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Karunarathne, Ishanka, Bader, Katharina orcid.org/0000-0003-2447-2187, Froese, Fabian Jintae et al. (1 more author) (2025) Consequences of geographic separation of partners during expatriation:The moderating effects of trust and virtual communication. International Business Review. 102459. ISSN 0969-5931

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2025.102459

International Business Review 34 (2025) 102459

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Business Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ibusrev

Consequences of geographic separation of partners during expatriation: The moderating effects of trust and virtual communication

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Expatriation
Expatriate partner
Geographic separation
Repatriation
Virtual communication
Attachment theory

ABSTRACT

Geographic separation from the partner is a reality for many expatriates, yet little is known about its effects on expatriates and their partners. Drawing on attachment theory, we develop a theoretical model linking the effects of geographic separation to expatriates' repatriation intentions and eventual repatriation and reunion with their partners via an increase in depressive symptoms of both expatriates and their partners. Moreover, we propose that dyadic trust and the frequency of virtual communication between expatriates and partners buffer the negative effects of geographic separation on the depressive symptoms and repatriation. Results from a multi-wave dyadic survey of 132 expatriates and their partners provide strong support for our theoretical model. Findings from a follow-up interview study with 20 expatriates and partners offer additional insights into the underlying reasons and mechanisms of separation, depression and repatriation. We discuss important implications for theory and practice.

1. Introduction

Given the high costs associated with expatriation, researchers have investigated factors that enhance or threaten expatriate success (see Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005, for a review). In addition to individual (e.g., Schuster et al., 2022; Shaffer et al., 2006) and organizational (e.g., Chen & Shaffer, 2017; Van der Laken et al., 2019) factors, prior research has noted that one of the key factors is the role of the family (Dang et al., 2022), especially the partner (Lazarova et al., 2010). Studies have illuminated the important role partners play in making international relocation decisions (Kim & Froese, 2012) and influencing expatriate outcomes, such as adjustment (Black & Stephens, 1989; Davies et al., 2015; Lazarova et al., 2010). A key takeaway is that expatriate partner adjustment and support are salient inputs for expatriate success (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005).

This line of research is mostly based on the underlying assumption that partners accompany expatriates on their assignments. However, statistics show that a large number (27%) of married and partnered expatriates go abroad alone (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2016) and maintain a long-distance relationship (LDR), mostly for reasons of dual career issues, children's educational needs, or family responsibilities at home (Crown World Mobility, 2015). Initial research indicates that the absence of the spouse increases work-place strain, which in turn reduces cross-cultural adjustment and job performance of expatriates (Takeuchi et al., 2005). Yet, more research is needed to understand the potential mechanisms that link separation to detrimental outcomes and how to mitigate such negative effects.

The aim of our study is to develop and empirically test a theoretical

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2025.102459
Received 26 August 2024; Received in revised form 6 March 2025; Accepted 10 May 2025
Available online 27 May 2025

model that explains the effects of partner location (living together or apart during expatriation) on repatriation via the intervening effects of expatriate and partner depressive symptoms. To explain potential consequences for expatriates and their partners, we use attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) as the theoretical base. Attachment theory defines attachment as a deep and enduring bond that ties individuals together. Because of this emotional bond, individuals seek proximity to the people they are attached to as a source of safety, comfort, and support (Bowlby, 1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). However, if expatriate couples do not live together, attachment theory suggests that their lack of proximity may lead to diminished mental health for both (Bishop et al., 2019), potentially influencing expatriates' decisions to repatriate. Furthermore, we consider two potential boundary conditions in these relationships that might reduce the negative effect of geographic separation—dyadic trust, which refers to the mutual trust of both, the expatriate and the partner, and the frequency of virtual communication. Understanding the effects of separation on mental health and repatriation is important as they are a critical input to expatriate success (Koveshnikov et al., 2022) and depressive symptoms are among the most prevalent health problem in the world (World Health Organiation, 2023).

Our study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, our study investigates the crossover or transmission of emotional states and well-being between expatriates and their partners. Prior research found that mental ill-health can crossover from the trailing partner to the expatriate (Reiche et al., 2023). Providing arguments based in attachment theory, our study extends this finding and suggests that expatriates' and partners' psychological states not only influence each other while they are on assignment together but also when they are not physically in the same location.

Second, by introducing attachment theory to the expatriation literature, we offer a novel theoretical perspective to better understand the influence of geographic separation on expatriation success. This extends prior research that has mainly used stress- and cross-cultural adjustment-based arguments to explain success or failure of expatriates (Takeuchi, 2010). This novel theoretical lens on attachment allows us to shift the conversation from the benefits and drawbacks of trailing families and partners to an analysis of the detrimental influence of separation from partners and explain the link between separation and the likelihood of repatriation.

Third, we extend attachment theory by investigating two boundary conditions—dyadic trust and the frequency of virtual communication—on the relationship between separation and depression that are relevant to attachment in a relationship. We argue that both dyadic trust and the frequency of virtual communication may help attenuate the negative effects of lack of physical proximity, a core pillar of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969).

The structure of the remaining paper is as follows. In the next section, we introduce attachment theory and develop our hypotheses. We then outline our research methodology and present the findings. The final section discusses the study's theoretical and managerial implications, acknowledges its limitations, and suggests avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Attachment theory

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1982) postulates that individuals have an innate desire to seek proximity to an attachment figure, particularly in turbulent times. Grounding in evolutionary theory, Bowlby (1969) argued that because humans are more or less helpless and defenseless at birth, children have a biological programming to ensure proximity to caretakers. Thus, they develop behavioral patterns to meet proximity demands, such as smiling and babbling, or crying and clinging to the parents that ensure that they stay safe and secure (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). This pattern is activated by the attachment system, which is based on an interpersonal and emotional bond that connects humans across time and space (Bowlby, 1982; Mikulincer et al., 2002). If the attachment figure is not physically present, however, the theory contends that individuals experience anxiety and distress (Bowlby, 1969).

While originally rooted in child psychology, attachment theory has also been applied to relationships in adulthood (e.g., Bishop et al., 2019; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) as well as behavior at work (Yip et al., 2018). Weiss (1982) argued that attachment theory can be easily transferred, because the bond between partners shares some similarities with that of parent and child. He proposed that not only do partners want to be together, particularly in times of stress, they also feel secure and comfortable when they are together and will experience anxiety when separated.

2.2. Attachment theory and geographic separation during expatriation

Attachment theory offers a distinct theoretical framework to understand the specific challenges of living apart from the partner (Pistole et al., 2010), as it highlights the needs of proximity to the partner as an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969). Couples who live apart do so often due to reasons such as career or education of the partner and children. However, separation threatens their attachment, and adults seek proximity to their romantic partner to ensure a sense of security and protection (Bloom, 2015). Research has shown that separated couples experience loneliness and distress when they fail to maintain the attachment-related proximity to the partner (Jackson et al., 2000). For instance, in an extensive review of the literature on partners separated because of war, Vormbrock (1993) reported that because of an alerted attachment system, extended separations are related to various depressive symptoms such as anxiety, sleeplessness, anger, depression, and agitation. Thus, partners may seek to return to their respective attachment figure to deactivate their attachment system (Bloom, 2015), as physical distance reduces the possibility of access to the partner when needed.

Given its relevance for couples living apart, attachment theory also holds great promise in the context of expatriate relationships. Building on attachment theory, we propose that, similar to other forms of LDRs, geographic separation during expatriation affects both expatriates' and their partners' depression and expatriates' initial thoughts of repatriation, culminating in actual repatriation to reunite with their partners. Additionally, we contend that the effects of geographic separation are less threatening for expatriate couples who have a strong attachment, as indicated by their dyadic trust (Clark & Lemay, 2010), and frequent virtual communication with each other (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).

2.3. Effects of geographic separation on the depression of both partners

According to attachment theory, physical proximity to loved ones is important in maintaining a stable and continuous relationship (Bowlby, 1982). The need for attachment and proximity is one of the reasons most couples decide to live together. Attachment theory proposes that in case of separation from the attachment figure, the attachment system of an individual is activated, as it is perceived as a situation of strain. Once activated, the attachment system triggers support-seeking behaviors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), leading to the heightened longing for support from and physical proximity to the attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969). If this need is not met because of continued separation, individuals experience separation distress, which is related to a greater risk of depressive symptoms. In his original work, Bowlby (1969) proposed that children go through a three-stage sequence when experiencing separation: protest, despair, and detachment. During the state of despair, children show reduced activity and apathetic behavior, such as signs of depression. Similarly, in the context of adult relationships, conceptual and empirical studies on wartime separation have confirmed that physical separation from a significant other is indeed a potent

predictor of depression (see Vormbrock, 1993, for a review).

