ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Living alone and using social media technologies: The experience of Filipino older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Prolonged implementation of lockdowns during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in older adults living alone in social isolation. The purpose of the study was to describe the meaning of the experience of Filipino older adults, who are living alone and using social media technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight participants who met the inclusion criteria were interviewed using the snowball selection technique. Transcribed interviews were read while also listening to the recorded interviews and highlighting significant words, phrases, and statements. An iterative process of analysis using van Manen's phenomenological approach identified thematic structures and categories revealing life-worlds of corporeality, relationality, temporality, spatiality, and materiality. The five general essences of flourishing, communicating, struggling, journeying and empowering, described the meaning of living alone and using social media technologies among older adults during the pandemic. The experience was expressed as "flourishing despite struggling to communicate, while journeying and empowering oneself and others." Older adults in isolation struggled to communicate with others however, with social technologies opportunities were opened for them in securing needed food, safety and security, maintaining their health, and their social connectedness. Despite the physical isolation and living arrangements during the pandemic, the use of social media technologies sustained older persons' well-being.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19 pandemic, hermeneutic phenomenology, living alone, older adults, nursing and healthcare, social media technologies, van Manen

1 | INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has affected how people normally engage with one another as billions of the world's population were placed on government-mandated quarantines. In the Philippines, community quarantine refers to the restrictions of social movement within, into, or out of the area of quarantine of individuals, large groups of people, or community designed to reduce the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission during the pandemic (Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases, 2020). In observing community quarantine, interactions with friends, relatives, and acquaintances are curtailed. Among those who are severely affected by the community quarantine are the older adults who live alone.

It was revealed in the most recent census of population data in the Philippines conducted in 2015, that out of the 22,975,630 households, approximately 590,000 were one-member household composed of older adults aged 60 years and above living alone. Much of the population are residing in Luzon (51,324), with West Visayas and Central Visayas joining the list of areas with a significant number of older adults living alone at 47,707 and 45,201, respectively (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015). This living arrangement is alarming with notable effects on the health and well-being of older adults ranging from varying illnesses such as cardiac diseases and hypertension, obesity, immunocompromised conditions, anxiety, depression, and cognitive impairment to a more serious outcome like death (Arslantaş et al., 2015; Cacioppo et al., 2015; Steptoe et al., 2013).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention supported by several literatures and studies from various countries have revealed that aside from persons with existing conditions, older adults also run a higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19 (Applegate & Ouslander, 2020; Garcia et al., 2020; McMichael et al., 2020). With this information in mind, government authorities such as the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases and the Department of Health in the Philippines, have crafted policies specifically for older adults with the aim of keeping them free from the disease-causing virus (Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases, 2020). These policies include movement restrictions and community quarantines to limit the exposure of this vulnerable population. However, it is good to note that the same guidelines have led to an increasing number of socially isolated older adults complying with stay-at-home orders and "banned" visits from friends and family members. These physical and social restrictions compounded by the living arrangement of being alone experienced by this age group necessitated immediate inquiry focused on their welfare in this grueling situation.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation is especially detrimental to older adults who are living alone. Already evidenced are their battles against social isolation with feelings of loneliness (Wu, 2020). Furthermore, Stickley and Koyanagi (2016) found that with a long duration of isolation with health-related quarantines, deleterious mental health effects have increased such as depression and anxiety, poor sleep quality, and poor self-care such as personal hygiene. As social beings, older adults long for interactions and conversations and tend to get lonely and socially isolated if social interactions are limited (National Institute on Aging, 2019).

As this group of adults are the same people who have experienced deaths of loved ones (e.g., spouse or child) and are often suffering from chronic diseases, physical impairments and immobility, they are placed at a greater health risk. A study by Umberson and Karas Montez (2010) supports the finding that social relationships affect mental health, health behavior, physical health, and mortality risks. In addition, social isolation significantly increases persons' risks of premature death from all causes, and is associated with an increased likelihood of dementia (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020).

One contemporary effect of advancing technologies is the advantage of being technologically savvy. People have turned to technologies to cope with social isolation often as an outcome of limited socialization activities created by imposed lockdowns and quarantine protocols (Locsin et al., 2021). The dependency on using technologies to learn, live, and stay connected is evident throughout the COVID-19 health crisis (Koeze & Popper, 2020; Nortajuddin, 2020). Present technologies have aided individuals to maintain social support and information acquisition, breaking traditional barriers to communication (Antonucci et al., 2017). This is made possible through the use of smartphones, tablet computers, and the internet through social media platforms which are also commonly accessed by older adults (Gell et al., 2015). Although there are differing perceptions toward technology, older adults aged 65 years and older reported more positive than negative attitudes toward technology (Mitzner et al., 2010), challenging stereotypes that older adults are afraid and unwilling to use it.

