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Did the psychological implications of COVID-19 influence employees to say, "I quit"

Lori Fay

DID THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19

INFLUENCE EMPLOYEES TO SAY, "I QUIT"

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A Research Project

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graziadio Business School

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Science

In

Organization Development

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by

Lori Fay

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LORI FAY

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the forces that influenced employees to quit and how the employee-manager relationship mitigated this. The research centered on employees employed in the retail industry throughout the year 2020. This study aimed to investigate what factors motivated employees to remain committed to their organizations amidst the psychological impacts of COVID-19. The findings of this study suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental well-being of individuals, as evidenced by their experiences of anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue. Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on employee turnover and the influence of the employee-manager relationship is crucial for gaining valuable insights into the organizational landscape. Organizations can develop effective strategies to improve employee retention and overall satisfaction by comprehending these dynamics.

Keywords: anxiety, depression, emotional fatigue, employee-manager

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The year 2020 left many relieved to move past it, as COVID-19 wreaked havoc on human life and profoundly affected businesses and organizations. To weather the storm, many employers were compelled to downsize their workforce. This downsizing trend was evident nationwide in the early months of the pandemic. Nevertheless, as time progressed and vaccinations became more accessible, positive signs emerged, instilling a sense that the time had come to return to work. Despite these circumstances, an unexpected surge in resignations occurred, with individuals choosing not to return to work and expressing their decision with the words "I quit." This phenomenon has been coined the Great Resignation, drawing parallels to the unemployment crisis experienced during the Great Depression in the 1930s. While the unemployment rate in 2020 saw a sharp decline, with a peak rate of 11.1% in June, the implications of today's unemployment crisis extend beyond economic factors. The impact of unemployment in the present era differs significantly from that of the 1930s, affecting people globally on various levels beyond just an economic recession (Wheelock et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has been recognized as a global health crisis, impacting the mental well-being of individuals (Fofana et al., 2020). The pervasive threat posed by the disease has led to various psychological responses, including heightened anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue (Fofana et al., 2020). Local and national governments implemented mandatory lockdown measures to mitigate the transmission of the disease, leading to individuals being required to undergo quarantine and experiencing separation from their families. The psychological impact of quarantine duration on individuals' mental health is evident. Research conducted during previous outbreaks, such as SARS,

found that among quarantined parents, 28% (27 of 98) reported symptoms that met the criteria for a trauma-related mental health disorder. In contrast, only 6% (17 of 299) of parents who were not quarantined experienced similar symptoms (Brooks et al., 2020). Additionally, individuals subjected to quarantine periods lasting over 10 days reported symptoms such as exhaustion, poor concentration, and reduced work performance.

As a result of mandatory stay-at-home orders, organizations were forced to either cease operations or transition from in-person work environments to remote setups. This shift had significant repercussions, with many employees losing their jobs or being subjected to the psychological ramifications induced by COVID-19 (Blick et al., 2020). Simultaneously, as employees returned to work amidst the psychological implications of the pandemic, they encountered organizational changes that influenced their work behavior and perceptions of job security (Bajrami et al., 2021). Previous studies have demonstrated that job insecurity detrimentally affects overall job satisfaction and motivation (Reisel et al., 2010). Job insecurity reached extreme levels due to the heightened threat posed by COVID-19 (Bajrami et al., 2021). According to Martins et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic had significant socio-economic implications, particularly for the hospitality industry, which was profoundly impacted by the outbreak. The supply and demand sides of the industry were affected, and workers in this sector faced unprecedented hardships. The World Travel and Tourism Council warned that due to COVID-19, 50 million jobs in the global hospitality industry were at risk (Nicola et al., 2020). Bajrami et al. (2021) collected 624 questionnaires from participants in the hospitality industry in Serbia. The respondents expressed a strong inclination to leave their current organizations. The findings revealed that a substantial percentage of the

respondents (44%), especially within the tourism industry, expressed their intention to seek new job opportunities actively. Furthermore, most respondents (62%) agreed or strongly agreed that finding a new job would pose considerable challenges. The study's findings revealed that COVID-19 significantly impacted different industries, making it challenging to seek new job opportunities during the pandemic. However, many employees considered leaving their job during this time, despite the obstacles they faced, but not all employees quit. What motivated employees to stay when experiencing the psychological impacts of COVID-19? How did organizations under a crisis create an environment in which employees were motivated to stay? Most importantly, how did the employee-manager relationship influence the employee to stay while impacted by the effects of COVID-19?

Gaining insights into how the psychological implications of COVID-19 influenced employees to resign and the role of the employee-manager relationship in encouraging retention can offer a valuable contextual understanding of the organizational landscape. This understanding, in turn, can facilitate the development of effective corporate strategies to enhance employee retention and satisfaction.

Research Objective and Approach

This study aims to discover how the psychological implications of COVID-19 influenced employees to say, "I quit," and how the employee-manager relationship influences employees to stay while experiencing the pandemic's emotional impacts. This research draws inferences about the psychological effects and presumes that organizations must understand the implications of developing and implementing employee retention strategies.

Importance of Study

      An in-depth understanding of the underlying factors driving employee resignations in the United States is paramount. Organizations today must implement proactive measures to support employees in the current conditions. This includes providing clear health and safety information and offering training for employee well-being (Bajrami et al., 2021). Emerging studies have identified effective measures to support employees in dealing with the psychological impacts of COVID-19, including flexible work options, paid time off, and assistance in adapting to changing work environments (Lin et al., 2021).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study aims to discover how the psychological implications of COVID-19 influenced employees to say, "I quit," and how the employee-manager relationship influenced employees to stay while experiencing such emotional impacts of the pandemic. This chapter highlights existing literature and is organized into three sections: the psychological effects of COVID-19, the causes of these effects, and the employee-manager relationship.

The Psychological Effects of COVID

On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) received reported cases of viral pneumonia, of unknown cause, from Wuhan, China (WHO, 2019). By March 15, 2020, COVID-19 was named a global pandemic affecting over 210 countries (Fofana et al., 2020). The deadly disease evolved rapidly and every news channel and social media streamed a play-by-play of the pandemic threat. People were not just contracting and spreading the virus to others, people worldwide were dying. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed a data tracker, and as of April 28, 2022, the total number of cases in the United States is 81,028,797 and the total number of deaths is 990,208 (CDC, 2022). From January 2020, when the word started circulating about the potential threat of this disease, people received mixed information and evidence of its actual impact. From this point on, humans experienced repeated stress from the environment. When stress is constant, the body and brain become overstimulated, resulting in chronic overactivity known as allostatic load (McEwen, 1998).

COVID-19 has changed how humans interact in everyday life, from how people communicate, work, and live. Because of the heightened threat of the crisis, governments

worldwide have invoked mandatory lockdowns, leading to mass panic and a rise in anxiety, emotional fatigue, and depression (Fofana, 2020). These psychological effects have adversely impacted mental health, but historically traumatic events have continued to carry on years later (Brooks et al., 2020). It is essential to look at these three psychological effects and how it impacts human response and behavior. Defining each implication and what causes the effect will give a more in-depth idea of what employees are experiencing psychologically and emotionally as they return to work. Unlocking the psychological reactions to the threat of COVID-19 may provide a better understanding of how these implications influenced an employee's decision to say, "I quit."

Defining Anxiety, Emotional Fatigue, and Depression

Anxiety

The psychological impacts of anxiety are characterized by discomfort in psychophysiological changes resulting from intrapsychic conflict and an overwhelming sense of impending danger (Levitt, 1980). These symptoms can manifest as pain and uneasiness throughout the body, typically triggered by a state of shock. Given the unprecedented challenges and uncertainties brought about by the pandemic, many individuals experienced heightened anxiety levels as a natural response to the ongoing circumstances. Lang (1968) classifies these symptoms as: worry (verbal-subjective), avoidance (overt motor acts), and muscle tension (somato-visceral activity. Whatever the psychological perception of the event people experienced, everyone everywhere had to keep moving forward and survive but, unfortunately, with the constant effects of living anxiety.

