

Article

'I Just Want to Go Home': Emotional Wellbeing Impacts of COVID-19 Restrictions on VFR Travel

Catherine Kelly

School of Business and Law, University of Brighton, Brighton BN2 4AT, UK; c.kelly5@brighton.ac.uk

Abstract: The COVID-19 global pandemic has had a profound impact on the taken-for-granted familial connections bound up in VFR travel. This paper examines the emotional impacts on diasporic migrants who could not travel to their homeland for extended periods of time. It considers pre-pandemic VFR patterns and assesses new meanings attributed to post-pandemic renewed travel. The lived experiences, patterns and emotions of seventy mainly UK-based participants were examined in this study. The research approach used both Maslow's hierarchy of needs analysis and Urry's tourist-gaze as conceptual frames for assessing these emotional experiences. The research showed that for many diasporas, the need to travel home is central to a sense of personal and place-identity as well as emotional security. The impacts of the pandemic in terms of wellbeing and emotional health were keenly felt by study respondents. Furthermore, contrary to much prior VFR research, this pandemic related study showed that in this instance, it is the "people" of VFR rather than just the "place" (of home) that are most valued. The removal of the right to VFR travel reinforced the centrality of family connections, especially in times of crisis. A mindful, VFR gaze emerges, rooted deeply in Maslow's basic human needs pillars of safety, love and belonging. This was shown to be a highly tuned post-COVID-19 gaze, where familiar touchstones of home helped to restore depleted emotions through performances and practices of connectivity. The unique global pandemic experience of a world full of migrant mobile diaspora brought to an abrupt halt, emphasizes the need for tourism research to focus on the emotions embedded in the inherent human-place connections of VFR travel. The longitudinal-temporal legacy of COVID-19 on this form of tourism requires future research attention for both the tourism industry and tourists themselves.

Keywords: VFR; home; identity; COVID-19; emotional impacts; Maslow's hierarchy of needs; diaspora tourism; tourist gaze; wellbeing; mindful gaze; connections



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1. Introduction

Visiting friends and relatives is one of life's most enjoyable activities. A simple, often taken-for-granted pleasure. For those lucky enough to live in the same country as their family, tourism and leisure behaviours often fall into a natural rhythm of weekly, monthly, or regular visits centering on birthdays, anniversaries and significant times of the calendar year. These simple "VFR actions" constitute an unspoken network of connection, identity and belonging. For those who do not live in the same country as their family or old friends, the significance of these connections becomes even more loaded and meaningful. Going "home" becomes a ritualised practise where family members offer ways of knowing that are effortless and bonding. Indeed, these practises become an inherent part of identity maintenance for many diasporas or emigrants. In addition, VFR travel forms a significant economic contribution to the wider sector globally—comprising almost a third of all tourism arrivals. In 2020, global tourism exports were worth USD1.7 trillion [1], so VFR should not be underestimated in terms of its economic or socio-cultural value [2].

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 (ongoing) halted international travel in a hitherto unforeseen manner. Tourism ground to a sudden stop as infection control boundaries were raised in a bid to contain lethal infection rates. The sector was hit hard; tourists stayed

at home and millions lost their tourism and hospitality jobs [3,4]. For many, this meant the end of relaxing holidays abroad, but for VFR travellers, it meant much more than that. In times of need and crisis, a core human response is to turn inwards, to family, for support. For diasporas, much or most family support exists outside the spatial realm of the everyday. Elderly parents still residing in the homeland, extended family networks, old friends—all were out of tangible reach in almost an instant, as fear and barriers curbed the right to travel.