To date, little is known about older adults who utilize technology and their experiences with it at this time of the pandemic. The dearth of information and the ostensible effects of isolation among older persons provided the impetus for the study. The aim of the study is to describe the meaning of the experience of older persons who were living alone and using social media technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Research design

Hermeneutic phenomenology was used to generate, analyze and interpret the narratives of older adults who were living alone and using social media technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. van Manen's (2014) hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to discover the essence of these experiences.

2.2 | Research locale and participant selection

The study was conducted in an urban region of the central Philippines that has significant numbers of older adults living alone and adept at using social media technologies. Eight participants were selected using a snowball sampling technique following the inclusion criteria: (1) adults age 60 years and older, (2) who were living alone during the community quarantine, (3) are proficient in the use of technological gadgets for communication, (4) are using social media platforms such as Facebook (FB), Twitter or Instagram, (5) able to understand and express themselves in the local language, and (6) are willing to participate and share their experiences.

2.3 | Ethical considerations

Approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Cebu Normal University Institutional Review Board (no. 563/2020-10) was secured. A signed informed consent to participate in the study

explaining the purpose, context, and focus of the study was obtained from the participants. The consent form was electronically mailed to them and they were given time to read it, and encouraged to ask questions concerning the study before the scheduled interview. The participants were assured that participation in the study was voluntary and that they can withdraw from it at any time and for any reason. In addition, they were also informed that they can answer only those questions that they felt comfortable with. They were assured that the information shared will be held in strict confidence and will be discussed only with the research team.

Interviews were carefully secured by ensuring involvement of only the interviewer and the interviewee in all data collection interviews. Moreover, notes, transcripts, and audio/video recordings were kept in a password-secure computer drive that could only be accessed by the researchers. Personal information were kept anonymous by using pseudonyms to maintain privacy and confidentiality.

2.4 | Procedure of data generation

Recruitment and selection of participants commenced following approval by the Ethics Review Committee. Data generation started after the consent was signed, the interviews were scheduled, and the choice of technology medium secured, such as using Zoom or FB Messenger chat.

The researchers conducted in-depth online interviews with a free-flowing question and answer discussion. Notes and audio–video recordings were generated to ensure richer data. The duration of the interviews was from 30 to 60 min. Transcriptions were done by the researchers as a means of psychomotor immersion in the data (through listening and note-taking, in addition to reading the transcribed data) within 3 days from the date of the interview. However, some participants were contacted further, to explain their stories, to provide clarity, and better understanding of the data.

2.5 | Data analysis and synthesis

Data analysis used a series of iterative processes distinct in the hermeneutic circle adopted in van Manen's (2014) approach to phenomenological analysis. The analysis ensued through an interpretive circle in which the researchers read and reread the text, reflectively went back and forth to the essence of "parts and wholes" of the narrative while listening to the recordings. This was critical to identify the unique meaning of words and phrases that denoted the participants' experiences. Discussions among the research team was equally imperative to discover themes in pursuit of having richer and fuller understandings of the phenomenon.

Highlighting was used in identifying meaningful statements from which thematic structures were identified corresponding to the different life-worlds (van Manen, 2014). The themes were reflective of the five life-worlds guided by how the phenomenon was experienced: (a) corporeality or lived body refers to being always "embodied" in the world. It relates to how the body is experienced within the phenomenon; (b) relationality or lived other is the experience of relating with others maintained within the interpersonal and shared space; (c) temporality or lived time refers to subjective time. The temporal dimensions of past, present, and future constitute the horizons of a person's temporal landscape; (d) spatiality or lived space refers to felt space, a category for inquiring into the ways persons experience the day-to-day affairs of existence, helping "uncover more fundamental meanings and dimensions of lived life" (van Manen, 1997, p. 116); and (e) materiality or lived things refers to how equipment, possessions, and so forth, are experienced and how these experiences of things in the world contribute to the essence of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2014)

Similar thematic structures were grouped together as thematic categories. With further data immersion of the thematic structures and categories led to profound understandings of the participants' experiences of living alone with technologies. Synthesizing these categories led to the discovery of general essences illuminating the lived experience of older adults who were living alone during the COVID-19 pandemic and using social media technologies.

While in the process of analysis and interpretation, the researchers bracketed preconceptions, those ideas, thoughts, and biases which may interfere with the rigor of analyzing and interpreting the data. These preconceptions of thoughts and biases include notions of older persons having low technological literacy, that social media may be the only means for older adults to communicate with significant others, and that their use of social media platforms are limited to only "chats" and video calls.

2.6 | Rigor of the study

Trustworthiness was ensured following the four criteria formulated by Lincoln and Guba (1986), namely: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was addressed through peer debriefing via an independent colleague (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing is "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer... for the purpose of exploring aspects of inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). This activity increases the credibility of research studies. Immersion in the data by reading and rereading the narratives and themes—from whole to parts and parts to whole, and writing and rewriting allowed for prolonged engagement with the data. This iterative process of data collection, reflection, and analysis was done to achieve the intended depth of insightful understandings. In the process of analysis, investigator triangulation was accomplished through consultations with other expert researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Member checks were beneficial to clarify the findings of the study.