Emotional Fatigue

Ream and Richardson (1997) described that emotional fatigue results from both internal and external experiences. It manifests as an overwhelming sense of exhaustion that cannot be fully restored through mental and physical rest. *Fatigue* is a subjective and unpleasant symptom, encompassing a range of total body feelings from tiredness to extreme exhaustion. This condition persistently hinders an individual's ability to function at their normal capacity. When stress persists without mental and physical rest, one will experience chronic fatigue. Chronic fatigue is excessive and continuous exposure to internal and external pressure, significantly affecting daily living and overall quality of life. Physical and mental health is unbalanced when people cannot replenish and restore their energy because of the constant overload of internal and external stressors (Aaronson et al., 1999). Emotional fatigue is a symptom of depression (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Depression

Depression is caused by genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors (National Institute of Mental Health, 2022). Depression is a mood disorder that can affect the quality of life. Symptoms of depression may include sadness, loss of interest, hopelessness, fatigue, trouble concentrating, restlessness, and lack of motivation. Depression is a global disease, and 23% of patients report that depression symptoms are severe enough to be bedridden (Reddy, 2010). Depression may go undiagnosed, and people struggle to recognize what is going on and what they are feeling. Sometimes it takes emotional, behavioral, or physical changes to become aware of something wrong. Being unaware can cause a delay in proper treatment. When people experience such

dynamic changes, they often seek various substances to cope with this strange feeling. Dealing with substance abuse can add to depression and prolong proper treatment.

Furthermore, people normalize their symptoms and believe they feel this way because of everyday stressors due to life challenges. To avoid stigmatization, people aware of their depression tend not to share it with others, including friends, family, and colleagues. This prevents people with depression from seeking help (Epstein, 2010). If people identify how they are feeling and what is causing them to feel this way, they can consider one of the factors named by the NIMH. Documenting and naming the depression is a starting point for obtaining the proper treatment.

Causes of These Effects

Anxiety

Many social restrictions occurred during the pandemic, including a national lockdown, stay-at-home orders, and social distancing. Research shows that quarantine and isolation have increased depression and anxiety (Lie et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2009). Wu et al. (2009), found that being quarantined had long-term implications for hospital employees, predicting the development of post-traumatic stress symptoms even after three years. Similarly, among horse owners who underwent quarantine due to an equine influenza outbreak, approximately 34% (938 of 2,760) reported experiencing high psychological distress during the outbreak, in contrast to the prevalence of around 12% in the general Australian population. Liu et al. (2012) investigated the long-term impact of quarantine on hospital staff, focusing on symptoms of depression. It was found that among the entire sample of hospital staff (549 individuals), 9% ($n = 48$) reported experiencing high levels of depressive symptoms. In the group with high depressive

symptoms, approximately 60% ($n = 29$) had quarantined, while only 15% ($n = 63$) of those with low depressive symptoms had been subjected to quarantine. In addition, a national phone survey among Israelis showed that anxiety, depression, and loneliness levels increased throughout the pandemic (Frankenthal et al., 2022). The different social distancing demands in place caused social disruption, which influenced the effect of depression among people who have experienced adverse events such as disasters and epidemics. Depression and anxiety are steadily concurrent with stressful life events and outcomes (Kendler & Gardner, 2016; Kendler et al., 2003). Because of the unknown rise and fall of future outbreaks, the ongoing panic and worry will likely increase depression, anxiety, and emotional fatigue for years to come.

Researchers have conducted cross-sectional studies using different psychometric instruments to evaluate anxiety (Batista et al., 2021; Lie et al., 2020). The sample sizes ranged from 50 to 7,143 participants. The participants included students, healthcare professionals, COVID-19 patients, and members of the public. Upon analyzing the data, it was evident that every participant reported experiencing anxiety related to the COVID-19 outbreak. According to Liu et al. (2020), 51 COVID-19 patients exhibited high anxiety levels and reported poor sleep quality because of isolation and treatment. Because they contracted COVID-19, people who had to isolate showed high levels of anxiety and insomnia. They also showed high anxiety scores associated with stress, impacting their sleep quality. Because the sample included a wide range of people from various backgrounds, this suggests that the psychological effects of COVID-19 impact healthcare professionals, students, and everyone in the general population (Batista et al., 2021).

It is widely recognized that the pandemic generated unprecedented information and news coverage globally. Government officials asked people to stay at home and quarantine to reduce or control the spread of the virus. While quarantining may have been the right move to reduce the spread of the virus, studies reported that quarantine and isolation had adverse psychological effects on people who were quarantined for more than 10 days (Brooks et al., 2020).

Depression

According to research, individuals faced numerous challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, including isolation, unemployment, financial uncertainty, and losing loved ones, leading to significant distress (Shader, 2020). Depressive symptoms commonly reported by individuals include a lack of energy, disrupted sleep patterns, reduced motivation to engage in daily activities, and difficulty concentrating (Shader, 2020). Adhering to the guidelines set by the CDC can effectively mitigate the spread of the disease. Depression and mental illness are associated with large-scale traumatic events and have risen in epidemics like SARS and the Ebola outbreak. From 2002-2003, the SARS outbreak reported 8,098 probable cases and 774 deaths. Both outbreaks significantly impacted the affected regions, leading to public health emergencies and global efforts to contain and mitigate the spread of the diseases. Many other disruptive life events also report a rise in mental illnesses, such as depression (Ettman et al., 2020). Ettman et al. (2020) showed that depression symptoms increased in the US more than 3-fold during the COVID-19 pandemic. The symptoms of depression went from 8.5% before the pandemic to 27.8% during the pandemic. The findings also showed that lower-income populations had a higher risk of depression than people of higher income. People

exposed to more stressors were 50% more at risk for depression symptoms (Ettman et al., 2020). The mental health consequences of COVID-19, such as depression, can be long-lasting. If situational factors from COVID-19 continue to influence people's reactions and behavior, there will likely be a continuous rise in depression cases.

Emotional Fatigue

When the pandemic emerged, people did not have accurate information about the disease. Employees, such as healthcare workers, embodied extreme stressors from personal and work-related conditions during COVID-19. Many factors are associated with higher rates of emotional fatigue. According to Sfeir et al. (2022), higher rates of depression were related to mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. People struggle to deal with everyday life and cannot cope, proving higher exhaustion rates.

According to Buneviciene et al. (2021), living alone, financial instability, worrying about family, and the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 collectively contributed to the psychological impact of emotional fatigue on the population. This fatigue manifests differently in individuals and is not solely limited to symptoms of depression and anxiety; rather, it can be experienced due to the challenges of everyday living. During the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, staying informed through news media was crucial to adhere to safety precautions, such as mask mandates, social distancing, and travel restrictions. While these updates were necessary for disease prevention, they predominantly consisted of negative stories, constantly reminding people of the ongoing threat. This continuous exposure to negative news and the persistent fear of the disease created significant stress, resulting in emotional fatigue among the population. The world's reactions due to the COVID-19 outbreak changed the way people lived their

lives. Everyone was mentally and physically different pre-pandemic. The continued uncertainty of the pandemic and our adjustments to life ultimately led to a rise in anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue, associated with our overall mental well-being. People continue to mitigate their emotions and navigate these challenging times and many struggle to balance life at home and work. Employees deal with dual stressors from their everyday social interaction and the demands and stressors from their workplace.

Employee's Experience

According to Song et al. (2020), employees in the service industry who returned to work expressed concerns about potential exposure to the disease. Their perception of increased risk due to inadequate working conditions contributed to elevated stress levels and rendered them more susceptible to mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue. Employees also faced significant organizational changes. New work policies kept employees safe, but the new guidelines needed to make sense and some new policies seemed unfair. Employees who used to work with clear boundaries and knew what to do daily no longer had stable procedures supporting their work. They lacked control.

While employees returned to work, others were furloughed or let go. Some employees took salary cuts. The economic plunge caused social and economic stressors among employees returning to work. Pre-pandemic research shows that employees who face such circumstances experience job insecurity (Shoss, 2017). Employees have a subjective perception of losing their job and are uncertain about future opportunities. According to Cheng and Chang (2008), job insecurity affects overall job satisfaction, mental and physical health, organizational commitment, and trust. These effects

ultimately influence employee turnover. Anxiety and worry are expected outcomes of such workplace threats. Such adverse psychological effects of job insecurity result in reduced job satisfaction, poor well-being, and lower productivity and performance (Cheng & Chang, 2008).

Employees returning to work were dealing with social and economic stressors, and the dramatic changes at work added to occupational stress. Such changes can lead to chronic job stress and burnout to emotional fatigue. Even though over 4 million Americans left their jobs in 2021 (Cook, 2021), not all employees left. It is essential to look at past and present research on the employee's relationship with their manager and how this influences employees to stay when occupational threats and stressors exist.