During expatriation, expatriates relocate to another country for a limited period. As a result, expatriates and their partners often lack the safety and comfort of physical closeness and social support. Separated partners commonly suffer from the lack of personal comfort, and they miss mundane personal interactions, such as daily talks and shared laughter (Gerstel & Gross, 1984), the absence of which can increase stress and strain. Attachment theory predicts that the underlying theoretical mechanism for this reaction is the activation of the attachment system (Bowlby, 1969; Yip et al., 2018), meaning the partners will experience discomfort and miss physical closeness with each other when apart. While we cannot measure the activation of the attachment system, based on these theoretical mechanisms, we propose that negative outcomes will materialize, and expatriates' and their partners' mental health will suffer from the separation if a reunion is not immediately possible during expatriation. Therefore, separated partners are more likely than co-located partners to experience depressive symptoms, such as feelings of senselessness, as well as diminished interest and energy. We expect that both the separated expatriates and their partners experience these phenomena (Diamond et al., 2008). Thus, we propose:

Hypotheses 1a and 1b. : Geographic separation is associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms for (a) expatriates and (b) their partners.

2.4. The moderating effects of dyadic trust and virtual communication

How the effect of geographic separation unfolds is governed by variables that capture the attachment between the expatriate and the partner. One important component of attachment is the extent to which individuals feel comfortable and trust their partners (Clark & Lemay, 2010; Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Researchers have distinguished between generalized trust, which refers to "belief by a person in the integrity of another individual" (Larzelere & Huston, 1980, p.595), and dyadic trust in relationships, which is defined as "one's perception of the spouses' commitment to the relationship" (Hansen, 1985; p.263); this latter form of trust is more prevalent in relationship research.

Prior research has highlighted that dyadic trust is associated with a secure attachment style (Clymer et al., 2006; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Having a secure attachment style is important because securely attached individuals can better balance closeness and independence (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Insecure attachment and distrust, in turn, are accompanied by an uncertainty about the return of the partner and a concern that the partner is less committed to the relationship (Larzelere & Huston, 1980) and may leave the relationship (Rodriguez et al., 2015). Thus, insecurely attached individuals are also more likely to be jealous and "clingy" (Brennan & Shaver, 1995). As prior research has shown that attachment styles are somewhat stable but can change between and within partnerships (Fraley et al., 2015), our research investigates dyadic trust as a suitable indicator of attachment in the focal relationship as it is less prone to past experiences but refers to the current relationship.

Building on attachment theory, we propose that if individuals have a secure attachment to their partner, characterized by high dyadic trust, they will be less affected by geographic separation. Because both expatriates and partners most likely handle their independence better (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and are less afraid that their partner would not return or might find an alternative (Rodriguez et al., 2015), their attachment system is less likely to be activated by separation. On the contrary, if individuals have low dyadic trust toward their partner (Larzelere & Huston, 1980), they will more severely suffer mentally from separation (Brennan & Shaver, 1995) because their relationship is threatened by the absence of the partner and the attachment system will be activated. Thus, separation would result in depressive symptoms. As for Hypotheses 1a and 1b, we propose that this will hold true for both partners and the level of depression of both partners associated with their geographic separation will vary according to their respective levels of dyadic trust.

Hypotheses 2a and 2b. : The relationship between geographic separation and expatriate/partner depression is moderated by dyadic trust such that the relationship is attenuated for (a) expatriates and (b) partners with high levels of dyadic trust.

Another factor relevant for attachment when partners are separated is virtual communication. With improved virtual communication technologies and their widespread usage in social relationships (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2014), people are increasingly sharing their experiences, information, and feelings via virtual communication. For instance, partners can enjoy dinner "together" via a video conference and speak about their daily experiences or send each other emoticons via mobile phones to express their feelings toward each other. Such self-disclosure behaviors increase intimacy and attachment (Reis & Shaver, 1988). While virtual communication cannot replace physical proximity, it can, under certain conditions, improve relationship satisfaction and quality (Luo & Tuney, 2015) and, therefore, the attachment of partners. Research on interpersonal interdependence in LDRs argues that couples can engage in transformational processes and thus alter their means for maintaining closeness and attachment by adapting their behavior and transferring their relationship to a virtual communication context (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). If couples in LDRs actively engage in such behavior, they can maintain similar or even better levels of relationship stability compared to couples who live together (Stafford, 2010).

While communication is beneficial for couples regardless of their proximity, we argue that virtual communication is particularly important for geographically separated couples. First, due to the absence of the partner, their attachment system will be strongly activated. While expatriates living with a partner have opportunities to discuss serious issues, such as emotional distress and relationship anxieties, with their partners in person, geographically separated couples do not have this time together, and they have to resolve such issues via virtual communication (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Thus, virtual communication plays a more important role in securing the attachment of geographically separated couples. This leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypotheses 3a and 3b. : The relationship between geographic separation and (a) expatriate and (b) partner depression is moderated by frequency of virtual communication such that the relationship is attenuated for expatriates and partners with high levels of virtual communication frequency.

2.5. Depression, repatriation intentions, and repatriation

Based on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), we expect that expatriates who show higher levels of depression will be more likely to think about repatriation. Depression is indicative of an intense and stressful situation (Manning et al., 1989), and attachment theory predicts that the intensity of such a situation is likely to result in a heightened need to be close to the partner. Thus, we anticipate that expatriates who experience depressive symptoms will start fantasizing about reuniting with their partners and will develop intentions to repatriate (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Indeed, related expatriate research has acknowledged that expatriates' poor mental health has a significant influence on their repatriation intentions (e.g., Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005).

Recognizing that the experience of one partner crosses over to the other (Reiche et al., 2023; Takeuchi et al., 2002), we also anticipate that the partners' level of depression will affect expatriates' intention to repatriate. Just as positive emotions and affect can cross over to their partner, negative affect and strain can also be transmitted to their partners and influence their experience (Reiche et al., 2023). On the one hand, the negative mood of the partners can cross over and directly affect expatriates. On the other hand, expatriates who are geographically separated from their partners may be stressed by interacting with

the depressed partner or feel guilty about not being physically available to help their partner when they are in psychological need. Given that expatriates need much energy and resources to cope with their new cultural and work environments (Lazarova et al., 2010), having to comfort and solace depressed partners and fight the guilt of not being physically present to do so requires extra resources. As resources are limited, expatriates might struggle to provide sufficient energy to meet both their partners' psychological needs and their work demands. As this intense situation activates the attachment system, expatriates will seek proximity to their loved ones (Bowlby, 1969). Therefore, from an attachment perspective, above and beyond the wish to support the partner personally, thinking about returning home to be in proximity to the partner becomes a desirable option to fulfill the expatriate's needs for attachment and closeness. Consequently, the expatriate's intentions to repatriate will increase. Formally, we propose

Hypotheses 4a and 4b. : The depression of (a) expatriates and (b) their partners are positively associated to expatriates' intentions to repatriate.

Corroborated by an extensive body of research on employee turnover, turnover intentions are the most potent predictor of actual turnover (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 2007). Therefore, we expect expatriates' repatriation intentions will be directly associated with actual repatriation. From an attachment point of view (Bowlby, 1982), individuals want to minimize the unpleasantness of separation. For expatriates who are geographically separated from their partners, thoughts and plans to repatriate are a preliminary mechanism for such relief. However, this is only a first step because the unpleasantness of separation only stops if they reunite with the partner by returning home. Prior research (e.g., Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010) has found that intention to repatriate is a primary determinant of actual repatriation.

Hypothesis 5. : Expatriates' intentions to repatriate are positively associated with actual repatriation.

2.6. Moderated sequential mediation

Based on the theoretical arguments provided by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and integrating all proposed hypotheses, we expect geographic separation to be linked with repatriation through increased depression of the expatriate and the partner, as well as the expatriate's intentions to repatriate (serial mediation). Attachment theory suggests that if individuals are separated from their partners, the attachment system is activated and only a reunion with the partner can provide relief from the pain. Therefore, we propose that the depressive symptoms of both partners' and expatriates' intentions to repatriate provide sequential links between separation and actual repatriation, as negative affective states relate to intentions to quit (Fisher, 2002) and intentions are strongly linked to actual behavior (Podsakoff et al., 2007). Moreover, according to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1982), individuals with high trust have a secure attachment style and tend to be balanced in their LDRs. Thus, it is plausible that trust moderates the indirect effect of depression and intention to repatriate on the expatriate's actual repatriation. Based on this rationale, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 6a and 6b. : The dyadic trust of (a) expatriates and (b) partners moderates the indirect effect of partner location on repatriation through expatriates' and partners' depression and expatriates' intention to repatriate such that this relationship is stronger for expatriates and partners with low trust.

In a similar vein, we propose that these sequential mediating effects are also moderated by virtual communication frequency. Expatriates who live apart from their partner and who do not engage in frequent virtual communication have less opportunities to maintain their relationship (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Frequent virtual communication can buffer the negative consequences of geographic separation and alter the effect of separation on psychological, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. Therefore, we argue that communication frequency moderates the indirect effect of geographical separation on actual repatriation via the depression of expatriates and partners, as well as expatriates' intentions to repatriate. We expect that the indirect effects are more severe when communication between expatriates and partners is infrequent. Based on this rationale, we propose:

Hypotheses 7a and 7b. : Communication frequency moderates the indirect effects of geographic separation on repatriation through (a) expatriates' and (b) partners' depression and expatriates' intentions to repatriate such that this relationship is weaker at high levels of virtual communication frequency.