Reflexivity was done by maintaining a reflective stance and employing self-reflection. Group reflection was also performed through virtual discussions among the members of the research team by examining how values and views may influence the analysis of the

data. The virtual meetings allowed researchers to bring forth different perspectives during the data interpretation, enriching the interpretations of the data.

Transferability or "fittingness" of the study was established by ensuring that there is a rich description of the findings to allow meaningful understandings of the experience with others in similar situations. Participants were chosen based on the selection criteria, particularly those who were able to articulate their experience well. Dependability was addressed by ensuring that the findings are consistent and repeatable. The findings were examined to determine their accuracy with supporting data, while confirmability was assured through audit trails, clearly illustrating how themes were discovered. Keeping an audit trail enables the revelation of data supporting transparency of the research process and ensuring consistency and neutrality (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

3 | RESULTS AND FINDINGS

3.1 | Descriptions of participants

Eight participants were selected based on the inclusion criteria set for the study. The participants were older adults ageing 62–71 years old, residing within the Central Visayas region, in the Philippines, are living alone and using social media technologies during the required community quarantines.

Pseudonyms were used throughout the study. Each participant was given a name other than his or her actual name. The first participant was Anna, a 65-year-old single woman, who has lived alone for 25 years. She started using social media platforms when she received an android device from her sister 2 years ago. Another participant was Beth who is 67 years old, single as well. She has lived alone for more than 10 years and started using social media before the pandemic started. Chris, a 70-year-old single man used social media platforms when he retired, while Dina, who is 67 years old and single, has been living alone for 16 years and used her FB account for about 4 years now. Eve, is a 67-year-old widow who has lived alone for 5 years while Fely, the sixth participant is a 62-year-old, single woman who has been using FB Messenger for the past 3 years. She has lived alone for 12 years. Greg is another single man aged 71 years. He has lived alone for more than 10 years. Lastly, Honey is a 66-year-old widow who has been living alone for 8 years, and used social media technologies for 4 years now.

3.2 | Thematic structures and thematic categories of the lived worlds

Twenty-four thematic structures were uncovered with recurring and similar structures that were grouped together from the eight interviews. These structures were comprised of seven thematic categories: choosing battles; gratitude and hopefulness rather than helplessness; managing personal connections; empowering oneself

and others; navigating through timelessness; belongingness, and thriving with technology.

3.3 | Lived body (corporeality)

Two thematic categories: *choosing battles* and *gratitude and hopefulness rather than helplessness* revealed the life-world of corporeality. *Choosing battles* was discovered from the three structures: establishing priorities, facing limitations and difficulties and physiologic frailties. Thematic structures associated with *gratitude and hopefulness rather than helplessness* include, having a positive mentality, pursuing a grateful heart, and acknowledging convenience.

3.3.1 | Choosing battles

Older adults' existence of being in the world allowed them to establish priorities and experience limitations, difficulties and physical frailties, effectively allowing them to choose their battles. Anna, Dina, and Fely expressed this well when they used social media technologies to communicate their need for food. Anna said, "*I communicate my need for food by chatting with my friends, and ordering food online.*" Other than for nourishing the body, Eve, Fely, and Dina also declared using technology to seek health information and other healthcare services. Eve said, "*I look for posts or information about health and about diseases especially when I hear about issues through TV and from friends.*" Similarly, Fely, Anna, and Dina shared that their use of FB Messenger was an avenue to get updates from the rural health unit on available health services. In the Philippines, information about vaccination schedules, monitoring of COVID-19 cases and subsequent isolation of confirmed cases are done through the rural health units.

However, for some, the use of technologies to get to social media platforms was not a "walk in the park." Greg openly expressed his difficulty in using a computer mouse, and the need for assistance to access the internet to retrieve email messages and post replies as well. He said "*I do not know how to use (a) Laptop because I'm discouraged when I try to use* [pointing to the mouse]—*what do you call this, mouse? When it does not hit anything, I lose my temper when I don't hit something that I point at, oh my god (chuckles).*"

In their use of technology, most of the participants also declared physical frailties such as eye strains and back pains which also resulted in temporarily halting and discouraging them from using the technology. Chris and Fely momentarily paused their use of these technological gadgets to relieve them of these physical concerns. When using the desktop computer for quite some time, Fely's experience was more pronounced, exclaiming, "*I feel exhausted, and my eyes hurt, and so I rest or sleep.*" However, the need to communicate, encouraged them to continue to use their smartphones and gadgets, to connect with others and to satisfy their need for communication. Older adults struggled these dauntless tasks but faced the necessity to use technology despite having little know-how, and aggravated by poor internet connectivity.