This paper examines how the COVID-19 restrictions affected migrant populations both during the main phases of the pandemic and, subsequently, when restrictions were eased, and VFR travel could commence. The research objectives of this project were (a) to assess the lived experiences of (mainly) UK-based diaspora who could not engage in VFR travel around the pandemic; (b) to ascertain the emotional impacts of not being able to return “home”; (c) to discuss the effects of limiting VFR travel in relation to diasporic identity disruption and wellbeing maintenance; and (d) to examine the subsequent experiences of re-instated VFR visits once restrictions were lifted. These research objectives were chosen to examine a unique, externally determined set of circumstances where VFR travel limits were not imposed by personal, economic or motivational factors—but rather, by a global crisis. As such, this paper is important, and offers unique insight into what “not going home” means to diasporas abroad. Much of the familiar literature (cited in the following section) on VFR travel examines motivations to travel, experiences and a range of economic and socio-cultural issues. Here, the emotional and wellbeing aspects of suspended travel are examined. Theoretically, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs model [5] is used to conceptualise the heightened basic-needs focus that humans re-engaged with when familial connections were restricted. This was followed by a conceptual application of a new “ways of seeing” adaptation of Urry’s [6] theory of the tourist gaze, in the post-pandemic return-visit VFR environment.

The paper firstly examines existing literature on VFR travel along with key concepts of home, place-attachment, and identity. It then examines two theoretical concepts in order to assess the “during” and “after” temporal aspects of pandemic travel restrictions experiences and impacts. The methods and findings sections show how a mainly qualitative approach is taken to collate the accounts of seventy respondents in terms of the four key research objectives noted above. The results of the study are connected to the existing literature. Conclusionary comments and recommendations elicit the need for a more emotional-wellbeing-driven focus by the tourism industry to encourage and steward meaningful VFR travel campaigns and experiences.

1.1. VFR Travel

In an increasingly globalised world, there has been a steady rise in temporary and permanent migration for work and study purposes. Resultant migrant diasporas participate in repeated tourism actions which involve return travel “home” to visit friends and family. This type of travel is known as VFR (Visiting Friends and Relatives) tourism/travel and is a key tourism market segment, alongside holidaying and business tourism. In the literature, it is referred to in different ways—VFR itself in its literal meaning [7,8], “diaspora tourism” [9,10], and “ancestral tourism” [11,12]. Most definitions hint at the notion of connection and meaning in their offerings. Indeed, Larsen et al. [13] suggest that VFR travel is all about being co-present with significant faces. As we will see in this research, it is the very absence of and inability to be present with these faces that has caused huge emotional impacts for diasporas in the COVID-19 era. Huang et al. [14] warn about the dangers of generalising about this form of tourism and travel due to the wide range of tourist motivations that range from simply visiting family (largely travel-only) to second or further-back generations searching for genealogical roots and cultural connections/activities. The VFR market has been largely under-researched and under-respected [15] due to its perceived lack of economic profitability for destinations and tourism/hospitality companies where travellers often make use of free accommodation. However, Backer highlights rightly that

VFR visitors can be highly important both socio-culturally and economically to “home” destinations and should not be underestimated. [16].

Considerable research exists in the fields of migration studies and geography regarding diasporic experiences, and while some work exists that links migrant diasporic experiences, identity, “home” and the socio-emotional meanings and behaviours of associated forms of tourism [17–19], more remains to be done. The pandemic impact of interrupted travel has brought to light how significant VFR travel is for the emotional wellbeing of the diaspora and families in source homelands alike. This work focuses specifically on the interrelationships between diaspora experiences, identity, VFR meanings, emotions and wellbeing during and in the ongoing aftermath of COVID-19. It therefore adds to the literature in a new way, given the specific crisis-driven impacts of the inability to travel “home”.

1.2. Identity, Home and Place Attachment

Identity is constructed, created and recreated due to the different external and internal processes that shape an individual’s identity. Identity is socially and geographically diverse and can include religion, language, race, and culture with multiple personal associations on local, regional or national levels [20]. Who or where we identify with most is an important factor, arguably, in our sense of belonging in our place of everyday residence and our related need to return “home” to our place of origin.

The concept of a nation is intangible per se, but a nation can be defined as a community with the same history, descent and belief system which can be distinguished from other cultural identities [21,22] and these elements combined contribute to national identity. National identity is realised through relationships with friends, family, and neighbours (known people) as opposed to just a relationship with “the nation” (although not always is this the case) [23]. This may be because individuals identify with people who behave, communicate and think in the same way as they do. It is the ideals, customs, ceremonies, national symbols, the joint sentiments and character of a people that make a people a nation. However, national identity is also a very personal concept, and individuals draw from it different aspects (culture and religion, for example) and experiences to create their own identities [22]. Nations are usually a primary form of belonging or identification for most individuals, which seems to be more important than other forms of identification, such as class, race, gender, sexuality [and] religious belief [24].