Fig. 1 presents our conceptual model and visualizes the hypothesized relationships.

3. Methods

We adopted a mixed methods research design that includes both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). We adopted an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Garrett, 2008), first conducting a qualitative study followed by a qualitative study. To be more specific, we initially collected survey data from 132 expatriate-partner dyads to test our hypotheses and then conducted a qualitative follow-up study with 20 survey participants to increase our understanding of the survey results.

3.1. Procedures and sample of the quantitative study

To test our research model, we collected data from 132 Sri Lankan expatriate–partner dyads at three time points. We chose to investigate expatriates from Sri Lanka because it is a collectivistic country (Hofstede et al., 2010) where the family and relationships are important anchors of the social structure. Therefore, the participants in our study represent a fruitful testing ground to examine the effects of geographic separation from an attachment perspective.

We selected participants based on four criteria. First, to be comparable to other expatriation studies, we surveyed only skilled professional expatriates who intended to work for a limited time in their host country. We identified potential respondents through the member directories of professional associations, such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka. Second, to control for host country effects (and for feasibility reasons), we only included expatriates working and living in Australia and the Middle East, which are among the most popular destinations for Sri Lankan expatriates and other South Asian expatriates. Third, we restricted the sample to those who were married or in a legally committed relationship. Finally, we did not consider short-term assignees, business travelers or immigrants.

Based on the inclusion criteria described above, we contacted 1,643 expatriates via email and social media (LinkedIn and Facebook, which are commonly used by Sri Lankans) and requested their participation in an online survey. The expatriates were requested to forward survey invitations to their partners or provide us with the partners' contact details. To match the surveys of expatriates and their partners, all participants were asked to create an identification code. Both surveys were available in English and Sinhala, an official language of Sri Lanka. We used the back-translation method to ensure translation equivalence.

At Time 1 (T1), we received complete surveys from 242 expatriate–partner dyads. After a time-lag of approximately three months, we collected data from 146 dyads following the same procedure as at T1, which yielded a retention rate of 60%. One year after completing the T2 survey, we were able to identify the location of 132 expatriates via email and social media, which corresponds to a retention rate of 90%. At T3, 25 respondents had repatriated, yielding a repatriation rate of 18.9%, which is comparable to prior studies (e.g., 19%; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010).

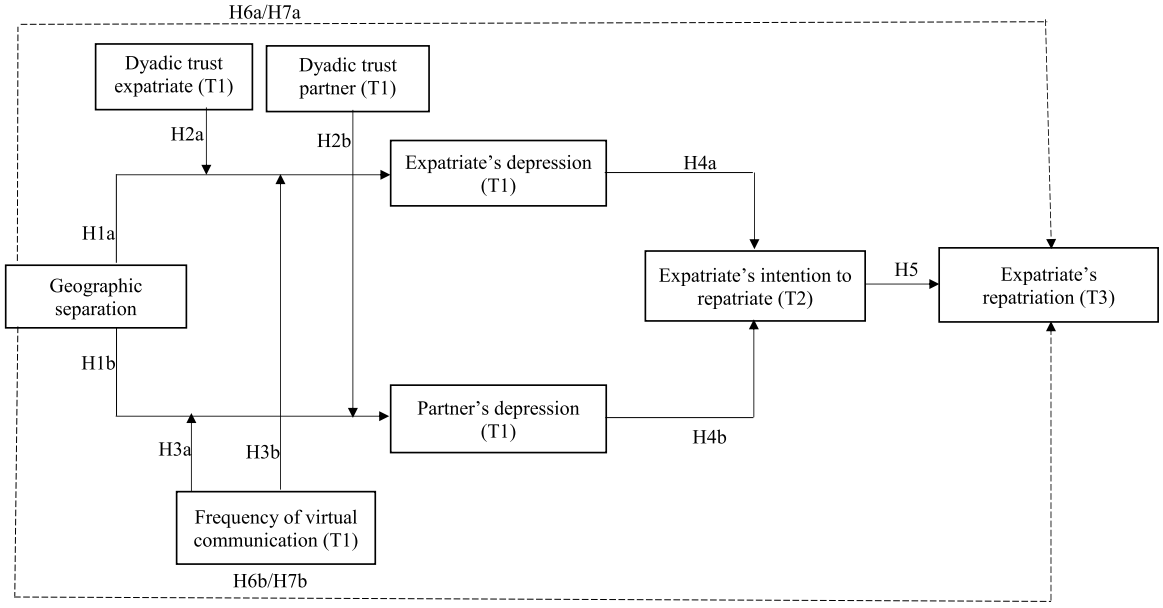

Fig. 1. Conceptual Model. — shows the indirect paths.

Among the expatriate couples, 61.4% were living apart, and 68.9% of the expatriates were working in the Middle East. The average length of marriage/permanent relationship was 8.14 (SD = 3.96) years and 50.8% of expatriates were between 31 and 40 years old. Reflecting a significant gender imbalance in the sample, 98.5% of the expatriates were male. Being mindful of this limitation, we discuss the implications of potential gender differences in more detail in the limitations section. Most of the expatriates (80.3%) were self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), i.e. those who found employment abroad on their own. Of all expatriates, 3.8% had completed a doctoral degree, 7.6% had completed a master's degree, 46.2% had completed a bachelor's degree, 16.7% had professional qualifications, and 25.8% had vocational training. Of the partner respondents, 44.1% were between 31 and 40 years old, 62.94% had children, and 74.1% were employed. Of all expatriate partners, 43.4% had completed a bachelor's degree, 35.6% had obtained professional qualifications, 5.3% had completed a master's degree, and 2.3% had completed a doctoral degree. Of the expatriate respondents, 14.4% visited Sri Lanka less than once a year, 75% once a year, 9.8% several times per year.

Unless otherwise noted, we assessed all variables on interval scales ranging from 1 to 6. We opted for a six-point scale (instead of an odd-numbered response format) that forces respondents to decide because Sri Lankans, like many other Asians, prefer to choose the middle point (Chen et al., 1995). We measured geographic separation, depression, the frequency of virtual communication, and all control variables at T1; intentions to repatriate at T2; and actual repatriation at T3.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Geographic separation

Was measured asking expatriates "Where does your partner live?" Answer options were dummy coded as 0 = "lives with me abroad" and 1 = "lives apart." To cross-validate the geographic separation, we asked the same question in the partners' surveys: "Where do you live now?" All responses were identical between expatriates and their partners.

3.2.2. Depression

Was measured using the eight-item scale used by Manning et al. (1989). The anchor points of the scale used to measure depression covered frequencies from 1 = *never* to 6 = *every day*. A sample item is "How often do you feel depressed or remorseful?" We deleted one item "Think about suicide" due to low factor loading, suggesting that clinical depression was not a common issue among respondents. Both expatriates and partners responded to the same items. Cronbach's alphas for expatriate and partner depression were.94 and.93, respectively.

3.2.3. Dyadic trust

Was measured using the five-item scale developed by Larzelere and Huston (1980). A sample item is "My spouse/partner is perfectly honest and truthful with me." Both expatriates and partners were presented the same items, and an individual value was calculated for each partner. Cronbach's alphas were.91 for expatriates and.86 for partners.

3.2.4. Frequency of virtual communication

Was measured adopting O'Leary et al.'s (2014) scale. We asked expatriates' partners how often they communicated with their expatriate partners using four different communication sources: phone, video conferencing (e.g., Skype), social media (e.g., Twitter & Facebook), and instant message, chat, or text. The anchor points of the response scale ranged from 1 = *never* to 6 = *more than 5 times a day*. In line with prior research (Cigrang et al., 2014) we measured virtual communication frequency as a formative construct, and thus, excluded it from CFA analysis.

3.2.5. Intentions to repatriate

Was measured using the three-item scale from Tharenou and Caulfield (2010). A sample item is "I plan to return to Sri Lanka in the near future." The response scale was from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. Cronbach's alpha was.86.

3.2.6. Repatriation

Was measured by asking expatriates to report their current living locations approximately one year after the initial survey. Repatriation to the home country was coded as 1 and staying in the host country was coded as 0.

3.2.7. Control variables

We controlled for several variables that have been shown to influence expatriate work outcomes. Based on related research (e.g., Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Takeuchi et al., 2002), we controlled for expatriate cross-cultural adjustment due to its possible impact on expatriate intentions to repatriate and actual repatriation. We measured

cross-cultural adjustment using Black and Stephens' (1989) 14-item scale. A sample item was on how adjusted the expatriates were to "living conditions in general." Considering prior research (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010), we controlled for length of time in the host country (response scale ranges from under a year = 1 to more than 12 years = 5), host country location (Australia = 0, Middle East = 1) and length of marriage (in years). We controlled for expatriate type (SIEs = 0, organizational expatriates (OEs) = 1), as prior research has shown that SIEs differ from OEs in work-related outcomes (e.g., Froese & Peltokorpi, 2013). We did not control for gender because 98.5% of the expatriates were male.