3.3.2 | Gratitude and hopefulness rather than hopelessness

Older adults, through their bodies share, feel, reveal, and conceal how they experience the world. These were supported by the participants. They remained grateful, appreciative, and full of hope amidst the difficulties and struggles of being in isolation. They focused on the brighter side of life and made the best out of their current situation by finding pleasure and joy in the use of social media technologies rather than being hopeless. Beth explained, "*I get super excited, if they say it's (internet content) for the seniors. As a senior citizen myself, I really enjoy technology, I look forward to it. What are these things (that) I'm reading or watching, what's happening?*"

Likewise, the participants emphasized that during the quarantine period and while living alone, they enjoyed reading media contents on the internet and watching video illuminations. One participant, Dina, was happy to have found information about cooking explained through FB, "*I used to cook in the past. Through Facebook I found certain recipes and I tried them out at home (smiles).*" Not only Dina found the internet helpful, but also Honey who claimed that "*Because of the social media and internet, we are enjoying (laughs).*" Their experiences revealed expressions of gratitude and appreciation because of the convenience that technology offered them. Specifically, Beth and Anna were thankful for the ability to immediately connect with their friends and family members. Beth said, "*I am grateful* [with Facebook] *that I even had more time to communicate with friends now, because I'm being 'locked' down.*" Similarly, Anna described finding it convenient to get responses or messages immediately. With the technology, she said, "*I just look at the message, and pictures and online commodities, and if I like something, I just message them and they message back almost immediately*" (see Table 1 for the thematic categories under corporeality).

3.4 | Lived self-other (relationality)

Relationality included two thematic categories illuminating the experiences of older adults: *managing connections* and *empowering oneself and others*. The thematic structures associated with *managing connections* are seeking and establishing or re-establishing connections; fostering relations; shifting of support; severing connections; and alone but not lonely. While the thematic category *empowering oneself and others* was revealed through the following thematic structures: freedom to express; being private in public situations; and going the extra mile.

3.4.1 | Managing connections

The participants were able to manage their connections with the use of technology. Connection means a state of "being related to a person, thing, or idea" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.a). The participants were able to establish connections with people they prefer and nurture formed

TABLE 1 Life worlds, thematic categories and thematic structures

Thematic categories	Thematic structures
Lived body (corporeality)	
Choosing battles	1. Establishing priorities
	2. Facing limitations and difficulties
	3. Physiologic frailties
Gratitude and hopefulness rather than helplessness	4. Having a positive mentality
	5. Pursuing a grateful heart
	6. Acknowledging convenience
Lived self-other (relationality)	
Managing connections	1. Seeking and establishing or re-establishing connections
	2. Fostering relations
	3. Shifting of support
	4. Severing connections
	5. Alone but not lonely
Empowering oneself and others	6. Freedom to express
	7. Being private in public situations
	8. Going the extra mile
Lived time (temporality)	
Navigating through timelessness	1. Knowing the now
	2. Lost time and opportunities
	3. Having more time
	4. Passing the time
	5. Recalling joyful occasions while yearning for tomorrow
Lived space (spatiality)	
Belongingness	1. Watchful vigilance
	2. Coming together like being home
Lived things (materiality)	
Thriving with technology	1. Managing complexities
	2. Enhancing competency
	3. Maintaining productivity

relationships. Connections were facilitated through social media platforms. For instance, Eve met with family and friends through FB and established connections by creating virtual groups, exclaiming that, "*My childhood classmates when I was in Elementary, I met them again here on Facebook.*" Beth and Honey shared that, conversations with friends and family about any topic of interest were made possible with technologies. Honey further explained, "*Yeah, I chat with my elementary classmates, my high school classmates, my college classmates, my friends and members of my garden club.*" Moreover, they expressed appreciation of the younger generation's willingness to teach them how to use certain online applications.

Considering their religiosity and faith, Beth and Eve also maintained their spiritual relationships with a higher Being by being able to attend "live" online religious services such as the Catholic Mass, listening to the Gospel and other inspirational messages, and by meeting other people virtually, whom they share the same religious beliefs, all through the use of social media technologies. Beth said, "*I've listened to pastors about topics related to getting to know the Lord more and how to pastor a church.*" Eve also shared the same sentiments, adding, "*I listen to livestream [Catholic] Masses.*"

Similarly, business relations were attended to with the use of technology especially for Chris who said, "*I use email and Messenger apps. Both are useful in communicating [about] business transactions too.*"

However, an unexpected consequence of the community quarantine was also experienced by some participants—a shift of personal support from friends and relations thereby causing them to sever connections with a few. Dina specifically shared her disappointment, how assistance was extended by neighbors instead of her family members toward accessing basic needs during the time of quarantine. She exclaimed, "*At first it was my family members who asked me if I needed anything, but then one after another, they became [unavailable] and 'busy] because of their work.' So, I turned to my neighbor for assistance, who gladly helped me.*"

Besides getting support from others, some participants also decided to cut ties with their social contacts by refusing to communicate with them or "unfriending" them in their social media apps. This was shared by Eve who explained about her relationships with one of her friends, "*He came on too strong. He used words that to me were not acceptable and his attitude was very belligerent. I did not connect with him anymore.*"