Migrant diasporas can have many different, fluid identity-markers, and this is especially so for migrants who are exposed to multiple sites of residence and connection, real and imagined. Migration fosters a relationship between distant intangible heritage and personal identity that can be complex. Going “home” implicitly involves connective identity performance rituals, through the selection of destinations, personal encounters and tourism behaviours, depending on the purpose of the trip. This becomes more significant when children of migrants and younger generations are brought on trips where legacies of belonging and familial identity are shaped through tourism. Such practises are more culturally significant than mere “holidaying” and often form the core matter of VFR experiences. As Basu [25] suggests, “the question of who we are is readily answered with reference to where we came from” and national identity forms an important component in that. It is this notion of where we came from, and therefore where we return to, that is central to VFR identity ties and practice.

Home, as a place we return to, is a critical locale for both developing and maintaining place identity. It holds emotional significance and provides some degree of stability within peoples’ lives, serving as a reference for past action and experience; a locus of memories and meaning [26]. For diasporas, the notion of home is multi-layered; the home they have created in their chosen land of residence may differ in its resonance to the “home-home” of their birthplace, or even that of their parents and grandparents. Home can refer to a physical location (birthplace, house, village, country) such as a dwelling, a residence, a particular landscape, or an abstract idea of “motherland” [27]. It can be an emotional construction, representing joy, protection, comfort and belonging, often idealised with

distance and time by migrants. Home as a physical space laden with memory, emotion and meaning, becomes more poignant when life takes a migrant away from it [28].

Home involves a matrix of social and spatial relations, and as we have seen with restrictions to accessing “home” during the pandemic, it has wider symbolic and ideological meaning for most people. These ideas of “home” are central in concepts of place attachment and place identity. The need to feel connected to a place of personal meaning is central to “place attachment”. Place attachment is not comprehensively debated within the tourism literature yet is central to VFR travel [29]. It portrays an emotional bond, or relationship, between an individual and a specific culture and/or landscape, which may change over time as people themselves change [30]. Moments of crisis, arguably, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, sharpen a sense of this attachment when it is severed by external forces beyond our control. Place attachment has three key components: affect, cognition and behavioural intention, where affect denotes the emotional link the individual has with the place; cognition connects the belief system or thoughts of the individual; and behavioural intention examines the values and commitments of the individual but not their actions [31]. What is missing somewhat in the VFR literature is this idea of not just place-based affect but people-based affect—where emotional links are a complex myriad of human, landscape, place, and cultural meaning. VFR travel can reignite identities and place-people attachments [32] as diasporas usually place a much higher importance on the meaning of “home” compared to other tourists.

What is clear is that concepts of identity, home and place attachment are experienced differentially by diasporas, both in their everyday migrant experiences and in their chosen VFR practices. The need to connect to home depends on individually constructed and experienced senses of identity and place attachment. These are not static notions, but rather, fluid, dynamic, environmentally determined, and changing too, across time and space. Family and friends (and therefore VFR travel) play an important role in place attachment and identity in terms of how “home” is individually constructed. For many, the idea of home is a familiar and taken for granted place, to be returned to at any time—but when this is threatened by global events beyond our control, the impacts can be life-changing. The needs of the global population suddenly shifted, as people feared for their health and wellbeing and that of loved ones at home in other countries. What became evident very quickly, was that our most basic human needs were brought sharply into focus. For general tourists, the loss of holidaying was an inconvenience, but for diasporas, the loss of VFR tourism and travel ran much deeper.