3.3. Procedures and sample of the qualitative study

We conducted a follow-up interview study to deepen our insights about why partners live apart, reasons for depressive symptoms, and reasons for the decision to repatriate. The interview questions were developed based on the results of the quantitative study as we were interested in the underlying mechanisms of the effects in our model. To attain these objectives, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 individuals (17 expatriates and three partners). To recruit them, we contacted survey participants who had participated in all three surveys by asking for their participation in an interview. Although 27 participants initially agreed to be interviewed, we were able to interview only 20 because of scheduling conflicts. Accommodating the preferences of the participants, the majority (15) of interviews were conducted through video conferencing and five interviews were conducted in-person in Sri Lanka. Interviews lasted from about 25 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded with the prior consent of the interview participants and then transcribed. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, we used pseudonyms when referring to participants. Table 1 summarizes respondent characteristics.

As recommended by Neale (2016), we conducted the analysis through an iterative process of reading, coding, and interpreting the transcribed interviews. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was carried out to code and categorize data. We used our theoretical lens and findings from the quantitative study, as well as existing literature of expatriation motivation (e.g., Doherty et al., 2011; Froese, 2012), expatriate mental health (Koveshnikov et al., 2022), and reasons for repatriation (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010) to analyze the data. From there, we developed our codes combining deductive (theory-led) and inductive (data-led) approaches and moved to the next phase of identifying second-order codes. Example quotes and themes are presented in Table 3.

4. Findings

4.1. Survey results

Before testing our hypotheses, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses to validate the multi-item scales and provide a descriptive overview. We included depression and dyadic trust in both expatriate and partner surveys and used the same scale across both surveys. Due to the identical nature of items across partners and following the steps given by Kenny et al. (2006), we imposed corresponding factors to be equal across both partners and correlated item-specific errors. The results of a five-factor model (expatriate depressive symptoms, partner depressive symptoms, expatriate dyadic trust, partner dyadic trust, expatriate intention to repatriate) showed a reasonable fit to the data ($\chi 2$ [366] = 581.27; p <.001; CMIN/df = 1.59; CFI =.93; TLI =.92; RMSEA =.07) (Byrne, 2016). We assessed discriminant validity by comparing models with different factor structures. The complete five-factor model fit the data significantly better than any lower factor models. Furthermore, all items significantly loaded on their respective factor with standardized loadings higher than 0.50, and the average variance extracted was greater than 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), thus demonstrating convergent validity. The means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alphas, and intercorrelations among variables are reported in Table 2.

4.1.1. Hypotheses testing

To test the hypotheses, we ran path analyses with AMOS and Hayes' (2018) PROCESS with a 5,000-bootstrap sample. We mean-centered the moderating variables. The hypothesized model provided a good fit to the data ($\chi 2$ [26] = 37.18, p =.07, CMIN/df = 1.43, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.06). As recommended (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016), we first ran the model with and without control variables. The results were essentially the same, and we report the results with control variables (see Fig. 2).

H1a and 1b proposed positive relationships between geographic separation and (a) the expatriate's and (b) the partner's depression. Both hypotheses were supported, as living apart is positively related to the expatriate's depression (β = 0.50, p <.001, 95% CI [.466,.864]) and partner's depression (β = 0.42, p <.001, 95% CI [.313, 691]).

In H2a and 2b, we postulated that dyadic trust would weaken the effect of geographic separation on the depression of (a) expatriates and

Table 1
Participants in the qualitative study.

#	Expat/partner	ID Code	Expat Category	Age	Expat Location	Expat Job Title	Gender	Children	Partner employment
1	Expat	SW	OE	37	Qatar	Senior Audit Supervisor	Male	02	Part-time employed
2	Expat	SKT	OE	36	Qatar	HR and Admin Manager	Male	01	Self-Employed
3	Expat	DN	OE	40	Qatar	Bank Manager	Male	01	Employed
4	Expat	TH	OE	37	Jordan	Lean Officer	Female	01	Employed
5	Expat	RP	SIE	40	UAE	Accountant	Male	02	Employed
6	Partner	BN	SIE	36	UAE	Accountant	Female	02	Employed
7	Expat	RS	SIE	46	Qatar	Civil Engineer	Male	01	Employed
8	Expat	SJ	SIE	42	Qatar	Finance Manager	Male	02	Not employed
9	Expat	SS	SIE	41	UAE	Technician	Male	02	Employed
10	Partner	LM	SIE	39	Qatar	Civil Engineer	Female	01	Employed
11	Expat	JW	SIE	35	Australia	Aerospace Engineer	Male	02	Employed
12	Expat	KJ	SIE	40+	UAE	Bank Manager	Male	03	Employed
13	Expat	AW	SIE	40	Qatar	Accountant	Male	01	Unemployed
14	Expat	TS	SIE	33	Qatar	Quality Supervisor	Male	01	Employed
15	Partner	MP	SIE	47	Saudi Arabia	Mechanical Engineer	Female	03	Self-employed
16	Expat	LK	SIE	38	UAE	Partnership Marketing Manager	Male	02	Not employed
17	Expat	IS	SIE	39	Australia	Engineer	Male	02	Part-time
18	Expat	HR	SIE	36	Oman	Senior Finance Controller	Male	00	Employed
19	Expat	AP	SIE	44	UAE	Chief Technical Officer	Male	02	Not employed
20	Expat	UD	SIE	38	Australia	(not mentioned)	Male	00	Employed (part-time)

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, Internal Consistency Reliabilities, and Correlation.

	Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Expatriate adjustment	4.00	0.47												
2	Length in host country	2.11	0.71	-.08											
3	Host country location	0.69	0.46	-.28**	-.25**										
4	SIEs/OEs	0.80	0.40	-.01	.05	-.09									
5	Length of marriage	8.14	3.96	-.08	-.14	.20*	-.02								
6	Geographic separation[a]	0.61	0.49	-.21*	-.25**	.41**	.16	.03							
7	Depression-expatriates	3.16	0.67	-.24**	-.25**	.46**	.18*	.28*	.50**	(.94)					
8	Depression-partner	3.22	0.59	-.24**	-.17	.39**	.13	.25*	.41**	.70**	(.93)				
9	Dyadic trust-expatriate	4.22	0.79	.28**	.04	-.30**	-.11	-.14	-.23**	-.45**	-.34**	(.91)			
10	Dyadic trust-partner	4.31	0.72	.12	.09	-.21*	-.08	-.11	-.29**	-.44**	-.51**	.44**	(.86)		
11	Frequency of virtual communication	3.11	0.87	.12	-.17*	.03	-.07	-.17	.22*	-.16	-.27**	.21*	.31**		
12	Intention to repatriate	3.64	0.80	-.26**	-.29**	.43**	.05	.27*	.38**	.58**	.49**	-.35**	-.36**	-.13	(.86)
13	Repatriation	0.19	0.39	-.25**	-.05	.24**	.14	.04	.30**	.49**	.48**	-.24**	-.28**	-.18*	.48**

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Notes. n=132; a 0 = live together, 1 = live apart; *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$; *M* = means; *SD* = standard deviations.
Internal consistency reliabilities are in parentheses on the diagonal

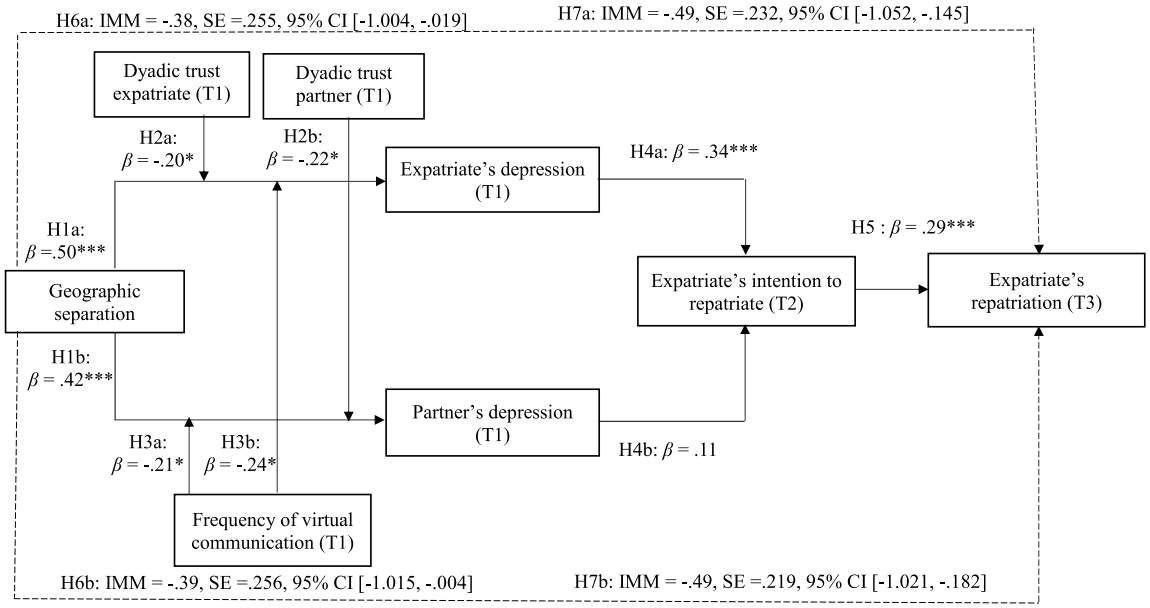

Fig. 2. Estimated Paths of Conceptual Model. *Note:* *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$, β = standardized regression coefficients. H6a/b and H7a/b refer to sequential moderation effect.
IMM = index of moderated mediation. SE= standard error.