Employee-Manager Relationship

According to Takupiwa (2019), maintaining positive employee-manager relationships is crucial for employee retention. Organizations must pay more attention to the employee-manager relationship when implementing changes or face failure. Therefore, fostering a supportive and positive relationship between employees and managers is vital for the organization's overall success. Empowered employees feel they have a sense of control or autonomy, and their work aligns with their values enhancing the employee intentions to stay with an organization (Samuel & Engelbrecht, 2021). Developing a healthy relationship between the employee-manager over time will likely evolve into mutual trust and commitment weaving the rule of reciprocity and repayment relationship (Samuel & Engelbrecht, 2021). When employees feel their needs are being met with the proper support of their manager, it is less likely they will leave the organization (Samuel & Engelbrecht, 2021).

Many attributes can contribute to building a solid employee-manager relationship, such as effective communication, trust, mutual respect, support, and recognition (Liden et al., 2000). However, employees returning to an organization operating in an economically challenging environment may be confronted with new workplace experiences that can give rise to misunderstandings. Employee efficacy may be threatened. Such perceptions can cause a negative emotional response, and employees may feel their manager violated their social contract. Once employees feel a violation of their social contract, they will reciprocate to leave (Samuel & Engelbrecht, 2021)

Organizations must support the development of employee-manager relationships during the distressful economic environment, such as the impacts of COVID-19. Zimbabwe experienced significant economic distress between 2000 and 2008, and employees suffered (Takupiwa, 2019). Salaries were cut, employees lost their jobs, and management failed to maximize possible opportunities. In turn, employees quit. Employees who experienced a working environment fostered support and promoted a collaborative work environment increased employee satisfaction. Employees were motivated when recognized and treated with respect. In addition, employees with close relationships with their managers fought tooth and nail to reduce the macro-environmental threats threatening their company's survival. During this economic crisis in Zimbabwe, managers faced the same problems as the employees. Nevertheless, when managers could maintain a good relationship with their team, some employees continued to work and felt like company co-owners. The employees realized their work effort was for more than individual success but for the whole team. Working towards a healthy

employee/manager relationship brings unity, purpose, and collaboration toward organizational health and wealth.

Employees returning to work dealing with the psychological implications of COVID-19 need optimal support from their managers and organization. Managers play a significant role in the employee's success as they return to work. Managers who understand the organization's operating context and strategy will likely positively and psychologically create employee relationships with the company's goals. Employees' motivation increases when they psychologically trust their manager (Lees & Dhanpat, 2021). To build this trust amongst employees, managers must remain reliable, consistent, and competent about what is happening in the organization and how they can support their employees (Lees & Dhanpat, 2021).

Employees dealing with the psychological implications of COVID-19 are in a different mental space than those pre-pandemic. Increased stress levels, heightened anxiety, and a greater focus on health and safety concerns characterize this difference in mental space (Wu et al., 2020). It will take time for them to rebuild trust with their manager and team. Many employees returning to work have lost loved ones and suffer from anxiety and grief. Verdery et al. (2020) tracked the kin loss from COVID-19. Their analysis implied that if 190,000 Americans die from COVID-19, it is projected that 1.7 million people will experience the death of a grandparent, parent, spouse, or child. The WHO expects loss and suffering to continue; managers rebuilding trust must be competent in dealing with the rise of new employee behaviors and response to workplace stress. Rebuilding employee-manager trust requires the manager to foster a positive work

environment through open communication, fairness in decision-making, and consistent support (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002).

According to research, managers who foster a sense of psychological safety within their teams exhibit signs of resilience and trust (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Edmondson, 1999). These findings highlight the role of employee-manager relationships in retaining employees amidst the ongoing challenges posed by a never-ending pandemic. Literature on psychological reactions to other pandemics shows what to expect post-COVID-19, and people will likely continue to carry the health burdens of COVID-19, anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue (Batista et al., 2021). It is up to managers to increase their competence in employees' emotional states to strategically align their teams and adapt employee behaviors toward organizational objectives (Lees & Dhanpat, 2021).

Conclusion

Many employees are mentally and physically different from what they were pre-pandemic. The constant threat of the pandemic and the allostatic overload daily increased anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue. These psychological implications have a behavioral response in which people tend to feel anxious; they avoid threatening situations and experience physical symptoms such as muscle tension and pain (Lang, 1968). These unpleasant symptoms create a condition that potentially interferes with an individual's ability to function to their average capacity (Ream & Richardson, 1997), experiencing constant internal and external stress affects our overall life. One significant response to recognize is the loss of interest, trouble concentrating, and a lack of motivation caused by depression. Every employee returning to work likely experienced one of these psychological effects (if not all) to their mental health.

The global COVID-19 pandemic resulted in widespread lockdowns and forced isolation, causing individuals to face the loss of loved ones and experience overwhelming grief. As the economy reopened, employees returned to work, only to encounter managers who expected immediate productivity without considering the emotional impact of the pandemic. This led employees to quit, while others chose to stay despite the challenging circumstances. Understanding the psychological implications of COVID-19 is crucial in comprehending why employees made these decisions. Building positive and trusting relationships between managers and employees supports employee trust and motivation. In the current volatile and uncertain economic environment, organizations must acknowledge the influence of COVID-19 on employee decisions and the significance of their relationships with managers (Cook, 2021; Lees & Dhanpat, 2021).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the methodologies used for the research project, beginning with a restatement of the purpose followed by the study design, interview process, the sample, interview population, data collection, protection of human subjects, instrumentation, and an overview of the data analysis and summary.

Research Purpose

This study aimed to explore how the psychological implications of COVID-19 influenced employees to say, "I quit". Moreover, I wanted to explore how the employee-manager relationship influenced employees to stay while experiencing the pandemic's emotional impacts with the following research questions:

1. Did employees experience anxiety, depression, or emotional fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What causes these effects, and how did they influence the employees to quit?

3. How did the employee-manager relationship influence employees to stay while experiencing the emotional impacts of COVID-19?

There is extensive research on the great resignation and why over 4.4 million employees left their jobs in the second half of 2020 (Cook, 2021). At the same time, little research examined how the psychological implications influenced the employees to quit. Understanding how the psychological impact of COVID-19 influenced employees' decision to quit will provide insight into what employees were experiencing when returning to work and how this influenced their decision to leave or stay.

Study Design

The choice of a qualitative research method for this study was motivated by two factors. First, there was limited research on how the psychological implications of COVID-19 influenced employees to quit, the impact of the employee-manager relationship, and how their relationship influenced employees to stay while experiencing the emotional effects. Qualitative studies are often employed in such cases, as they allow for exploring topics that have received limited attention or need more extensive literature (Creswell, 2003). In this study, the qualitative approach examined the participants' experiences to understand the phenomena under investigation comprehensively. In addition, employing a phenomenological approach gave deep insights into the participants' unique perspectives, thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of the phenomenon under investigation. This approach is particularly valuable when studying subjective and complex phenomena that are not easily quantifiable or measurable.

Second, a qualitative approach was chosen as the definitions of anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue were based on validated measures. Participants were requested to share their experiences in their own words. Further clarity was probed and explored participants' responses to develop an emerging definition of how the psychological implications of COVID-19 influenced employees to quit. The study aimed to uncover what the employees experienced during the pandemic and describe in their words how this experience influenced them to leave their organization, specifically retail associates employed in 2020. Therefore, the qualitative research approach used was characterized as a phenomenological study, aligning with established methodologies such as those proposed by Moustakas (1994), Jeffries (2002), Creswell (2003), and Marshall

and Rossman (1999). In this context, the phenomenon under investigation was the experiences of retail associates affected by the psychological implications of COVID-19 and subsequent decisions to quit their jobs.

In this phenomenological research, the primary objectives are (a) to gain insights into employees' lived experiences, specifically regarding their experiences of anxiety, depression, or emotional fatigue and (b) to understand how these experiences influenced their decision to leave their jobs in 2020. Additionally, I aimed to explore whether the employee-manager relationship affected the employee's decision to stay despite the emotional impacts. To maintain the integrity of the phenomenological approach, the study avoided making assumptions, reduced the complexity of reality to simplistic variables, and employed instruments that could unintentionally influence the study's outcomes (Creswell, 2003; Jeffries, 2002). Therefore, interviews were conducted with retail associates employed in 2020, and the resulting data underwent a reduction process to synthesize the phenomenon's meanings and fundamental nature (Jeffries, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Interview Process

To align with the adoption of a phenomenological approach in the qualitative design of the study, 27 interview questions and probing questions were formulated to address the research objectives. The interview questions and structure, which began with an introduction, were developed as part of the process. Both multiple-choice and open-ended questions encourage respondents to provide detailed and subjective responses, allowing them to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in their own words without limiting them to predefined answer options. The development of these questions

was informed by a thorough review of relevant literature, with a specific focus on the psychological implications of COVID-19, including anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue, and their impact on employees' decisions to leave their organizations.