Nonetheless, being alone during the quarantine period did not always result in feelings of loneliness. Being lonely is described as "sadness because one has no company" (Merriam-Webster, n.d). One participant expressed that she felt fine and instead enjoyed the lockdown because she was able to connect with others using social media. Beth stated, "*I'm really fine, I enjoyed my quarantine lockdown (chuckles). Because with technology, I was able to enjoy. I enjoyed learning. It took away the emptiness.*" Another participant expressed that the use of technology filled the void of staying at home after retirement, in essence assuring and becoming the needed company. Chris added, "*The use of technology helps a lot in terms of filling the void of staying at home after retirement.*"

3.4.2 | Empowering oneself and others

In *empowering oneself and others*, the experience was associated with being able to express oneself, maintain privacy, and extend help to others. In expressing oneself, social media platforms such as FB and Instagram were used for communication. For example, Eve mentioned, "*If I see things or posts that I do not like, I immediately react. I do comment; I cannot help myself.*" While another participant shared that ideas and information are sent to friends through FB. Greg conveyed, "*I think of something about the quarantine, about the COVID situation and so forth and then do it in the Facebook, post it in the Facebook.*" However, some participants who engaged in public connectivity had maintained confidentiality through private messaging. Dina expressed that sensitive information is meant to be sent to specific receivers only, saying "*That's why I use Messenger because it's private. The only person who can read your message is the one whom you sent the message.*"

More than having the freedom of self-expression, it was in their use of technology that enabled them to convey their humanness by assisting others, their relatives, and neighbors during the pandemic. Honey recalled her experience of extending help to others as she exclaimed, "*When the lockdown started, of course my daughter would coordinate with me and would ask me for the names of our relatives who are in need. So, through me, they would send the money then I would distribute the money to people who are in need, particularly to our relatives who are in need*" (see Table 1 for thematic categories of relationality).

3.5 | Lived time (temporality)

Temporality consisted of one thematic category, *navigating through timelessness*. The thematic structures supporting this category were knowing the now, lost time and opportunities, having more time, passing time and recalling joyful occasions while yearning for tomorrow.

3.5.1 | Navigating through timelessness

Timelessness is defined as "a state of having no reference to time or not being affected by the passage of time" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.d). The findings revealed that participants were able to move through different subjective times. Despite the isolation, the participants disclosed that by using technology, they were able to navigate the "now," recall past events and desire for the future.

To know the present news and updates from friends and families, they turned to social media platforms as expressed by a participant. Fely shared, "*We talk about what's happening, who tested positive (of COVID-19) and what's new.*" However, too much time spent using the internet led to losing time and opportunities. For instance, Chris mentioned that a day can be consumed if one is glued to the internet. He said, "*It would eat up your day if you start the day with opening your Facebook. The whole day is consumed.*"

However, some of the participants disagreed, declaring that using technology while in isolation gave them more time for themselves and for

others. More opportunity and time were given to do fascinating things. Beth declared, "*This lockdown has really given me a lot of time through technology. It gave me more time to communicate with my family and friends through and with the help of technology.*" Yet, with more time, the experience of having to pass the time by doing something (Cambridge University Press, n.d.b) urged Chris to do something, recalling that FB filled the day, and that the internet kept him occupied. He said, "*I took an oath that I would never join Facebook but then because of empty, empty days to fill, I joined Facebook.*"

Inadvertently, what technology had done was permitting participants to relish past moments. Beth recalled her joyful experience while listening to contemporary music; while Honey declared that conversations facilitated reminiscing past occasions, and yearning for future encounters. Beth expressed, "*The music I used to listen to when I was younger. I got (them) all, so I really enjoyed being able to do that.*" Honey added, "*I usually talk to my family members and sometimes if my friends would call me then we can talk, reminisce*" (see Table 1 for the thematic categories).

3.6 | Lived space (spatiality)

Spatiality comprised one thematic category—*belongingness*. With belongingness came watchful vigilance and coming together like being home. It was revealed that participants felt that they belong and were being kept in sight while engaging in social media. Some stated that family members were able to watch over them through their online activities. Honey said, "*But now that I'm locked down, I'm here. My son (is) always watching my Facebook. If a picture was posted and if I attended a birthday party, I get reprimanded. (laughs) I am being monitored!*"

Interestingly, participants found a place where they can go anytime in the comfort of their homes. While in isolation, they took part in virtual communities with similar interests. Beth mentioned, "*There's a group chat with my friends when I was in grade school, group chat with friends from high school, group chat with friends from college and with other friends that I worked with as (a) nurse in the past which only happened with technology.*" These statements reflected that the participants became part of a group that can make them feel as if they are being watched over, yet, allowing them to find a place where they can come together like it was home (please see Table 1 for the thematic categories).

