover, positive attitudes may waver over time, with initial optimism tested by unpredictable longer-term outcomes of the pandemic. Job insecurity mediates the relationship between self-employment and psychological distress (Patel & Rietveld, 2020), and longer-term financial and personal outcomes of the pandemic for entrepreneurs are areas in need of further exploration.

Recently, Sharma and Tiwari (2023) found that emotional intelligence dimensions matter in career success. They note adaptability had a significant direct impact on career success, and interpersonal intelligence predicted resilience. While their study did not focus on entrepreneurs, we contend that it may apply equally to this population, and suggest further research in this domain. Given the acknowledged importance of interpersonal relationships and adaptability in the lives of our participants, we expect that these would be important drivers of expatriate entrepreneurial success in the UAE and beyond.

6.3 | Limitations

Some limitations of this study point toward opportunities for future research. For example, there were areas of note in participants' narratives beyond the current study's remit—our focus did not allow for substantive discussion of entrepreneurs' personal lives, specifically their family structure. Whether participants have a spouse and whether they are the sole earner in their family would mediate their personal and financial vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the sample was homogeneous in many respects, there was heterogeneity in business type and time since establishment (the latter ranging from less than 6 months to more than 10 years). Research has shown a more severe impact of the pandemic on nascent entrepreneurs than those with more established businesses (Kuckertz et al., 2020; Salamzadeh & Dana, 2021). Still, newer, smaller companies may be more agile in changing their strategies or business models when facing crises (Hagen et al., 2019). While this was not a focus of the current study, it is undoubtedly an important consideration. We are heartened by the research attention directed toward entrepreneurial pandemic experiences. We hope to see more research focusing on positive post-pandemic growth and strategies that will allow entrepreneurs to not just survive but thrive during future, inevitable exogenous shocks.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All authors participated in study conceptualisation/design, data collection, and manuscript writing (both the original draft and review versions). The first and third authors also conducted data analysis and edited the final manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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