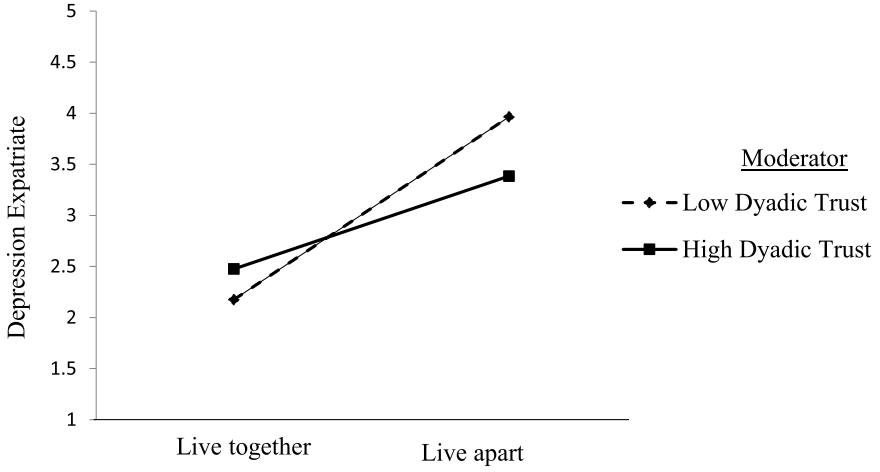

Fig. 3. Interaction Plot of Geographic Separation and Dyadic Trust on Expatriate's Depression.

(b) their partners. As predicted, expatriate dyadic trust moderated the relationship between geographic separation and the expatriate's depression ($\beta = -.20$, $p = .032$, 95% CI [−418, −.001]), and partner dyadic trust moderated the relationship between geographic separation and partner's depression ($\beta = -.22$, $p = .037$, 95% [−.441, −.016]). Thus, H2a and 2b were supported. Following Aiken and West's (1991) procedure, we created interaction plots (Fig. 3 & 4). The plots indicate that dyadic trust weakens the effect of geographic separation (flatter lines). In addition, we conducted a simple slope test to further understand the interaction effects. We investigated the existence of moderation at two levels of dyadic trust, i.e., 1 SD above the mean, and 1 SD below the mean. The results of the simple slope analysis indicated that the relationship between geographic separation and expatriate depression was significant at both levels of the moderator; however, it was stronger at low levels of expatriate dyadic trust: (+1 SD: $\beta = .40$, SE =.131, $p = .002$; 95% CI [.142,.659]; −1 SD: $\beta = .77$, SE =.143, $p < .001$; 95% CI [.491, 1.056]). In contrast, the simple slope test results showed that the relationship between geographic separation and partner depression was significant and positive only at a low level of partner dyadic trust: −1 SD: $\beta = .56$, SE =.139, $p < .001$; 95% CI [.283,.832]), while the relationship was not significant at a high level of partner dyadic trust: +1 SD: $\beta = .19$, SE =.119, $p = .121$; 95% CI [−.05,.422].

H3a and 3b predicted a moderating effect of virtual communication frequency on the relationship between geographic separation and the (a) expatriate's and (b) partner's levels of depression. As expected, virtual communication frequency between expatriates and partners significantly moderated the relationships between geographic separation and the expatriate's depression ($\beta = -.21$, $p = .038$, 95% [−415, −.029]) as well as the partner's depression ($\beta = -.24$, $p = .029$, 95% [−.397, −.016]). Thus, H3a and 3b were supported. Again, to interpret the moderating effects, we created interaction plots (Fig. 5 & 6). The plots indicate that the influence of geographic separation on depression was weaker for expatriate couples who communicated virtually more frequently. The results of the simple slope analysis indicated that the relationship between geographic separation and expatriate depression was significant at both high and low levels of the moderator, however, it was stronger at low levels of virtual communication frequency: (+1 SD, $\beta = .49$, SE=.144, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.201,.77]; −1 SD, $\beta = 1.01$, SE =.134 $p < .001$, 95% CI [.748, 1.227]). In contrast, the results of simple slope analysis indicated that the effect of geographic separation on partner depression was significant at both high and low levels of the moderator; however, it was stronger at low levels of virtual communication frequency: (+1 SD, $\beta = .30$, SE =.129, $p = .022$, 95% CI [.045,.554]; −1 SD, $\beta = .85$, se =.119, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.618, 1.091]).

H4a and 4b posited that the (a) expatriate's and (b) partner's depression is positively related to the expatriate's intentions to repatriate. The relationship between expatriates' depression and intentions to repatriate ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$, 95% [.146,.665]) was significant and positive. Thus, H4a was substantiated. However, the effect of partner depression on the expatriates' intentions to repatriate ($\beta = .11$, $p = .252$, 95% [−.103,.405]) was not statistically significant. Thus, H4b did not receive support. As predicted by H5, the expatriates' intentions to repatriate was positively related to actual repatriation ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$, 95% [.070, 233]).

H6a and 6b proposed that the indirect effect of geographic separation on actual repatriation through both the (a) expatriate's and (b) partner's depression and the expatriate's intentions to repatriate would be moderated by dyadic trust. To test these moderated sequential mediation effects, we used Hayes' (2018) PROCESS with a 5,000-sample, bias-corrected bootstrap procedure (conditional process analysis). The results showed that the moderated (expatriate dyadic trust) sequential mediation effect from geographic separation to repatriation through the expatriate's depression and intentions to repatriate was significant, as the conditional indirect effect did not contain zero (*index of moderated mediation* = −0.38, Boot SE =.255; 95% Boot CI [−1.004, −.019]). Moreover, the conditional indirect effect was positive and significant at −1 SD (*indirect effect* =1.26, Boot SE =.499; 95% Boot CI [.604, 2.513]) and at +1 SD of dyadic trust (*indirect effect* =.57, Boot SE =.293; 95% Boot CI [.116, 1.273]). The slopes were less positive when dyadic trust changed from low to high, suggesting a buffering effect of dyadic trust. Further, the results showed that the moderated (partner dyadic trust) sequential mediation effect from geographic separation to repatriation through partner depression and intention to repatriate was significant (*index of moderated mediation* = −.39, Boot SE =.256; 95% Boot CI [−1.015, −.004]). The conditional indirect effect was positive and significant only at −1 SD (*indirect effect* =.90, Boot SE =.409; 95% CI [.353, 1.987]), but it was not significant at +1 SD of dyadic trust (*indirect effect* =.24, Boot SE =.222; 95% Boot CI [−.135,.745]). Thus, H6a and b were supported.

We followed the same procedure to analyze the moderating effect of virtual communication frequency on the association of geographic separation and actual repatriation through (a) expatriates' and (b) partners' depression and expatriates' intentions to repatriate. The results showed that the sequential mediation effect from geographic separation to repatriation through the expatriate's depression and intentions to repatriate was significant, as the conditional indirect effect did not contain zero (*index of moderated mediation* = −.49, Boot SE =.232; 95% Boot CI [−1.052, −.145]). Moreover, the conditional

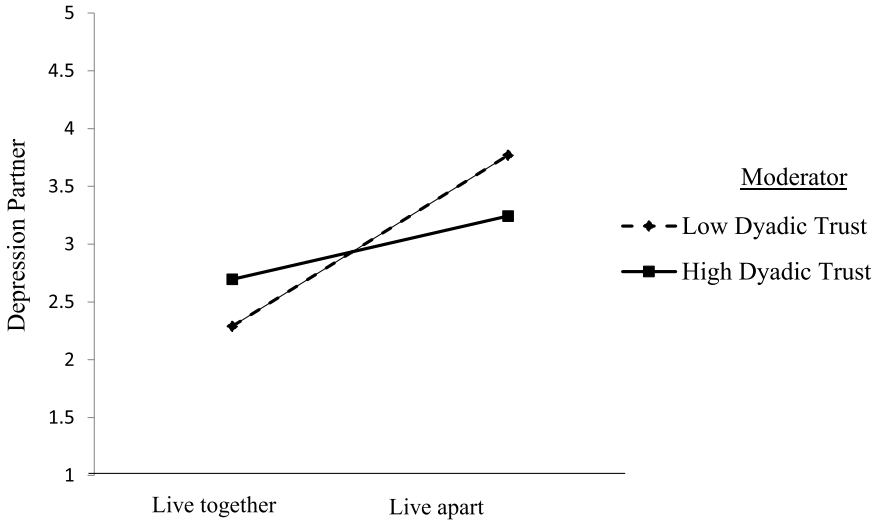

Fig. 4. Interaction Plot of Geographic Separation and Dyadic Trust on Partner's Depression.