1.3. Human Needs and Differential Tourist Gazes

To understand exactly how the global pandemic affected society, it is useful here to re-examine what really matters to people in times of need and uncertainty. Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs model is used as the contextual premise for examining the impacts of the disallowed/suspended temporal phase of VFR travel; whilst Urry’s construct of the tourist gaze is used to specifically assess post-restriction return experiences. The temporality of this division is important. In the extreme phases of disallowed VFR travel, our most basic human needs were called sharply into question. When we were “allowed” once more to connect to homeplaces and people who matter to us, a gratitude-imbued way of seeing enabled a fresh tourist gaze to ensue. Maslow’s seminal work is an important revisit in the context of COVID-19 as a reminder of essentialism. His model describes how humans have several sequential stages of “needs” that are required for personal fulfilment [5]. Our initial needs are physiological, designed for an individual to survive, and as the stages of the needs progress, so does the complexity of the motivations: requiring “safety”, having “belonging and love”; acquiring “esteem”; and finally reaching self-actualization (see Figure 1 below).

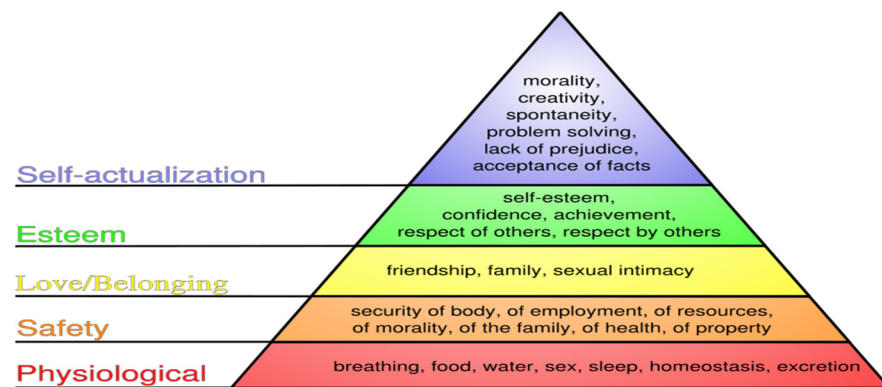


Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs [5].

When COVID-19 took away the basic ability to physically breathe from huge swathes of the global population, fear abounded in a way and scale never witnessed before. Our most basic physiological needs have been compromised in a way that is indicative of historic rather than contemporary times. In Maslow's second stage, safety has also been called into question in the most fundamental of ways. Security of body and of health were challenged as scientists sought to find a vaccine and health professionals struggled to keep people alive. Mass redundancies happened in the tourism and hospitality sectors, compromising "safety of employment". Ethical issues of morality were called into question about who to treat and vaccinate first. Moreover, "safety of the family", of key interest in this paper, was ruptured as family members were kept apart spatially and emotionally in a bid to protect each other. For families of the diaspora, this was further intensified by bans on non-essential travel for the majority of the population.

The third tier of Maslow's pyramid relates to "love and belonging" and centres around family and friendship. As the pandemic progressed through several iterations and lockdowns of varying degrees of severity, isolation and loneliness took hold. The human need for contact with our family and friends, it turns out, is central to our wellbeing. Collectively, these three tiers of Maslow's model, —physiological, safety and love and belonging, affected all of humanity during the pandemic but were particularly harshly felt by diasporas. Maslow's conceptual model informs both the research objectives of this paper and the questions asked in the data collection phases.

Previous tourism research using Maslow's work has focused mainly on tourist motivations and behaviours in relation to "going on holiday". Pearce's [33] influential work on motivations showed that Maslow's needs of love and self-actualisation were the key positive aspects of traveller experiences, whilst physiological and safety needs were the main threats or negative experiences noted in his study. Hsu and Huang [34] review the importance of Maslow's concepts in our understanding of general tourism audiences. This paper, however, asserts that VFR travel is connected to Maslow's hierarchy model in a more fundamental way. It does not prioritise escape and relaxation as passive constructs; rather, it actively seeks connective-bonding as a basic human need. In this case, the diaspora must travel to achieve that, but the process is much more than just tourism per se. In this specific case of pandemic-suspended travel, the human-needs withdrawal of love, belonging and the threat of physiological safety are usefully framed using Maslow's theory.

The resultant repercussions and emotional impacts of these basic needs compromises for VFR travellers are examined in the findings of this paper.