Additional probing questions were incorporated based on the guidance of Creswell (2003). To ensure the appropriateness of the modified questions, pilot interviews were conducted with three retail employees employed in 2020. The final set of interview questions used in the study can be found in Appendix C. Table 1 displays the link between interview questions and the research purpose, along with the sub-questions.

Table 1

Research Questions Aligned with Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
1. Did employees experience Anxiety, Depression, or emotional fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic	5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11
2. What causes these effects, and how did they influence the employees to say I quit?	8, 9, 12, 13, 14
3. How did the employee-manager relationship influence employees to stay while experiencing the emotional impacts of COVID-19?	15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25

Research Sample

The sample consisted of 21 retail sales associates in San Francisco, California. The sample included five participants identifying as male (23.8%) and 16 as female (76.1%). In terms of years of experience, six participants (28.5%) had 1-2 years of experience, three participants (14.2%) had 3-5 years of experience, and 12 participants (57.1%) had five or more years of experience in the retail industry. These demographic

details provide valuable insights into the gender distribution and experience level among the participants, which can be relevant for analyzing their perspectives and experiences within the retail industry. The retail sector experienced significant workforce reductions during COVID-19, with over 800,000 employees lost (Dorfman, 2022). The retail sector was chosen because of specific themes, industry trends, and challenges that shaped employees' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The retail sector was profoundly affected by the economic downturn caused by the pandemic, resulting in a substantial loss of jobs. The insights gained from this study population hold value and applicability to other populations, as this group underwent an intensive experience related to the study's research questions. Other industries facing similar challenges could benefit from the research findings.

Interview Population

Information about the study was shared within the professional network to facilitate its dissemination. The sampling approach used in this study was purposive, specifically employing a snowball sampling technique. Participants from the retail sector were requested to provide information regarding their industry contacts and they were subsequently informed about the study. Individuals were given the voluntary option to participate in the study. This strategy was chosen to select participants that could provide information relevant to the research question (Maxwell, 2023). The targeted participants for this research are retail sales associates.

Data Collection

The data set consisted of a purposive sample of 21 sales associates employed in the retail industry in 2020. This study used a face-to-face interview method, which

involved a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The interview

questions were designed to elicit participants' opinions and experiences (Creswell, 2018).

An email invitation was distributed to participants who had previously agreed to

participate in the one-on-one interviews for the sales associate role ($n = 21$). The email

comprised an introductory letter (Appendix A) that elucidated the research's objective

and requested the participants' involvement in the study. Furthermore, the email

contained the consent form (Appendix B). Once the participants provided their signed

consent forms, interview sessions were scheduled. The interviews were conducted face-

to-face via Zoom and consisted of 27 questions. Each interview session lasted at most 60

minutes, and the entire process was recorded to ensure optimal data collection.

Protection of Human Subjects

Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board approval was obtained on

December 20, 2022 (Appendix D). The MSOD Human Subjects Training was completed

on January 09, 2022 (Appendix E).

Before each interview, participants were provided with an introductory cover

letter (Appendix A) outlining the research's purpose and advising voluntary participation.

Informed consent was obtained from each participant before conducting the interviews. It

is important to note that participants did not receive any financial compensation or

incentives for their involvement. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study,

and data were assigned numerical identifiers to ensure anonymity. The list of names of

the participants is confidential, and the recorded face-to-face interviews were digitally

stored in an electronic password-protected file. Participants were offered the opportunity

to request a summary of the study's results upon their request.

Instrumentation

The qualitative interview guide (Appendix F) comprised 27 questions and prompts. The audio recordings of the interviews and the concurrent notes are securely stored in a password-protected file. They will be permanently deleted upon completion of the research project to ensure confidentiality and data privacy.

Data Analysis

Interview questions were organized according to their relevance to each research question. The qualitative analysis involved a comprehensive review of the interview transcripts alongside attentive listening to the recorded audio to ensure an accurate interpretation of the interviews (Emerson et al., 1995). Throughout this process, notes and memos were generated, capturing noteworthy observations and insights from the data, and ultimately identifying thematic patterns and categories. The responses from the entire participant population for each research question were synthesized based on the overall interview process. Following this, themes were identified from each interview question and each sub-question within the study. Subsequently, a thematic analysis was conducted.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the methodology employed. It reaffirmed the research purpose, provided a rationale for adopting a phenomenological qualitative research approach, and elucidated the data collection tools and procedures and the data analysis procedures employed. Chapter 4 presents the findings and results derived from the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to determine how the psychological implications of COVID-19 influenced employees to say, "I quit," and how the employee-manager relationship influences employees to stay while experiencing the pandemic's emotional impacts with the following research questions:

1. Did employees experience anxiety, depression, or emotional fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What causes these effects, and how did they influence the employees to say I quit?

3. How did the employee-manager relationship influence employees to stay while experiencing the emotional impacts of COVID-19?

The first section presents the results of 21 interviews of employees who worked in the retail industry in 2020. The second section offers data gathered by an online survey questionnaire, and the third section describes the similarities and differences of why employees either quit their job in 2020 or stayed.

Qualitative findings from the interviews provide insights into employees' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically regarding anxiety, depression, emotional fatigue, and their influence on the decision to quit. Additionally, I investigate if the psychological effects of COVID-19 played a role in employees' decisions to leave their jobs. Lastly, did the employee-manager relationship influence the employees to stay at their current organization while experiencing the emotional implications?

RQ1 asked respondents if, at any time during the pandemic, did they experience anxiety, depression, or emotional fatigue? Table 2 presents themes from the interview related to what the employees experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2

Themes and Sample Comments for RQ1

Theme	Sample Comments	*N=21*	%
The COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented stress and anxiety levels due to concerns about health, job security, financial stability, and overall uncertainty.	I was fearful I would contract the virus I was worried I would lose my job. I was having trouble paying my bills and struggling with unemployment benefits	17	81%
Changes in lifestyle, social distancing Limited ability to engage with friends and family Not able to spend time outdoors	The newness of our social reality to prevent people from contracting the virus Unable to see friends and family in person Could not spend time outdoors or in public spaces	14	67%
Disruption of daily routines Transitioned to remote work or furghload	Transitioned to remote work immediately I was furloughed for over three months	11	52%
Lack of sleep due to worry about the stability of my job	The constant worry of losing my job Uncertain my employer would stay in business	8	38%
The constant influx of news and information about the pandemic through social media and 24-hour news cycles contributed to heightened stress levels and a sense of unease	The constant news updates Social media posts about how the virus was spreading Being notified by social media of the death toll Friends posting on social media of their loved ones dying	7	33%
Lack of coping mechanisms Needed help with social support or recreational activities We were locked down and could not do anything.	I struggled to find ways to cope with my new life Felt isolated and lonely	4	19%

The most common theme identified by respondents during the interviews was the profound fear they had of contracting the COVID-19 virus (17 of 21). For instance, one respondent expressed concern:

> I was constantly worried about catching the virus and what it could mean for my health and the health of my loved ones." Another prevalent theme was the worry participants had about losing their jobs. This was exemplified by a respondent who shared, "I was constantly on edge, fearing that I would lose my job due to the impact of the pandemic. It was a constant source of stress and uncertainty.

Furthermore, financial insecurity and difficulties in managing bills and finances emerged as a significant concern. One respondent explained, "I struggled to pay my bills and keep up with my financial responsibilities. The loss of income and uncertainty about the future made it incredibly challenging to maintain stability and pay my bills."

The second most common theme identified in the interview data was the impact of changes in lifestyle, social distancing measures, limited social engagement, and reduced time spent outdoors, which resulted in heightened levels of anxiety and depression (14 of 21). For instance, one respondent expressed the emotional toll: "I was unable to see my family, and it left me feeling depressed." Another participant conveyed the overwhelming nature of the new circumstances, "The changes and all the social distancing measures were incredibly stressful and caused anxiety."