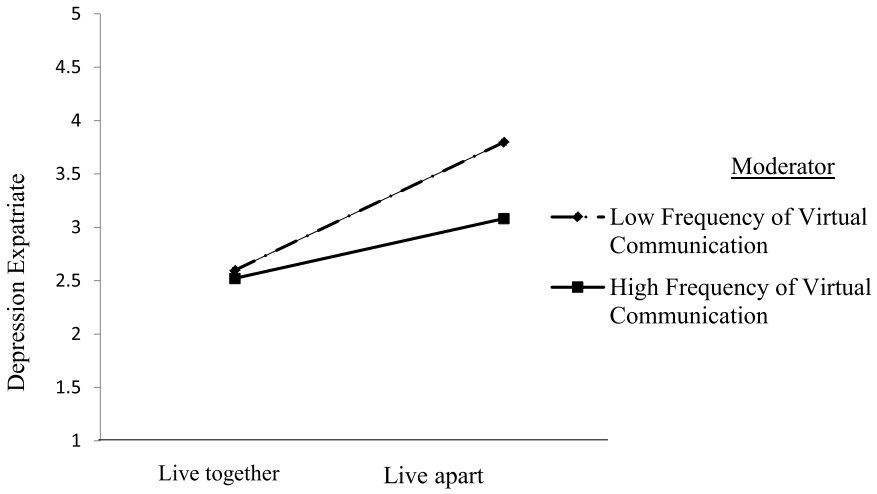

Fig. 5. Interaction Plot of Geographic Separation and Frequency of Virtual Communication on Expatriate's Depression.

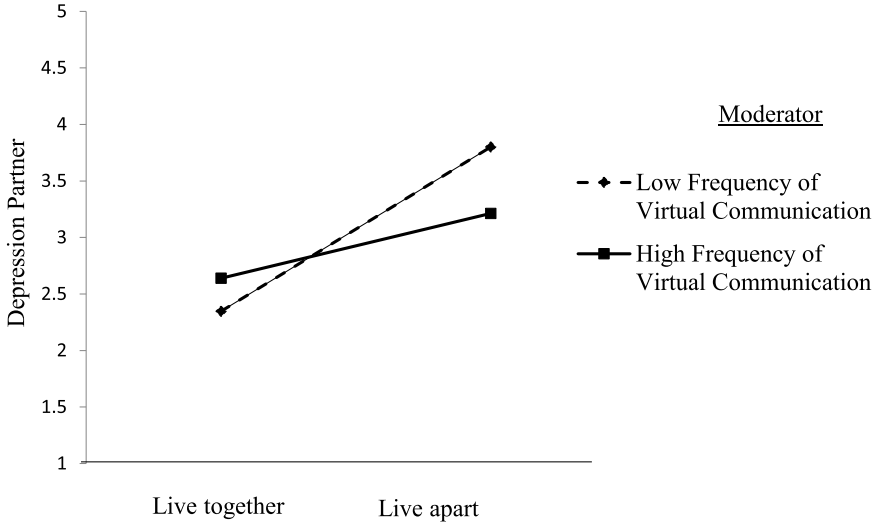

Fig. 6. Interaction Plot of Geographic Separation and Frequency of Virtual Communication on Partner's Depression.

indirect effect was positive and significant at −1 SD (*indirect effect* =1.62, Boot SE =.541; 95% Boot CI [.899, 2.960]) and at +1 SD of virtual communication frequency (*indirect effect*=.77, Boot SE =.346; 95% Boot CI [.285, 1.572]). The slopes were less positive when communication frequency changed from low to high, suggesting a buffering effect of virtual communication frequency. Similarly, the sequential mediation effect from geographic separation to repatriation through the partner's depression and the expatriate's intentions to repatriate was also significant (*index of moderated mediation* = −.49, Boot SE =.219; 95% Boot CI [−1.021, −.182]). Moreover, the conditional indirect effect was positive and significant at −1 SD (*indirect effect* =1.29, Boot SE =.469; 95% Boot CI [.685, 2.492]) and at +1 SD of communication frequency (*indirect effect* =.44, Boot SE =.260; 95% Boot CI [.080, 1.099]). The slopes were less positive when communication frequency changed from low to high. Thus, H7a and b were supported.

4.2. Findings from the interview study

Our interviews aimed at identifying mechanisms that explain the results of our main quantitative study. Accordingly, we discuss our findings under three main headings: reasons for geographic separation, reasons for depressive symptoms, and reasons for repatriation. While not the primary focus of our analysis, we pay attention to similarities and differences between SIEs and OEs.

4.2.1. Reasons for geographic separation

The majority of reasons centered around the partner and children and were similar for both SIEs and OEs. For instance, our interviewees highlighted that the partner's career (job in home country) was the main reason for living apart. One SIE explained, "She has been working as a university lecturer, and you know that … it is a prestigious job in Sri Lanka, of course even here (Australia). So, she didn't want to give it up and come with me here" (Expat, JW). Another SIE stated that they lived apart because of "…my parents, my Ammi (mother) and Thaththi (father). I didn't want to leave them alone." (Partner, BN). Our interviewees also emphasized children as a key reason for living apart. In particular, expatriates decided to relocate alone to ensure stability and continuity in their children' education (e.g., OE, SJ). Additionally, they noted that having young children often reinforced their decision to maintain a long-distance relationship.

Our findings also suggest some reasons that were unique to SIEs and OEs. Among SIEs, reasons included inadequate compensation, inadequate support for the partner, and hostility of the environment. For instance, one SIE explained, "As of our company's policy, they do not accommodate for the family. So, if I want to bring my family, I have to take the responsibility and bear all other expenses." (Expat, KJ). Another

SIE's partner highlighted that the adversity of the host country held her back from joining her husband: "Saudi Arabia was not in my preferred list. I meant in the country list that I love to live. I think I have more freedom here (in Sri Lanka) than there (Saudi Arabia)" (Partner, MP). As for OEs, one OE referred to the short duration of the assignment and the opportunity to visit his family back home as reasons for relocating alone.

4.2.2. Reasons for depressive symptoms

To better understand our survey results, we asked about the experiences of depressive symptoms. All the interviewees stated they experienced sadness or depressive episodes during their time abroad. The main cause for both OEs and SIEs to experience sadness and emotional exhaustion was the absence of the partner. *Isolation and loneliness*, especially being apart from their partner, were the main reasons for their depressive feelings. For instance, one partner highlighted, "I feel lonely, I miss him a lot, of course … I miss him a lot" (Partner, BN). There were further concerns related to the absence *(family issues)*. One expatriate elaborated, "One of the main concerns was my family. I meant my wife […] During that time, I was in doubt about her behavior" (Expat, SS). Very much in line with arguments presented in our hypothesis development, this quote shows how concerns about fidelity and the relationship heighten the negative feelings during separation. Other concerns were related to the unique circumstances expatriates' partners experienced, for example, having to *live with their in-laws* during the separation (Expat, RS). Our findings also highlight certain reasons which are uniquely associated with OEs and SIEs. While *disruptive supervisors* (Expat, DN) and *cultural distance* (Expat, TH) caused feelings of exhaustion and sadness for OEs, *issues at work* (Expat, RP) and *long working hours* (e.g., Expat, SJ) were unique reasons for their depressive feelings of SIEs.

4.2.3. Reasons for repatriation

Further, we extended our analysis to understand the reasons for repatriation. Supporting our arguments based on attachment theory, reunion with their partners and families was most frequently mentioned as the main reason when considering repatriation. Our interviewees (both SIEs and OEs) repeatedly stated that partners had a strong influence on their decision to return to their home country to reunite with the family. As one respondent vividly expressed, "Every time I visited her, she begged me to stop (my expatriate assignment)" (Expat, RP). Other reasons included intention to change the career and stressful life in the host country were elaborated as the reason for repatriation by our SIE interviewees. The end of the assignment was only mentioned once by a former OE as a reason to repatriate

5. Discussion

In the following, we discuss the implications of our study for research and theory and outline managerial implication based on our findings.