Whilst Maslow's theories help to formulate an investigation of the impacts of VFR non-travel, this paper also considers the experiences of diaspora in the aftermath of restriction-lifting and renewed VFR travel experiences and emotions. Urry's "tourist gaze" construct [6] is adopted here as a way of examining VFR travelers' unique post-covid restrictions phase of experiences. The seminal idea of the tourist "gaze" focuses on how an individual sees a place, person or object through a specific lens that has been influenced by individual constructs of ideas, skills, desires and expectations, framed by social class,

gender, nationality, age and education. In relation to tourism, the “gaze” affects the way a destination or place is perceived by the tourist [35]. VFR travellers, arguably, have a very particular gaze due to personal connections, meanings and memories between visitor and destination.

Urry refers to tourists’ ways of looking at and seeing/consuming places that affirm differences from or to home. Yet VFR travel fine tunes the lens of this gaze for the opposite purpose—to verify and confirm symbols of home. These are emotional, intangible, person-centred and deeper than just the realms of “place only”. These inter-personal relationships are central in VFR trips [14]. Urry’s gaze concepts are used in this paper to unpack the re-connections to home, place and identity that took place for research respondents after VFR travel resumed. As such, the conceptual framework of the post-COVID-19 gaze offers insight into a unique, globally time-specific, way of seeing, as experienced by the diaspora returning home after long spells of suspended travel. Using the gaze-construct through specific lines of methodological questioning enables greater understanding of the VFR-home and renewed-home traveller lens.

2. Methods

This work attempts to move beyond superficial impact-analysis, to hear the voices of travel-restricted diaspora on how a global pandemic affected their family lives and connections across space and time. The study examines the experiences of mainly UK-based diasporas during the COVID-19 global pandemic and immediately after travel restrictions had been lifted. Based on the ontological view that identity has a multiplicity of manifestations, the work examines how place-identity, residence and VFR visits “home” were impacted by lockdowns and then subsequent freedoms to travel. The research adopts a largely qualitative approach to acquire a greater depth of meaning. Yousuf and Backer [36] note that most VFR studies adopt quantitative methods, but there has been a more recent shift towards qualitative studies. These allow for the very real social, emotional, and psychological aspects of what it means to live elsewhere and return “home” regularly as part of normal habitual practices, to be more fully comprehended. Huang et al. [14] note that the underlying meanings behind VFR travellers’ thoughts, feelings and attitudes cannot be understood without considering the socio-cultural context and the transnational ties between migrants and their homeland. For this study, therefore, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with a view to understanding how VFR experiences compared both during and post pandemic in relation to restricted, then renewed travel. Questions asked explored a range of issues; from the emotional impacts of restricted access, to core pillars of identity, love and belonging, along with emotional/wellbeing implications and respondents’ adopted coping strategies of restricted travel. Phase two of the research took the form of an additional survey to increase the number of respondents. Between phase one (interviews) and phase two, the researcher moved positions to a different university outside London. When explaining “latest research activities” to new colleagues, a surge of interest to participate took place among fellow diaspora academics and students. The topic “hit home”, literally and metaphorically, and many were keen to express their experiences. Therefore, the research grew organically, into a two-phase piece of work. However, given the timings involved, longer interviews were replaced with surveys that could be self-completed. Most of the same key questions were asked, but reflexivity on the interview experience in phase one allowed for the inclusion of a small number of new, useful questions (see Table 1). Research practice is not a linear process, and it was important in this instance to incorporate more voices when offered the opportunity.

Table 1. Data Collection Questions.

Interview and Survey Questions
Where is “home” for you? (your parents)? *
Even though you live in England, what is your level of identification/identity in relation to your homeland/your parents’ homeland? (options ranged from “Strongly identify” (if someone asked my identity, I would name that country first), to “Low level identify”
How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect you and your family? **
What worries did you have about your/your family’s health? **
Can you talk about your emotional responses to the pandemic (during lockdowns/restricted travel) **
During “normal times” how often do you visit your homeland/your parents’ homeland? *
During COVID Lockdown, can you describe how it felt NOT to be able to travel to see friends and relatives?
How did COVID restrictions around travel to see friends and relatives affect your wellbeing?
Do you think living in a different country made COVID experiences worse? If so, how? **
Can you talk about how being able to see your family abroad regularly matters to your own sense of identity, love and belonging? **
What strategies did you use to cope with not being able to travel to see family?
Have you been on a Visiting Friends and Relatives trip since restrictions have ended?
Can you describe what the experience of being able to travel to see family again felt like?
Do you think you looked at your family or your homeland in a new or different way this time, compared to other visits in the past? Can you discuss that a little? **
Based on your answers so far, can you comment on the importance of VFR to you, personally?