The third theme identified was the disruption of daily routines due to transitioning to remote work or being furloughed (11 of 21). Some employees experienced an immediate transition to remote work, while others were furloughed for an extended period, often lasting over three months. One respondent stated, "Working from home was incredibly stressful for me. Suddenly, my bedroom turned into my office, and there was no clear separation between work and personal life. I found it difficult to switch off and

felt like I was always on.'" Another employee shared their experience of being furloughed for an extended period, saying, "Being furloughed for three months was emotionally challenging. I went from having a daily routine and a sense of purpose to feeling uncertain and disconnected. It was tough to stay motivated and productive without the structure and interaction that work provided."

The fourth theme identified was the lack of sleep due to worry about job stability during the COVID-19 pandemic (8 of 21). Employees expressed constant concern about the possibility of losing their jobs and the uncertainty surrounding their employer's ability to stay in business. The respondents reported that the ongoing worry and fear of job insecurity resulted in emotional fatigue and significantly impacted their sleep patterns and overall well-being. Respondents expressed that the heightened stress and anxiety related to job stability during the pandemic created a cycle of sleeplessness, emotional exhaustion, and mental strain for employees. One respondent stated, "I constantly had this overwhelming fear of losing my job; not knowing what was going to happen kept me up at night." Another respondent said, "I was constantly worried about whether my position would be eliminated or if there would be layoffs. It was a constant source of anxiety and sleepless nights." Lastly, one respondent expressed their worry about whether their company would survive the pandemic: "I stayed awake at night worrying about whether my company would survive the pandemic, and the thought of losing my job due to the business shutting down added to my stress and anxiety. It was a constant battle to keep up productivity while fearing for the organization's future."

The final significant theme that emerged was the constant news updates and social media posts about the spread of the virus, along with notifications of the increasing death

toll and personal accounts shared by friends of their loved ones dying, significantly

impacting employees' well-being (7 of 21). These continuous reminders of the

pandemic's severity and the personal stories of loss caused heightened anxiety and

emotional distress. One respondent shared an example:

> Every time I saw a notification on my phone about the increasing death toll or a
> friend's post about losing a loved one, it felt like a punch to the gut. It was a
> constant reminder of the grim reality we were living in, and it took a toll on my
> mental health. The fear and sadness that came with each notification made it
> difficult to focus on anything else.

The remaining themes were mentioned six or fewer times: lack of coping mechanisms

and needing help with social support or recreational activities.

RQ2 asked what contributed to these effects and how they influenced the

employees to say "I quit". Table 3 presents the major themes of the interview findings

pertinent to the factors contributing to anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue among

employees and the reasons influencing them to quit during the COVID-19 pandemic. The

table presents six prominent themes found during the interview sessions.

Table 3

Themes and Sample Comments for RQ2

Themes	Sample Comments	*N=21*	%
Health and safety concerns of contracting the virus at work	The lack of adequate safety measures and protocols in the workplace heightened my anxiety I did not feel confident in the organization's ability to protect my health and that others The fear of contracting the virus while commuting or being close to others added to my stress	14	67%
Increased workload and job demand pressure on employees increased my anxiety and depression	The pandemic led to an overwhelming increase in workload and unrealistic expectations. I felt constant pressure to perform at a high level, even with the additional demands. The combination of increased workload and stress led to burnout and overwhelming feelings.	11	52%
Remote work challenges	Felt isolated working from home Challenging to work as a team while at home Dealing with technical issues while working remotely added to my stress levels.	8	38%
Job insecurity and financial stress	The constant fear of layoffs pushed me to the point where I could not handle it anymore I constantly worried about the stability of my job and how it would impact my finances	7	33%
Employees who quit in 2020	I did not feel valued Health and safety concerns at work fear of contracting the disease Burnout and emotionally drained Did not have childcare	5	23%
Inability to maintain a work-life balance	I struggled to find time for myself and felt overwhelmed by the demands of work and family. It was hard to keep a balance between work and personal life Did not have work boundaries at home	4	19%

As shown in Table 3, health and safety concerns and the constant fear of contracting the virus at the workplace emerged as the most significant theme (14 of 21). Employees expressed concerns regarding the lack of adequate safety measures and protocols in the workplace, which heightened their anxiety. They also lacked confidence in their organization's ability to protect their health. The fear of contracting the virus while commuting to work or being too close to others added stress. This theme underscores the importance of prioritizing employee health and safety in the workplace.

Increased workload and job demand, coupled with heightened pressure on employees, were identified as contributing factors to anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue (11 of 21). Employees described an overwhelming increase in workload and unrealistic expectations, leading to constant pressure to perform at a high level. The combination of increased workload and stress resulted in burnout and overwhelming feelings. These findings highlight the significance of managing workload and setting realistic expectations to prevent employee burnout and maintain well-being.

Remote work challenges were another significant theme (8 of 21). Employees reported feeling isolated and disconnected from their team while working from home. The lack of face-to-face interaction made collaboration difficult, and dealing with technical issues increased their stress. This theme emphasizes the need for strategies to address the challenges associated with remote work, such as fostering virtual collaboration and providing necessary technical support.

Concerns about job security due to the constant influx of news related to job losses and layoffs impacted participants (7 of 21). Employees constantly feared layoffs, which negatively affected their mental well-being. The instability of their job and the

potential impact on their finances created significant anxiety. This finding highlights the importance of transparent communication and reassurance from organizations during uncertain times to alleviate employees' job security concerns.

Employees who quit during 2020 emerged as another theme (5 of 21). The three primary reasons identified were a lack of feeling valued, health and safety concerns at work related to the fear of contracting the disease, and experiencing burnout and emotional exhaustion. For example, some employees expressed that they did not receive recognition or appreciation for their efforts during the pandemic, contributing to their decision to quit. Others mentioned feeling unsafe at work due to inadequate safety measures or insufficient precautions taken by the employer, leading to concerns about their health and well-being. Moreover, the excessive workload and increased stress levels caused by the pandemic resulted in burnout and emotional drain for some employees. Lastly, the closure of childcare facilities or limited availability of childcare services presented challenges for employees with caregiving responsibilities, further impacting their ability to continue working. These factors collectively influenced employees' decisions to leave their jobs in the retail sector during the pandemic.

The final theme was the inability to maintain a work-life balance (4 of 21). Employees described struggling to find time for themselves and feeling overwhelmed by the demands of work and family. It was reported that no boundaries between work and personal life made it challenging to prioritize their mental well-being. This theme underscores the need for organizations to promote work-life balance and provide resources or policies that support employees in managing their personal and professional responsibilities effectively.

The psychological implications of COVID-19 significantly impacted employees; however, not all individuals chose to leave their organizations in 2020. Nevertheless, organizations can leverage these insights to develop targeted interventions and strategies that prioritize employee well-being and mitigate the risk of employees feeling compelled to quit during challenging times.

RQ3 asked, "How did the employee-manager relationship influence employees to stay while experiencing the emotional impacts of COVID-19?" Table 4 presents the themes of the interview findings pertinent to the role of the employee-manager relationship in influencing the employees to stay during the pandemic. The table presents six prominent themes from data scripts recorded during the interview sessions.

Table 4

Themes and Sample Comments for RQ3

Themes	Sample Comments	*N=21*	%
Supported and understood by their manager	I feel valued and appreciated because my manager acknowledges the emotional impact of the pandemic. They regularly check in on my well-being and provide a safe space to discuss my concerns which enabled me to cope-up with the remote working stress and disruptions. They listened to my concerns and provided guidance, which helped me navigate the emotional impacts of covid-19	15	71%
Managers maintained an open and transparent communication	Received communication from the manager regularly about the organization's response to pandemic My manager was transparent about the changes at work, and work together to find solutions My manager is straightforward and honest communication made me feel more connected and committed to the organization.	10	47%
The manager was flexible to accommodate circumstances for other employees and me	The manager was flexible and accommodated my personal circumstances during the pandemic Adjusted schedules and supported healthy work-life balance The understanding and care of my manager influenced me to stay with my organization	8	38%
Recognition and appreciation enabled the employees to feel valued by their organizations for their efforts during the pandemic, and	My manager consistently recognized and appreciated my contributions, even during remote work. They acknowledged the extra effort I put in and expressed gratitude for my dedication. Feeling valued and recognized by my manager motivated me to continue working with the company.	7	33%
Emotional support and well-being initiatives helped the employees to deal with work stress and anxiety during the pandemic	The manager cared for my well-being and offered support and resources to manage my stress Encouraged self-care during work hours and created a positive work environment The emotional support provided by my manager made me feel more supported and less likely to quit	5	24%

It was found that supportive and empathetic managers influence the employees to stay, which emerged as the most significant theme (15 of 21). Regular check-ins on well-being and providing a safe space to discuss concerns helped employees cope with the stress and disruptions associated with remote working. The support and guidance provided by managers were instrumental in assisting employees in navigating the emotional impacts of COVID-19, influencing their decision to stay with the company.