5.1. Implications for research and theory

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to the literature on expatriation and attachment theory. First, by introducing attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) as a novel theoretical lens to expatriation research, we are able to extend our understanding of prior studies on the relevance of family for expatriates (e.g., Lazarova et al., 2010; Takeuchi et al., 2002) to the effects of geographic separation of partners. This theoretical perspective is both timely and relevant, as focusing on separation reflects the reality of many expatriates today and helps explain the underlying mechanisms linking separation to broader issues such as potential assignment failure. While the predominant stress-based focus on cross-cultural adjustment has provided many valuable insights, our study broadens the theoretical discussion about factors threatening expatriates' assignments. Supporting our arguments based on attachment theory, we showed that the lack of physical proximity to a partner due to living apart during expatriation activates the expatriate-partner attachment system and results in not only increased depressive symptoms but also eventual repatriation intentions and actual repatriation to reunite with the attachment figure. Our follow-up interviews deepened this understanding, and interviewees highlighted their experiences of mental health issues due to separation and the longing to reunite with their partners, which eventually led to their repatriation. Building on attachment theoretical arguments, prior research has highlighted that separation from the partner triggers biochemical effects (measurable changes in hormones) that cause psychological ill health (Diamond et al., 2008). Our findings help theoretically link such psychological effects of attachment loss to repatriation intentions, providing a new theoretical understanding of mental health issues during expatriation and their threat to assignment success beyond adjustment and stress perspectives (Koveshnikov et al., 2022).

Second, besides highlighting the negative consequences of separation (Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Takeuchi et al., 2005), our study contributes to attachment theory by focusing on theoretical boundary conditions that alter the outcome of separation. Psychological research has frequently underscored the importance of closeness of relationships and attachment (Givertz et al., 2013), and scholars have called for more examinations of conditional effects in this relationship (Yip et al., 2018). Our research addresses this call by providing support for the role of dyadic trust and virtual communication as important boundary conditions that alter the strength of the activation of the attachment system. Scholars have frequently underscored the importance of dyadic trust for relationships and attachment (Clark & Lemay, 2010; Clymer et al., 2006; Givertz et al., 2013). From an attachment perspective, we extend these findings by providing support for dyadic trust as an important boundary condition on the relationship between geographic separation and repatriation. Our findings indicate that if expatriates and their partners have high dyadic trust, geographic separation is less of a threat to their attachment, and the need to become closer in physical proximity is weakened. Consequently, we suggest that dyadic trust is of importance not only for the individuals involved, as it mitigates the adverse effects of geographic separation on depression, but also for the employing organization, as the sequential mediation effects linking geographic separation with repatriation is also moderated by dyadic trust. Accordingly, in the light of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), our findings underscore that beyond individual-level factors, such as attachment style (Clymer et al., 2006; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), the integration of relationship-oriented variables into theories of separation is also relevant and informative.

The importance of relational variables as boundary conditions of the separation-repatriation relationship is further corroborated by our findings of how attachment-restoring interactions through virtual communication (Jiang & Hancock, 2013) mitigated the influence of separation on repatriation. Specifically, we identified the frequency of virtual communication as an important governing mechanism that alters the effect of geographic separation on the depression of both expatriates and partners, as well as expatriates' repatriation intentions and actual repatriation behavior. Prior research has highlighted that couples living apart engage more in self-disclosure behavior, even if communication is virtual (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Therefore, when expatriates and their partners communicate frequently via virtual channels, geographic separation is less of a threat to their attachment, and the need to get in close physical proximity is weakened. Consequently, the frequency of virtual communication between expatriates and partners is of importance, as it mitigates the adverse effects of geographic separation on repatriation. Accordingly, extending attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Yip et al., 2018), our findings highlight that while virtual communication cannot substitute for direct personal interaction, it can help maintain attachment in an expatriate context and buffer the negative effects of separation. Virtual communication has become a key resource in a global world (Bucher et al., 2024; Froese et al., 2025) and provides a means to stay connected for individuals. Including this important variable, our

study underscores the relevance of focusing on boundary conditions of established theories and taking account of new developments such as modern technologies.

Third, based on attachment theory, our research provides new theoretical explanations for crossover effects between partners during expatriation. Although the direct effect of the partner's depression on expatriates' intentions to repatriate was not statistically significant, the correlation between these two variables was ($r = .49$, $p < .001$)—suggesting that dyadic trust and the frequency of virtual communication, our moderating variables, might have suppressed the direct effect. Together with our qualitative findings that highlighted the experience of crossover between partners, we tentatively suggest that the partner's psychological health might still play an important role in the decision to repatriate. This is an important finding as in the extant expatriate literature, contagion effects have primarily focused on the relationship between expatriate and partner adjustment (Takeuchi et al., 2002). These investigations, however, were based on the premise that the expatriates and their partners reside together (see Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005, for a review). Lazarova et al. (2010) argued that in the case of expatriation, expatriates and their partners become more dependent on one another. This involves frequent interpersonal interactions that the authors argued to be a prerequisite for strong crossover effects. However, they further noted that we do not know much about the underlying process. In our case, we found crossover effects, even though the expatriates and partners were not living together, suggesting that contagion effects may occur virtually. This is an interesting finding as it is argued that modern technologies are less suitable to confer emotions and subtext to conversations. However, studies show that because of the features of modern communication, individuals can add emotional expressions and subtext better (Wang, 2016) or use video calls which simulate personal interactions (Bloom, 2015). Therefore, negative emotions and states can be transmitted more effectively producing similar effects as if couples live together. From an attachment perspective (Bowlby, 1969), we suggest a suffering partner is a source of stress for the expatriate. Attachment theory predicts that such a situation activates the attachment system and fosters the need for proximity between partners. Consequently, their attachment triggers an additional cognitive process in which thoughts revolve around reuniting with the partner and repatriating home. Table 3

Finally, prior research has been interested in the similarities and differences between SIEs and OEs, to understand the unique challenges faced by these two types of expatriates. While research has identified differences between types of expatriates such as in terms of motivation to expatriate (e.g., Froese, 2012) and non-work adjustment (e.g., Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009) findings are mixed and other research has shown that they are similar (see Brewster et at., 2021 for a review). In our study, while not included in our hypotheses, in line with prior research (e.g., Stoermer et al., 2021), we controlled for expatriate type. Aligning with prior research which reported an insignificant direct effect of expatriate type on repatriation (Meuer et al., 2019), our results also show a non-significant direct effect of expatriate type on our outcome variables, i.e., intention to repatriation and repatriation. Hence our study seems to suggest that while different in many aspects, SIEs and OEs seem similar in our study context as separation rather than type of expatriate seems to be a main motivator to return.

5.2. Managerial implications

In addition to the theoretical contributions, our study has important practical implications. First, our findings show that expatriates and partners who live apart from each other experience higher levels of depression than those who live together; consequently, expatriates are likely to withdraw from their assignments. Thus, to avoid the costs of withdrawal, it is to employers' advantage to encourage and support expatriates to take their partners along with them when they relocate. This is especially important since living together with the partner

Table 3
Themes and Example Quotes from the Qualitative Study.

Follow-up question	Theme	Example quotes
Reasons for Geographic Separation	Partner career (OEs & SIEs)	"Actually, he (expatriate) wanted to go with me, but I did not want to go with him, because of my job here. My job here was more stable and I didn't want to give it up." (Expat partner, LM)
	Children's education (OEs & SIEs)	"We were also thinking about education of our children. Here (in Qatar) we have international schools and education is good. But, why do we interrupt their education?" (Expat, SJ)
	Age of the children (OEs & SIEs)	"Another thing, during that time, my elder was too young, just 1 year and 3 months old. My wife was with her mother, if I relocate with them (wife and the child), how can she manage everything?" (Expat, SW)
	Partner education (OEs & SIEs)	"She was in her final year of the University. She has to complete her final examinations." (Expat, RP)
	Partner attachment to the parents (OEs & SIEs)	"My parents, my Ammi (mother) and Thaththi (father). I didn't want to leave them alone." (Partner, BN)
	Duration of the expatriate assignment and flexibility (OEs only)	"My assignment was only two years, relatively short, just to help them to establish lean management practices in our Jordan Company. As it was for just for two years, I decided to go alone. And alsooo …I had the flexibility of visiting my family as needed and managing some works virtually". (Expat, TH)
	Inadequate support for the partner (SIEs only)	"As of our company's policy, they do not accommodate for the family. So, if I want to bring my family, I have to take the responsibility and bear all other expenses. But, the company support for partner's VISA." (Expat, KJ)
	Inadequate compensation (SIEs only)	"If I want to bring her, I wanted to find a separate apartment, I was in a shared apartment with some Sri Lankans. Also, all other things were relatively expensive in Dubai, except transport. So, my salary was not adequate to cover the living expenses here.' (Expat, AP)
	Hostility of the environment (SIEs only)	"Other thing is I do not like to live or work in a middle-eastern country. I feel, here (Sri Lanka) life is more easy." (Partner, LM)
Reasons for Depressive Symptoms	Isolation and loneliness (SIEs & OEs)	"It was really difficult to live away from my family. My wife and the child. I don't know how to explain that feeling." (Expat, AW) "Hmm… In my experience, living in a different country is stressful in itself. I felt lonely, I miss my family, friends, home—especially my family" (Expat, SW)
	Distressed partner (SIEs & OEs)	"My wife's life was so miserable as she had to live with my mother and sister […] she had to face a lot of difficulties and harassments, but, I was helpless, because of… on one hand my wife, on the other

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (*continued*)