(* survey questions only; ** interview questions only, all other questions common to both).

The research findings emerge as co-created reflexive dialogues through interactions between researcher and interviewee/respondents, leading to an intersubjective understanding of VFR traveller experiences [14,37]. The researcher is ethnically Irish and has lived in the UK for over 20 years. The researcher’s positionality as a migrant diaspora with personal experiences of VFR travel and blurred, layered place-identities allows for insider knowingness of the research subject matter.

Sampling and Data Collection

This study focused on both first- and second-generation migrants who were born (or whose parents were born) in a country different to the one they reside in. A purposive sampling approach was used to engage with this target audience in the UK. The researcher’s own network of international colleagues and students at two UK universities (in/within one hour of London) and personal/friendship networks were used as a starting point. Colleagues and students who were known by the researcher This model allows for a relevant investigative framework to be applied to the non-British subjects who were asked to participate in the study. A snowball method was used for passing the project information forward to others in the initial participants’ networks who fit the criteria for inclusion.

A total of 20 interviews were conducted and 50 surveys collected between December 2020 and March 2022. This timeframe provided a longitudinal range of experiences that crossed multiple “lockdowns” in the UK (with varying degrees of severity) and subsequent staged easings of travel restrictions, to some destinations at least. The interviews took place both face-to-face and online (depending on the level of social contact allowed at the interview time), with a duration of 35–55 min on average. Surveys were completed online by respondents replying to personal email requests, social media announcements and intra-university online networks. The respondents in this study comprised a total of 70 people who lived in one country but whose national identity was linked to another. Sixty-nine participants lived in the United Kingdom, mainly in the London and Sussex areas (one hour travel range from London), and one participant was a British national living in Hungary. The nationalities of the other respondents were varied—almost half stated an identity link with another European country, one fifth with a North or South

American country, a third with Asia and the others were a miscellaneous spread (including Australia, New Zealand and African nations).

Conceptually, Maslow's hierarchy of human needs model and Urry's tourist gaze theory provide a framework of investigation within which "during and post" pandemic experiences were questioned, reported, felt, constructed, and analysed. They helped to frame the research objectives (1. to assess the lived experiences of (mainly) UK based diaspora who could not engage in VFR travel around the pandemic; 2. to ascertain the emotional impacts of not being able to return "home"; 3. to discuss the effects of limiting VFR travel in relation to diasporic identity disruption and wellbeing maintenance; and 4. to examine the subsequent experiences of re-instated VFR visits once restrictions were lifted) in terms of questions asked. Maslow's model informed the bulk of the questions asked (Table 1) in relation to notions of home, identity, belonging and the emotional and wellbeing impacts of COVID-19 and VFR non-travel. The open-ended, qualitative nature of most of the questions and the use of content analysis for the resultant data is in keeping with the inductive nature of the research process adopted. This is similar to Pearce's study [33], where Maslow's work was also applied. Urry's construct of the tourist gaze was applied to the final four questions (Table 1), where respondents were asked about their experiences of their first return VFR trip post-restrictions. They were specifically asked about feelings associated with any new ways of seeing or gazing upon familiar sites, places and people they had missed. The results of these questions are presented using the lens of these conceptual constructs later in the paper.

For transparency, the main questions included are shown in Table 1 below.

The survey questions were largely similar to the interviews but included some VFR patterns and behavioural information in addition. The data analysis used a systematic classification and identification of themes and patterns. This content analysis was conducted manually for the main part, and was guided also by the conceptual frameworks adopted through the lens of Maslow and Urry's work [5,6]. Coding was used to group topics and concepts into various categories. Themes emerged by interpreting and establishing relationships between key concepts. The findings were discussed in relation to the literature and theories cited earlier in the paper to aid meaningful, contextualised interpretations.