Managers maintaining open and transparent communication played a significant role and were found to have a considerable part (10 of 21). Employees appreciated their managers' efforts to inform them about the company's response to the pandemic. Transparent communication about the challenges faced and collaborative problem-solving fostered a sense of connection and commitment to the organization. This theme highlights the importance of open communication in building trust and reducing uncertainty during challenging times.

Certain managers incorporated flexibility to accommodate the varying circumstances of the employees (8 of 21). Participants mentioned their managers' demonstration of flexibility by adjusting personal circumstances during the pandemic. This included allowing schedule adjustments and supporting a healthy work-life balance. The understanding and accommodation shown by managers influenced employees' decision to stay with the company, recognizing the importance of flexibility in fostering employee loyalty and retention.

During the interview session, participants reported that recognition and appreciation significantly influenced their decision to stay at their current organization (7 of 21). Participants highlighted instances where they received consistent recognition and

appreciation for their contributions, even while working remotely. For example, one employee stated, "My manager always acknowledges the extra effort I put into my work and shows genuine appreciation for my dedication. It makes me feel valued and recognized, motivating me to stay with the company." This example demonstrates how employees felt motivated to remain in their current organization when they experienced a sense of value and recognition from their managers. It underscores the importance of appreciation in boosting employee morale and fostering organizational commitment.

Finally, emotional support and well-being initiatives were influential (5 of 21). Managers encouraged self-care and promoted a positive work environment. The emotional support provided by managers made employees feel more supported and less likely to quit, underscoring the importance of emotional well-being initiatives.

Overall, the thematic analysis reveals the importance of a supportive employee-manager relationship in influencing employees to stay while experiencing the emotional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Supportive and empathetic managers, open and transparent communication, flexibility, recognition and appreciation, emotional support, and well-being initiatives are vital in fostering employee commitment and retention. These findings provide valuable insights for organizations to enhance the employee-manager relationship and create a supportive work environment, ultimately reducing the likelihood of employees quitting during times of crisis.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research study aimed to explore how the psychological impact of Covid-19 influenced employees to say, "I quit," and how the employee-manager relationship influenced them to stay. Three research questions were explored:

1. Did employees experience anxiety, depression, or emotional fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What causes these effects, and how did they influence the employees to say I quit?

3. How did the employee-manager relationship influence employees to stay while experiencing the emotional impacts of COVID-19?

The results of this study provided valuable insights into what employees were experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic and how their relationship with their managers influenced their decision to stay amid the pandemic's impact. This chapter discusses the study findings, explores its limitations, suggests recommendations for future research, and concludes with a summary of the key points.

There were several interpretations and conclusions from analyzing the data. Employees did experience anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue during the pandemic; for some, this contributed to their decision to leave their organization in 2020. In addition, the employee-manager relationship did influence some employees to stay at their organization while experiencing the emotional effects of COVID-19.

Research Question 1

To what extent did employees experience anxiety, depression, or emotional fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic? Many respondents expressed uncertainty, fear,

and worry due to the global health crisis. The findings revealed that the pandemic had

brought about significant changes in different areas of their lives, such as social isolation,

disruptions in daily routines, financial challenges, health concerns, and the constant

influx of news updates related to the virus. These findings align with the study conducted

by Brooks et al. (2020), who reported an increase in symptoms of anxiety, depression,

and emotional fatigue in response to the pandemic. They concluded that uncertainties

surrounding the virus, health concerns, social isolation, and disruptions in daily routines

have contributed to elevated levels of psychological distress. Moreover, the current

research aligns with Fiorillo and Gorwood (2020) and Holmes et al. (2020) on the

adjustments the pandemic necessitates. These studies indicated that the necessary

adaptations to pandemic-related restrictions, such as social distancing measures, remote

work or study arrangements, and limited social interactions, have posed challenges for

individuals, leading to increased stress, feelings of isolation, and reduced well-being.

This study suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted overall mental

well-being. Research conducted by Wang et al. (2020) demonstrated that the pandemic

has affected various dimensions of mental health, including emotional well-being, sleep

patterns, and overall quality of life. These studies provide evidence that the pandemic has

had a broad-reaching influence on individuals' mental well-being, highlighting the need

for attention and support in addressing the psychological effects of the crisis.

Although many of the psychological implications were revealed in previous

studies, this study reveals how the psychological implications of COVID-19 influenced

the employee's decision to say, "I quit." This study found that five of 21 respondents did

indeed say "Yes," indicating that the psychological implications of COVID-19 influenced

their decision to quit. It is interesting to note that this highlights the importance of considering the psychological effects of the pandemic on employees' decisions and suggests organizations should address these implications to promote employee well-being and retention.

Research Question 2

What contributes to these effects, and how did they influence the employees to say I quit? Various factors were identified as contributors to the psychological effects experienced by employees. These included the fear of contracting the virus at the workplace, increased workload and job demands, isolation due to remote work, and concerns about job security. These stressors cumulative impact led some individuals to quit their jobs. These findings support the work of Cullen et al. (2020) who found that fear of contracting the virus at the workplace, increased workload and job demands, and concerns about job security were significant stressors that led to employees considering or quitting their jobs. Labrague (2021) reported similar findings, highlighting the impact of psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, on job satisfaction and turnover intentions.

Additionally, employees stated that their inability to interact with colleagues significantly impacted their overall mental well-being. The absence of personal interactions and reduced team cohesion made it more challenging to cope with the challenges and stressors of work. They missed the informal interactions and the support network they had in the physical workplace. Pietrabissa (2020) investigated the psychological effects of social isolation and found reduced social interactions in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings highlight the significant

impact on mental well-being and the challenges faced due to the absence of personal interactions and reduced team cohesion.

Lastly, participants expressed challenges in finding personal time and feeling overwhelmed by the demands of both work and family responsibilities. Struggling to maintain a work-life balance was a common experience, and the lack of clear boundaries between work and personal life further exacerbated the difficulties. It can be concluded that participants found it challenging to separate work from their home environment, which overwhelmed them.

Research Question 3

How did the employee-manager relationship influence employees to stay while experiencing the emotional impacts of COVID-19? The employee-manager relationship played a crucial role in employees' decisions to stay or leave their jobs despite the emotional impacts of COVID-19. Supportive and empathetic managers who provided clear communication, flexibility, and emotional support were instrumental in retaining employees. One respondent stated, "My manager was understanding and regularly checked in on my well-being. Their support made me feel valued and motivated to continue working despite the challenges." This study suggests that employees feel valued and appreciated when their managers acknowledge the emotional impact of the pandemic. Regular check-ins on well-being and providing a safe space for discussing concerns enable employees to cope better with the stress and disruptions of remote work. Managers listening to their employees' concerns and offering guidance help them navigate the emotional impacts of COVID-19. Grimes et al. (2022) supports these findings. They looked at the role of supportive leadership during the pandemic and its impacts on employee well-being and found that leaders who demonstrated empathy

provided emotional support and actively listened to employees' concerns positively influenced employee well-being and job satisfaction.

Regular communication from managers about the organization's response to the pandemic was reported as valuable to employees. When managers were transparent about workplace changes and collaborated with employees to find solutions, it was reported that the employee felt a sense of connection and commitment to the organization. Managers' straightforward, honest communication style made employees feel more engaged and dedicated. These participant responses underscore the importance of transparent and collaborative communication from managers during times of crisis, such as the pandemic. Such communication practices enhance employee satisfaction, trust, and organizational commitment.

Participants also expressed that their manager showed flexibility and accommodated their personal circumstances during the pandemic. This included adjusting schedules and supporting a healthy work-life balance. The understanding and care demonstrated by the manager positively influenced the individual's decision to remain with the organization.

Additionally, employees experienced recognition and appreciation from their manager for their contributions, even during remote work. The manager acknowledged the extra effort put in by the individual and expressed gratitude for their dedication. Feeling valued and recognized by their manager served as a source of motivation for the individual to continue working with the company.

Lastly, participants reported experiencing care and support from their manager regarding their well-being, with the manager offering resources and assistance to manage stress. Overall, managers encouraged self-care during work hours and fostered a positive

work environment. The emotional support provided by the manager made the individual feel more supported and less likely to consider leaving their job.