3.7 | Lived things (materiality)

Thriving with technology is a theme related to materiality. Thriving is described as "to grow or develop well" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.c). Such theme is associated with the following thematic structures: managing complexities, enhancing competency, and maintaining productivity. During the pandemic, while living alone, the participants had opportunities to improve themselves and thrive well by using technologies.

The participants realized that because of their advancing age using technological gadgets and learning ways that these offer always took time. For instance, Greg expressed, "*It's amazing that even a 3-year-old girl would say, 'Grandpa, you do not know?' (chuckles). She guides my hand and*

tells me 'Do it, do it this way. Okay, do you know now, do you understand?' (chuckles) and I have to say, 'Excuse me, I cannot understand that immediately.'*" Nonetheless, the user-friendly characteristics of devices encouraged continuous usage. Some participants expressed that with current online applications, devices are described to be "pretty good." Chris explained, "*My latest app is the voice clip. This is now the trending app. You simply press (the) record icon and speak and then you can be interactive. More so if the other would also reply to your voice clip.*" Furthermore, with their use of technology, the participants maintained productivity through various tasks and academic endeavors. Chris conveyed, "*I use the internet for paper presentations and speaking engagements*" (see Table 1 for the thematic categories under materiality).

3.8 | General essences of living alone while using social media technologies

In furthering immersion into the data and reflecting on the participants experiences, seven thematic categories were discovered from which five general essences were revealed, capturing the essence of the experiences of living alone and using social technologies among older persons. These general essences were *flourishing, struggling, communicating, journeying,* and *empowering* (please see Table 2).

3.9 | Flourishing

The lived experience of living alone while using social media technologies among older persons is *flourishing*. They were able to grow positively even if they were living alone, and became isolated during the imposed community quarantine. They remained optimistic and grateful with the little things that they could do using their technological gadgets. They embraced technology and gradually overcame its complexities by capacitating themselves towards using these devices and learning from the young ones.

3.10 | Struggling

Struggling is another essence of the lived experience of older adults. As human beings they were confronted with difficulties and their survival depended on challenges when using technologies particularly in meeting their biological and organic needs such as for food and maintenance of health services. Furthermore, with poor internet connection and existing physical frailties (e.g., eye strains, muscle, and skeletal aches) became hindrances to accomplishing activities of daily lining.

3.11 | Communicating

The lived experience of older adults was illuminated in communicating, giving, and receiving information through technologies, allowing them to maintain relationships with family members, friends,

TABLE 2 The essence of the lived experience of older adults living alone while using social media technologies in communication

General essence	Thematic categories in specific (lived world)	Thematic structures
Flourishing	Thriving with technology (materiality)	Managing complexities
		Enhancing competency
		Maintaining productivity
	Gratitude and hopefulness rather than helplessness (corporeality)	Having a positive mentality
		Pursuing a grateful heart
		Acknowledging convenience
Struggling	Choosing battles (corporeality)	Establishing priorities
		Facing limitations and difficulties
		Physiologic frailties
Communicating	Managing connections (relationality)	Facing limitations and difficulties
		Physiologic frailties
		Shifting of support
		Severing connections
		Alone but not lonely
	Belongingness (spatiality)	Watchful vigilance
		Coming together like being home
Journeying	Navigating through timelessness (temporality)	Knowing the now
		Lost time and opportunities
		Having more time
		Passing the time
		Recalling joyful occasions while yearning for tomorrow
Empowering	Empowering oneself and others (relationality)	Freedom to express
		Being private in public situations
		Going the extra mile

and coemployees despite the disadvantageous circumstances cause by lockdowns during the pandemic. While they were able to foster relationships with the younger generation who were their "go-to" persons when it comes to learning technology, they also communicated with others regarding their human needs, joining virtual groups which became an extension of their families and communities. Older parsons came together and subscribed to chat room conversations as if this was their usual activities. Nevertheless, while connectivity was served by technology, it also facilitated negative outcomes by their choices to sever contacts. Cutting oneself off from

people who were sources of distress and negativity became a viable option. Nonetheless, generally, by communicating through technologies, they found great comfort despite being alone.

3.12 | Journeying

Time itself became fluid. There were moments when the use of technology provided an opportunity to journey through time as they navigated the present with updates from friends and family all over the globe. At the same time, the experience took them back to the past to relive joyful occasions with music and conversations made possible in online platforms (e.g., FB, Instagram, Youtube). Lastly, being able to reach out to people resulted in a yearning for future encounters when the health situation permits.

3.13 | Empowering

Empowering is an essence of the experience manifested within the lived experience of older adults using social media technologies. To empower means "to encourage and support the ability to do something" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.e). Older adults had the ability to express publicly or in private their thoughts and values through their social media accounts given their living arrangements and use of technology for communication. Their social media activities also involved extending help to those in need at the time of the pandemic. Hence, not only were these participants empowered through their use of social media, but connecting through social media contributed to the empowerment of others as well.