Follow-up question	Theme	Example quotes
		hand my mother and the sister" (Expat, RS)
	Family issues (SIEs & OEs)	"One of the main concerns was my family, I meant my wife […] During that time, I was doubt about her behavior. Some of my friends called me and share some negatives about her behavior. Ermm, they said she has fallen into love with one of her colleagues. I did not trust them (friends), I trust my wife, but, that was a truth." (Exapt, SS)
	Cultural distance (OEs only)	"The life in Jordan was really different. First few months, I felt I wanted to come back." (Expat, TH)
	Disruptive supervisor (OEs only)	"My boss was bit rude, sometimes we had some conflicts and disagreements." (Expat, DN)
	Long working hours (SIEs only)	"Long working days make me depressed." (Expat,SJ)
	Challenges at work (SIEs only)	"Huge workload, achieving KPIs, and meeting the deadlines put myself into a big pressure. (Expat, RP)
Reasons for Repatriation	The partner (OEs & SIEs)	Every time I visited her, she begged me to stop (my expatriate assignment)" (Expat, RP).
	Family reunion (OEs & SIEs)	"I came back here mainly because of my wife and the baby." (Expat, KJ)
	End of the assignment (one OE only)	"I returned home at the end of my assignment." (Expat, DN)
	Changing the career (SIEs)	"I wanted to have a relaxed life. Less stressful life. I was looking for changing my career. Now I am working as a senior lecturer." (Expat, RS)

strengthens the couple's attachment, thereby helping to reduce the levels of depression of both the expatriate and their partner and decrease the expatriate's repatriation intentions and actual repatriation. Furthermore, our follow up study revealed important insights into the reasons why partners may stay behind which point to dual career issues, inadequate compensation, and inadequate support for the family. Employers can address these issues by offering career support for the partner as well as family support, e.g. finding appropriate education and out-of-school activities for children.

How to implement this recommendation might vary between different types of expatriates. Prior expatriate research has distinguished between SIEs and OEs, identifying differences in factors such as compensation practices and organizational support (e.g. Hajro et al., 2019; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). While OEs are dispatched by an organization and receive organizational support, SIEs go abroad on their own terms and often do not receive organizational support (e.g., support for children's education, accommodation, and support for partner employment) (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). In line with this, our qualitative study findings indicate that inadequate compensation and lack of support for partner are key reasons why SIEs live geographically apart from their partner. Thus, organizations hiring SIEs should recognize that this lack of support might increase expatriate withdrawal. Therefore, family support should be incorporated into HR programs not only for OEs but also for SIEs.

Second, our study has implications for the management of expatriates if their partners are not willing or able to join them. Our results suggest that those expatriates who are separated from their partners, who have less trust in the relationship and maintain less communication with them are especially at risk of experiencing higher levels of depression and have a higher likelihood of withdrawal. Although communication and trust between partners are outside the control of the employing organization, employers should consider providing opportunities for expatriates to maintain virtual communication with their partners, including providing necessary infrastructure for virtual communication, financial support, and time (in case of time zone differences). In addition, although we have not tested the effect the expatriate-partner visit frequency on expatriate and partner depression and the expatriate's likelihood of withdrawal, prior research (e.g., Holt & Stone, 1988) suggested that frequent visit of partners can reduce negative psychological effects stemming from separation. Thus, we suggest that organizations should provide more frequent visits and sponsored trips for partners to visit expatriates in the host country.

Next, our research points to the need to take care of the homebound partner as well. Our study findings as along with prior research highlight that the partner left behind also suffers from the separation which, in turn affects the expatriate abroad. Accordingly, to ensure expatriate's work ability abroad, expatriates and the employing organizations should engage in conversations with the partner to develop a strategy to reduce risks of psychological problems. From an attachment perspective, ensuring regular proximity through mutual visits can be one measure included in this strategy.

Finally, Western societies have excluded the partner in selection decision to avoid discrimination (Punnett, 1997). However, prior research has largely recognized the importance of considering the partner in the expatriate selection decision (Anderson, 2005). Our study shows that partners' attitudes, adjustability, and readiness to relocate can affect expatriates' overall well-being and retention. Thus, early identification of potential problems of expatriation and in particular potential separation will inform managers how to take proactive measures such as planning visits, providing family/partner support program and addressing concerns before problems arise. While employers of SIEs might not always have this opportunity, we encourage all organizations to get involved in conversations with the expatriate and their partner early on and as a part of their selection and preparation process, if possible. This should also include the assessment of the partner's readiness and willingness to relocate before going abroad and risk mitigation strategies if they decide to stay at home.

Given that our findings are based on a sample of mainly male expatriates, our recommendations need to be considered with caution when applied to female expatriates and their partners. While organizational support is relevant for all expatriation assignments, the dynamics might differ to some extend for male spouses staying behind.

6. Limitations and avenues for future research

The findings of this study should be considered in light of several limitations, which provide some avenues for future research. First, although we measured geographic separation during expatriates' stays abroad, we do not know why they decided to live apart. Findings from our qualitative follow-up study suggest that the reasons mainly focus on partner career opportunities, family, and children concerns but do not suggest any systematic bias invalidating our conclusions. Nevertheless, future research on geographic separation could link the motivation with the outcomes of expatriation (Froese, 2012). Furthermore, not all expatriates who live apart will eventually repatriate because of this experience, for instance, because the partner might follow them, they are able to cope with the situation, or they get divorced. There might also be other outcomes, such as poor expatriate performance, related to geographic separation that we have not considered. Future research could provide alternative explanations and develop complementary models to further explore the outcomes of separation.

Second, a key strength of our research design is the use of actual repatriation as a dependent variable. However, while theoretical arguments and empirical evidence support the validity of our proposed

relationships, our measure of repatriation—similar to that used in prior studies (e.g., Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010)—does not distinguish between scheduled and premature returns. Thus, we cannot fully account for the reasons behind repatriation or whether our findings differ between these groups. Brewster et al. (2021) highlight alternative mobility patterns for both SIEs and OEs beyond simply returning home at the end of an assignment. OEs, for example, may transition into SIEs by staying abroad with the same or a different employer, while SIEs may choose to become migrants. This suggests that expatriates (regardless of type) who wish to remain abroad often have viable options to do so. Conversely, those with a strong desire to return home will eventually repatriate, much like individuals with turnover intentions in a domestic job context. Our qualitative findings support this perspective, as key reasons for repatriation centered on reuniting with partners and children. However, given the limitations of our data, we cannot fully disentangle the role of separation in shaping repatriation decisions for scheduled versus premature repatriations. We encourage future research to examine this distinction and its implications more closely.

Third, our sample is comprised of (mostly male) expatriates from Sri Lanka in Australia and the Middle East. Insofar as most prior research has involved Western expatriates in Asia or Europe, the specific features of our sample can be considered a strength that brings more variance into expatriation research. Although, prior research has shown no gender differences in attachment system activation across genders (Mikulincer et al., 2002), prior research has shown that male and female expatriates are different in various aspects such as expatriation success (Caligiuri & Tung, 1999) and cross-cultural adjustment (Haslberger, 2010). Because attachment theory does not suggest gender differences in response to separation, we would not expect pronounced differences between male and female expatriates. Yet, we cannot draw this inference from our data and therefore encourage future researchers to study attachment across a wide sample of expatriates, ideally using a cross-country, multilevel design and including a more balanced sample of male and female expatriates.

Next, prior research has studied similarities and differences between SIEs and OEs. While some research has identified distinctions, such as differences in expatriate motivation (e.g., Doherty et al., 2011) and non-work adjustment (e.g., Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009), other research has shown that they share many similarities, especially in terms of work-adjustment (e.g., Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009) and objective and subjective career success (see Brewster et at., 2021 for a review). In our study, we controlled for expatriate type and, consistent with prior research (Meuer et al., 2019), we found no significant direct effect of expatriate type on repatriation intention and actual repatriation. This suggests that while SIEs and OEs differ in many ways, they appear similar in our study context, where separation rather than type of expatriate plays a primary role in returning home.

Against this backdrop and taking account of the limitations of our study, we propose that our focus on attachment paves the way for future research that puts relationships and associated changes of or threats to attachment caused by expatriation at the center of investigation. Looking further into threats of attachment with other stakeholders such as friends and family and potential mitigating strategies can uncover new phenomena in expatriation research and complement explanations of expatriate effectiveness and failure based on adjustment and stress perspectives (e.g., Lazarova et al., 2010; Takeuchi, 2010).

7. Conclusion

Expatriation, geographically distributed workers, virtual communication, and long-distance relationships have become widespread today. Our study showed that geographically separated expatriates and partners may report high levels of depressive symptoms, which then trigger expatriates' thoughts of repatriation, and eventually lead to their actual repatriation. These adverse effects of physical separation, however, are attenuated when expatriates and their partners have high levels of trust and when they virtually communicate more frequently with each other. As a novel attempt to understand the importance of physical presence, dyadic trust, and virtual communication between expatriates and their partners, we hope this study spurs further conversations about how and why expatriate families, especially partners, are integral to successful global work.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

We have not used any AI tool for writing or analysis throughout the research process.

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