It was found that the relationship between employees and managers impacted certain employees' decisions to remain employed while enduring the emotional consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most prevalent factors that motivated individuals to stay were their managers' support and understanding. Managers who maintained open and transparent communication also played a significant role. Additional factors that influenced individuals to remain employed included flexibility with their schedule that supported work-life balance and recognition from management. Overall, the employee-manager relationship played a significant role in the decision to stay but was not identified as the primary reason.

Study Limitations

In this study, certain limitations need to be acknowledged. This study suffered from a small sample size, 21 participants. This limited sample size impacts the generalizability of the findings to a larger population. Retail employees were the primary focus, and only one industry, which restricts the applicability of the results to other industries or professions.

Finally, researcher bias is a consideration. As I was an employee in the retail industry during 2020 biases could be present as personal experiences and perceptions may have influenced participant responses. However, the study's research design incorporated specific measures to address this potential limitation. Coding, data entry, data analysis, and an independent validation process were implemented to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the findings. Furthermore, multiple-choice and open-ended questions facilitated data analysis and allowed for identifying trends in the results.

Recommendations for Future Study

Conducting a replication of this study with a larger and more diverse retail sample would bring several advantages. Firstly, it would enhance the generalizability of the results by including participants from a wider range of retail sectors, such as electronics stores, fashion boutiques, or grocery chains. This broader representation would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of employees across various retail industry segments. Additionally, replicating the study across a broader range of sectors, rather than solely focusing on retail employees, would validate the findings. Considering the potential variation in experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic among different organizational sectors, the opportunity to compare data across sectors would be particularly intriguing to explore.

While the psychological effects of COVID-19 were significant, they did not directly lead to employee attrition in all cases. Some individuals could cope with the emotional impacts and maintain their job commitment, demonstrating unwavering dedication and a strong sense of responsibility. For instance, a retail employee shared, "I continued working because I genuinely cared for my clients and coworkers. I wanted to ensure their safety and well-being during these challenging times." These employees displayed remarkable resilience and determination, prioritizing the needs of others, and contributing to the overall functioning and support within the retail sector. However, for others, the psychological effects catalyzed their decision to quit. Factors such as burnout, lack of work-life balance, and limited opportunities for personal growth exacerbated by the pandemic contributed to the final decision to leave. Based on these findings, future research should explore the complex interplay between the psychological effects of COVID-19, individual coping mechanisms, and job-related factors contributing to

employee attrition. Understanding these dynamics can inform strategies and interventions to mitigate the pandemic's negative impacts on employee well-being and retention.

Summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the study's findings and presented an integrated synopsis of the first four chapters. The study results were examined to the theoretical framework, literature review, and research questions while acknowledging the study's limitations and outlining recommendations for future research.

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Appendix A: Introductory Email to Participants

Dear respected participant:

My name is Lori Fay, and I am a Master of Organizational Development Student at Pepperdine University; seeking your participation in my research thesis, which will be done under faculty supervision, Miriam Lacey, Ph.D.

I am conducting a research study to understand how the psychological implications of COVID-19 influenced employees to say I quit, and I need your help! I am seeking volunteer study participants to participate in a face-to-face interview and the option to opt into a survey questionnaire.

You have been identified as someone working in retail, particularly during 2020. I would like to invite you to participate in a 1-hour [recorded] interview in a location of your choice and the option to opt-in to a 13-survey questionnaire that will take no more than 30 minutes to complete. During the interview, we will discuss your background and experience. Some topics we will cover include how COVID-19 influenced your decision to quit or stay at your current retail job and how your relationship with your manager influenced you to stay.

If you agree to participate in the survey, you will receive an email with details on the survey within 24 hours of your face-to-face interview. You will have ten days to complete and return the survey for your data to be included in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and your identity as a participant will be protected before, during, and after the time that study data is collected. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The results of our interviews will be confidential and reported at the aggregate summary level only.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in this study, please contact me at your earliest convenience.

Lori Fay
(415) 309-2935
lori.fay@pepperdine.edu

Graduate Student, M.S. Organization Development
Pepperdine University | Graziadio Business School

Appendix B: Consent Form

IRB #: 22-08-1920

Study Title: How did the psychological implications of COVID-19 influence the employees to say I quit, and how did the employee-manager relationship influence them to stay while experiencing such emotional impacts of the pandemic?

Authorized Study Personnel
      Principal Investigator: Lori Fay | Mobile: (415) 309-2935
      Faculty Chair/Sponsor: Dr. Miriam Lacey | Mobile: (949) 322-3980

Key Information:
If you agree to participate in this study, the project will involve the following:

- Sharing your experience and how COVID-19 impacted you to stay or quit your job
- You will be asked to participate in a 30-minute individual interview via zoom or a 25-questionnaire survey
- Participation in this study is voluntary.
- There are minimal risks associated with this study.
- Your identity will be kept confidential before, during, and after the research study, and all data will only be reported at an aggregate level.
- You will not be paid for your participation.
- You will be provided with a copy of this consent form

Invitation
You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?
You are being asked to be in this study because you were employed as a sales associate within the retail industry in 2020.

What is the reason for doing this research study?
This research study aims to understand how the psychological implications of COVID-19 have influenced employees to say I quit and how the employee-manager relationships influenced the employees to stay while experiencing the emotional impacts of the pandemic.

What will be done during this research study?
You will be asked to engage in one 1:1 interview with the researcher, which will last approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted by zoom in a location of your choice. Or you will be asked to fill out a 30-minute survey. The link to this survey will be emailed and sent via email.

How will my data be used?
Data will be analyzed using qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Data will be analyzed to assign codes, reveal themes and categories, summarized, and then reported as a collection of the generative trends.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?
The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. To ensure your privacy and comfort, I recommend you use a personal email account and device for our interview and have access to a private, safe, and comfortable location where you are unlikely to be interrupted. You may request breaks at any time or withdraw your participation.

What are the possible benefits to you?
You will assist in contributing to academic research on the future of organization development. However, you may not get any direct benefit from being in this research study.

What are the possible benefits to other people?
The benefits to society may include a better understanding of how to develop organizations to structure their employee policies better and to meet employee needs.

What are the alternatives to being in this research study?
Instead of participating in this research study, you can choose not to participate.

What will be in this research study cost you?
There is no cost to you for participating in this research study.

Will you be compensated for being in this research study?
No compensation will be provided for participation in this study.

What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?
Your welfare is the primary concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

How will information about you be protected?
Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. All interview responses will be kept confidential, and only aggregated and non-identifiable data will be presented in this study or any future publication(s).

All digital recordings or print notes associated with this study will be secured and handled according to Pepperdine University's Information Security Policies. Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by securing data in password-protected files on a password-protected computer. There will be no hard copies of the data.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Pepperdine University, and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings. Still, the data will be reported as summarized data, and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

All data and notes will be destroyed within one year.

What are your rights as a research participant?
You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

Don't hesitate to contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form for study-related questions.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) by phone at (310)568-2305 or email at gpsirb@pepperdine.edu.

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or stop participating once you start?
You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw') at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or choosing to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Documentation of informed consent
You are voluntarily deciding whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered, and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Participant Feedback Survey
An online feedback survey is included to meet Pepperdine University's ongoing accreditation efforts and the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs (AAHRPP) standards.

Participant Name (Please Print): _____

Participant Signature: _____ **Date** _____

Investigator Certification:
My signature certifies that all elements of informed consent described on this consent form have been explained fully to the subject. In my judgment, the participant can give informed consent to participate in this research and is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent.

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent (Principal Investigator): _____
Date _____

Lori Fay
(415) 309-2935
lori.fay@pepperdine.edu

Graduate Student, M.S. Organization Development
Pepperdine University | Graziadio Business School

Appendix C: Survey Questionnaire

PEPPERDINE | GRAZIADIO BUSINESS SCHOOL

Study Title: How did the psychological implications of COVID-19 influence the employees to say I quit, and how did the employee-manager relationship influence them to stay while experiencing such emotional impacts of the pandemic?

Invitation

Hi.

I am Lori Fay. I am conducting a study and you are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study? You are being asked to be in this study because you were employed as a sales associate within the retail industry in 2020.

What is the reason for doing this research study? This research study aims to understand how the psychological implications of COVID-19 have influenced employees to say I quit and how the employee-manager relationships influenced the employees to stay while experiencing the emotional impacts of the pandemic.