Figure 1 presents the graphical illustration that captures the lived experience of older adults who were living alone and using social media technology during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4 | DISCUSSION

The lived experience of older adults living alone and their use of social media technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic were uncovered in the description of the general essences which were manifested in different life worlds. It was only when viewing interrelated essences that the meaning of the experience was revealed. Heidegger (1996) emphasized that *Dasein* implies that the human being in the world has the best knowledge of his or her own self.

Flourishing espouses the meaning of thriving with technology while remaining grateful and hopeful amidst the circumstances older adults are in. It describes the positive effects of using technology for their daily life encounters. More so, it defines their outlooks and explains how they adapt to changes and respond to difficult situations.

Philosophically, older adults are "being-in-the-world" with everyday encounters within finite time (Heidegger, 1996). Day by day they are situated in circumstances that would compel them to take certain actions as they try to make sense of the situation. Despite the
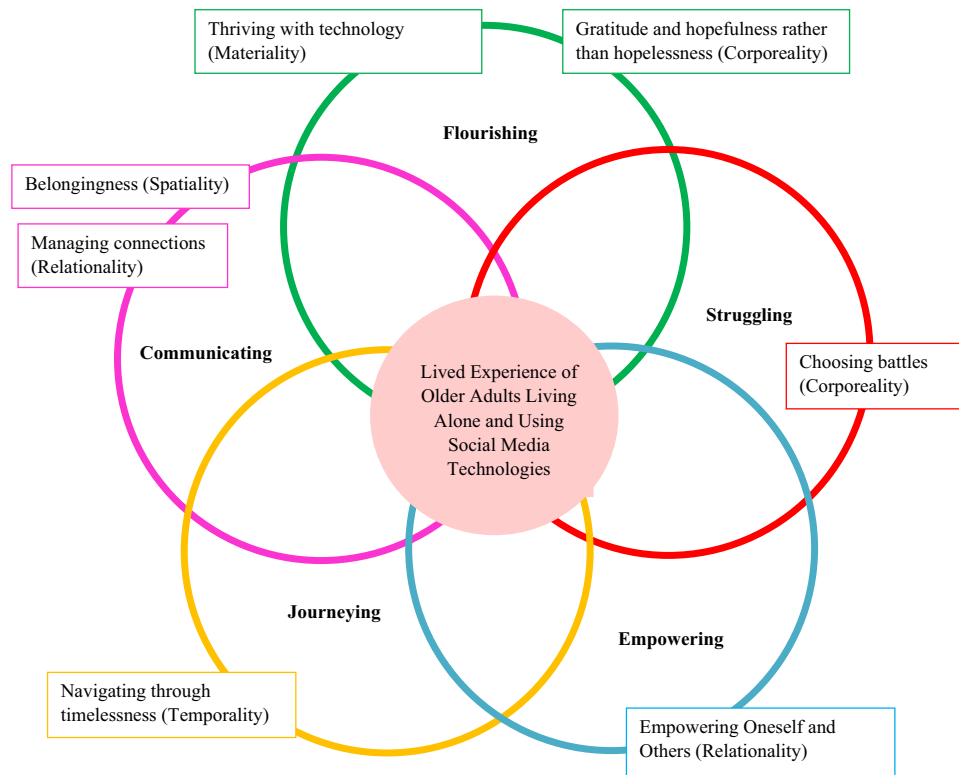
FIGURE 1 Lived experience of older adults living alone and using social media technologies

advanced age and physical limitations, older adults have experienced "fallenness," referring to the "inauthentic reality" of *Dasein* (being-there). Human beings assume certain practical ways by default. A herd mentality is borne because of social expectations and people dictating behavior. This behavior is tantamount to falling into tasks as part of one's nature (Wheeler, 2020). Embracing technology, older adults have increasingly used social networking sites (Anderson & Perrin, 2020) and developed more positive attitudes toward the use of technologies (Mitzner et al., 2010). Their use of hand-held devices and gadgets with easier navigational features facilitated their daily activities (Tyack et al., 2017).

But the "*falling*" into commonplace behavioral expectations was necessary for older adults to look into themselves and rediscover their authentic existence—the desire for growth. The intention to maintain productivity notwithstanding the imposed physical restrictions during the pandemic paved the way to for them to engage in technology use. The perceived usefulness of technology in their daily activities has encouraged them to utilize it (Braun, 2013) even in leisure (Genoe et al., 2018). With technology, older adults were able to accomplish tasks and enjoy at the same time.

The older adults' experience of being-in-the-world and using technology to survive and flourish also made struggling apparent. Struggling pertains to the meaning of the everyday battles they are facing while living alone and involves their use of technologies during the time of the forced isolation. Older adults understand how vulnerable their position is in terms of health and well-being. Priorities are set and the decision to act on certain events depends on the significance of every encounter. In this

case, the pandemic has limited their access to food, health services and other basic physiologic requirements which revealed what is of most importance to their being; and understandably, they struggle to have them. Satisfying human needs which begin from physiologic need for food, water, and shelter, to higher levels of need such as safety, security, love, belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization should be met (Thielke et al., 2012). Further, this brings to light the older adult's increasing adoption to e-health services or telehealth by demonstrating flexibility and interest in the use of technology for health-related needs (Greenwald et al., 2018). This is primarily facilitated by their perception of usefulness and ease of technology-use (Cimperman et al., 2013).

Struggles are also present in their experience with internet connectivity and use of technological devices. Apart from the perceived difficulty in manipulating these gadgets, older adults struggle with intermittent connectivity or poor connection deterring salient transactions. This problem with connectivity is particularly observed in developing countries such as the Philippines (Broom, 2020). Prolonged technology use among this older generation has also caused negative physical effects such as eye strain, pain in other body parts, and backaches (Johnson, 2020). Nonetheless, being thrown into the existing limitations and difficulties, they see the need to adapt to technology and use it to satisfy their needs and remain productive as well.

The general essence of communicating constitutes the meaning of managing connections and belongingness. Older adults experience establishing social connections while desiring for inclusion. They too are social beings who connect with people. It was their "being-with-others" and the older adults' relationality (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016) which led to

the awareness of an authentic expression of their being—the need for belonging Having been thrown back to the time of isolation and using technology made them realize the need to maintain social connections. Hence, they turned to technology to be included and to remain connected (Hill et al., 2015; Marston et al., 2016). Consequently, engaging in socializing and "surfing the net" have become common and important activities among the older adults (Gitlow, 2014). The use of social media platforms as an alternate social outlet for maintaining connectedness reduces the risk for social isolation and feelings of loneliness despite being alone (Hutto et al., 2015; Khosravi et al., 2016). Moreover, they engage with the younger generation to teach them about technology which give them the leverage to address their technological ineptitude. Intergenerational mentoring is an apparent experience which results in decreasing anxiety and enhancing the capacity and confidence of older adults in using technology (Lee & Kim, 2019).

Journeying revealed the lived experience of older adults with their subjective time. As being-in-the-world in limited time, older adults engage in technology to navigate the now and reminisce past events ensuing to a desire for what tomorrow will bring. This is manifested in seeking up-to-date e-health information regarding the pandemic (Bujnowska-Fedak & Pirogowicz, 2014). However, being drawn to the use of technologies has led to perceived lost opportunities and the need to pass time. Ironically, from this awareness, they use technologies to fill an empty day or lift their mood. The latter is particularly true as recollection of the past through songs and conversations has contributed to satisfaction in life and subjective well-being (Desmyter & De Raedt, 2012; Kazakina, 2013). Furthermore, the inquiry illuminated that the older adults look forward to upcoming events. This desire for the future is fueled by the positive effects they have from social connections (Chopik, 2016).

Empowering describes the lived experience of older adults as they utilize technology to exercise their freedom to express their opinions publicly or in private. Older adults create patterns in the everydayness of their lives which depict personal meanings and values (Parse, 1997). In this case, older adults use technology and social platforms as outlets for the expression of values and beliefs (Grieve et al., 2013) but are cautious to maintain their privacy in public domains (Xie et al., 2012). Moreover, the ability to take control or achieve something was not just limited to themselves, it extends to the people surrounding them. Older adults are at the stage of their lives where they either develop generativity and ego integrity or despair (Erikson as cited by McLeod, 2018). When they achieve the former, they begin to see themselves as part of a bigger picture; they feel a sense of duty to give back to others and help people to be more in control of their circumstances.

The general essences of the lived experience of older adults using technology during the pandemic are interconnected, suggesting that the meaning of the experience could not be merely explained independently and separately by one essence. To deeply understand the meaning of the experience, one has to see each of the essences as being significantly connected to each other.

5 | CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social media technologies afforded older people who are living alone the opportunity to enhance their confidence on the use of technology in general. The experience of living alone and coming in contact with the world through these technologies during the time of the pandemic allowed them to acknowledge the convenience of its use and maintained their productivity while staying at home rather than feeling lonely and helpless. It basically facilitated the need to maintain social connectedness and inclusivity despite distance and time boundaries. Along with the experience of struggles are the pleasures of using technology. They found meaning, joy, hope, and a sense of being at the helm of their own life's situation.

The use of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic provided recommendations pertinent to the care of older adults—to help them gain control over their personal situations and to cope with difficult circumstances while observing caution regarding excessive use. For instance, one can explore the use of social media technologies in the provision of e-health services among the older adults augmenting the existing telehealth services to encourage adoption and its use subsequently. Furthermore, future research may look into interventional models which involve the young for enhancing the older adults' technological competency. Finally, with the use of technology becoming more common among older adults, one can look into how its use can mitigate loneliness and social isolation and promote successful and healthy ageing especially for those who are living alone during this time of the pandemic. The experience of older adults living alone and using social media technologies is described as "flourishing despite struggling to communicate, while journeying and empowering oneself and others."

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data are available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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