What will be done during this research study? You will be asked to engage in one 1:1 interview with the researcher, which will last approximately 30 minutes and will be conducted by zoom in a location of your choice. Or you will be asked to fill out a 30-minute survey. The link to this survey will be emailed and sent via email.

How will my data be used? Data will be analyzed using qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Data will be analyzed to assign codes, reveal themes and categories, summarized, and then reported as a collection of the generative trends.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study? The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal.

What are the possible benefits to other people? The benefits to society may include a better understanding of how to develop organizations to structure their employee policies better and to meet employee needs.

What are the alternatives to being in this research study? Instead of participating in this research study, you can choose not to participate.

How will information about you be protected? Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. All interview responses will be kept confidential, and only aggregated and non-identifiable data will be presented in this study or any future publication(s). All digital recordings or print notes associated with this study will be secured and handled according to Pepperdine University's Information Security Policies. Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by securing data in password-protected files on a password-protected computer. There will be no hard copies of the data. The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Pepperdine University, and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings. Still, the data will be reported as summarized data, and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

All data notes in this study will be destroyed within one year

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s): Lori Fay lori.fay@pepperdine.edu

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB): Phone: 1(310)568-2305 Email: gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw') at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled. You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study.

By clicking on the I Agree button below, your consent to participate is implied. You should print a copy of this page for your records.

(1) Gender

Male
Female
Non-binary / third gender

Prefer not to say

(2) Were you a retail employee in 2020?

Yes
No

(3) How long have you been in your current position?

1 - 2 years
3 - 5 years
5 - 10+ years

(4) Have you received a positive COVID test?

Yes
No

(5) Did you experience any of the following during the COVID-19 Pandemic (select all that apply)

Emotional Fatigue
Anxiety
Depression
Loss of sleep

(6) Throughout the pandemic, do you feel the uncertainty and the adjustment you had to make to your life led to a rise in anxiety, depression, emotional fatigue, and overall mental well-being?

Yes
No
Not sure / Other

(7) At anytime during the pandemic where you isolated from your family due to mandatory lockdown and quarantine?

Yes
No

(8) Were you quarantine more than 10 days from friends and family?

Yes
No

(9) At anytime during the pandemic did you experience any of the following? (Select all that apply)

Lack of energy
Sleep loss
Lack of concentration
Motivation to keep up with daily routines

(10)   Did the daily news updates regarding the mandatory mask mandates, death tolls and the ongoing COVID restrictions cause any fear or stress?

Yes

No

Other

(11)   Did you leave your organization in 2020, if so why?

Yes

No

If so why?

(12)   Do you feel the effects of covid influenced your decision to quit?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Might or might not

Probably not

Definitely not

Doesn't apply

(13)   Did you consider resigning from your job?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Might or might not

Probably not

Definitely not

(14)   What motivated you to stay while experiencing the effects of COVID?

(select all that apply)

Job stability

Strong support from manager

Value my job and organization

Income

Other

(15)   I feel supported by my immediate manager in my efforts to adapt to

organizational changes.

Definitely not

Probably not

Might or might not

Probably yes

Definitely yes

(16)   Do you feel valued by your manager and the organization?

Definitely not
Probably not
Might or might not
Probably yes
Definitely yes

(17)   Did your manager stay in touch with you when you were laid off or

furloughed?

Yes
No
Other

(18)   Did you want to return to work after you were furloughed?

Yes
No
Other

(19)   Did you have the option to work from home?

Yes
No
Other

(20)   Was it easy to adapt to your work environment when you returned to

work?

Definitely yes
Probably yes
Might or might not
Probably not
Definitely not
N/A

(21)   My immediate manager supports my efforts to balance my work and

personal life during the COVID-19 situation.

Yes
No
Other

(22)   Does your manager create a trusting and open environment?

Definitely not
Probably not
Might or might not
Probably yes

Definitely yes

(23)	Do you feel supported by your manager?

Definitely not
Probably not
Might or might not
Probably yes
Definitely yes

(24)	Does your manager care about your well being?

Definitely not
Probably not
Might or might not
Probably yes
Definitely yes

(25)	Do you feel you had a loss of interest or trouble concentrating when you

returned to work during the pandemic?

Definitely not
Probably not
Might or might not
Probably yes
Definitely yes

(26)	Were you ready to pick up where you left off before the pandemic?

Definitely not
Probably not
Might or might not
Probably yes
Definitely yes

(27)	Is there anything you would like to add that was not asked on this survey?

Other

Appendix D: Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board

Pepperdine University
24255 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90263
TEL: 310-506-4000

NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: December 20, 2022

Protocol Investigator Name: Lori Fay

Protocol #: 22-08-1920

Project Title: How did the Psychological Implications of COVID-19 influence employees to say I quit

School: Graziadio School of Business and Management

Dear Lori Fay:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at community.pepperdine.edu/irb.

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chair

cc: Mrs. Katy Carr, Assistant Provost for Research

Appendix E: MSOD Human Subjects Training Completion Certificate

CITI
PROGRAM

Completion Date 09-Jan-2022
Expiration Date 08-Jan-2025
Record ID   46549554

This is to certify that:

Lori Fay

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification
through CME.

MSOD Human Subjects Training
(Curriculum Group)
MSOD Human Subjects Training
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Pepperdine University

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w88b093be-c53f-4ba0-912d-bc321ad51acf-46549554

Appendix F: Interview Questions

(1) Gender

Male
Female
Non-binary / third gender
Prefer not to say

(2) Were you a retail employee in 2020?

Yes
No

(3) How long have you been in your current position?

1 - 2 years
3 - 5 years
5 - 10+ years

(4) Have you received a positive COVID test?

Yes
No

(5) Did you experience any of the following during the COVID-19 Pandemic (select all that apply)

Emotional Fatigue
Anxiety
Depression
Loss of sleep

(6) Throughout the pandemic, do you feel the uncertainty and the adjustment you had to make to your life led to a rise in anxiety, depression, emotional fatigue, and overall mental well-being?

Yes
No
Not sure / Other

(7) At anytime during the pandemic where you isolated from your family due to mandatory lockdown and quarantine?

Yes
No

(8) Were you quarantine more than 10 days from friends and family?

Yes
No

(9) At anytime during the pandemic did you experience any of the following? (Select all that apply)

Lack of energy

Sleep loss

Lack of concentration

Motivation to keep up with daily routines

(10)   Did the daily news updates regarding the mandatory mask mandates, death

tolls and the ongoing COVID restrictions cause any fear or stress?

Yes

No

Other

(11)   Did you leave your organization in 2020, if so why?

Yes

No

If so why?

(12)   Do you feel the effects of covid influenced your decision to quit?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Might or might not

Probably not

Definitely not

Doesn't apply

(13)   Did you consider resigning from your job?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Might or might not

Probably not

Definitely not

(14)   What motivated you to stay while experiencing the effects of COVID?

(select all that apply)

Job stability

Strong support from manager

Value my job and organization

Income

Other

(15)   I feel supported by my immediate manager in my efforts to adapt to

organizational changes.

Definitely not

Probably not

Might or might not

Probably yes

Definitely yes

(16)   Do you feel valued by your manager and the organization?

Definitely not

Probalby not

Might or might not

Probably yes

Definitely yes

(17)   Did your manager stay in touch with you when you were laid off or

furloughed?

Yes

No

Other

(18)   Did you want to return to work after you were furloughed?

Yes

No

Other

(19)   Did you have the option to work from home?

Yes

No

Other

(20)   Was it easy to adapt to your work environment when you returned to

work?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Might or might not

Probably not

Definitely not

N/A

(21)   My immediate manager supports my efforts to balance my work and

personal life during the COVID-19 situation.

Yes

No

Other

(22)   Does your manager create a trusting and open environment?

Definitely not

Probably not

Might or might not

Probably yes

Definitely yes

(23)   Do you feel supported by your manager?

Definitely not

Probably not

Might or might not

Probably yes

Definitely yes

(24)   Does your manager care about your well being?

Definitely not

Probably not

Might or might not

Probably yes

Definitely yes

(25)   Do you feel you had a loss of interest or trouble concentrating when you

returned to work during the pandemic?

Definitely not

Probably not

Might or might not

Probably yes

Definitely yes

(26)   Were you ready to pick up where you left off before the pandemic?

Definitely not

Probably not

Might or might not

Probably yes

Definitely yes

(27)   Is there anything you would like to add that was not asked on this survey?

Other