3. Results and Discussion

This study offers insight into a key segment of tourism—VFR travellers—during a very specific window of time in one of the greatest human health crises the world has ever known. It is significant in that it captures a unique impact of this time period: non-travel, followed by renewed-travel, through the lens of travellers who are more than leisure motivated tourists. The conceptual frameworks discussed provide a structure for the discussion of the findings that follow.

3.1. Safety, Love and Belonging

To reflect on Maslow's human needs model is to reflect on the most basic aspects of survival first and foremost. The ability to breathe, and not be fearful for our daily health if we are largely "doing all the right things" in terms of exercise, diet and so on, is very much taken for granted. Yet, when the viral infection of COVID-19 first appeared, this very basic assumption of the "ability to live" was threatened. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs [5], this study showed that the three foundational levels of this model were compromised for most participants. This sense of safety, security of health, connection and belonging were taken away for many people, but especially so for those whose families and friends lived in a country they could no longer access or go to in times of most need. In terms of "safety", the study asked respondents questions about how the pandemic affected them and their family and what worries they had around their health during that time.

Most respondents reported the same personal limitations as the general population in terms of overall impacts—working from home, home schooling, worries over food supply during the first lockdown and a general sense of restricted freedom. Health worries were

diverse—some had pre-existing conditions that caused huge anxiety, whilst others had fears for their older family members abroad. Respondent 1 (R.1) explained how her elderly father's health situation worried her: "My father is 70 years old, and he has cancer. He lives alone and even though I am over here in London, I am technically his next of kin as the oldest daughter. I fly back and forth all the time when he has major hospital appointments or procedures. Suddenly, I couldn't go home anymore due to COVID, can you imagine? His treatment was delayed too because the hospitals were taking in COVID cases at the start, and we weren't supposed to leave the house. I felt so helpless stuck over here not being able to help. I worried so much that he would catch COVID and his immune system would collapse because of his illness. It was the worst feeling in the world".

These care-networks are common among diasporas with elderly relatives abroad, and this issue came up a lot in the interview conversations. Brinckerhoff Jackson [38] suggests that "home" represents a withdrawal into safekeeping—for some, this can mean physical buildings or a residence, but for diasporas, the duality of present-home and an emotional "other home" presents both a material and metaphoric dialectic tension. R.18 noted, "I mean, I don't really know where home is anymore? I say we are going home to my kids when I collect them from school every day in London, but then I say we are 'going home on holiday', and I mean Portugal. It's hard to explain to anyone who isn't in the same shoes". Such comments reinforce constructs of home as both a mental and spiritual condition [38].

In this study, most participants said they identified very strongly with their country of origin (they would name that place first when asked what their nationality was), and the remainder identified relatively strongly with it, depending on length of residence in the UK/their own birthplace. Therefore, a strong sense of national-identity and ongoing place-attachment were common across the entire sample. (See methods section, above for a breakdown of national identities). These results support the ideas cited earlier on national and personal identity and their links to the notion of home, place-identity and belonging [25–27,31]. However, belongings can be multi-spatial. VFR travel (and deeper VFR tourism activities, beyond just travel per se, in some instances) allows for the habitual practice of diasporic identity across space and time. R.53 noted that "VFR travel is very important to me because I need to connect with my homeland and family in order to be myself". This shows the strong need to touch base often, to reaffirm identity. To get a sense of the frequency of these bonding travel practices, participants were asked about their pre-Covid VFR behaviours. Results showed that the majority of respondents went home once or twice a year, while almost a third went home more than twice a year. For such regular travel behaviours, therefore, the impact of the withdrawal of those personal connections was profound. Overall, it is apparent from these findings that Maslow's foundational level basic needs were seriously threatened for diasporas over an extended time period (see Figure 2, below, which shows the key sentiments expressed by participants across three basic needs).

The duality of worry for family "here" and "there" during the limits to travel exacerbated the emotional experiences of diasporas, beyond those of the general population during this period. Our three areas of Maslow's basic human needs, physiological health, a sense of safety and love and belonging were compromised repeatedly, and the effects of this had significant emotional and wellbeing impacts.

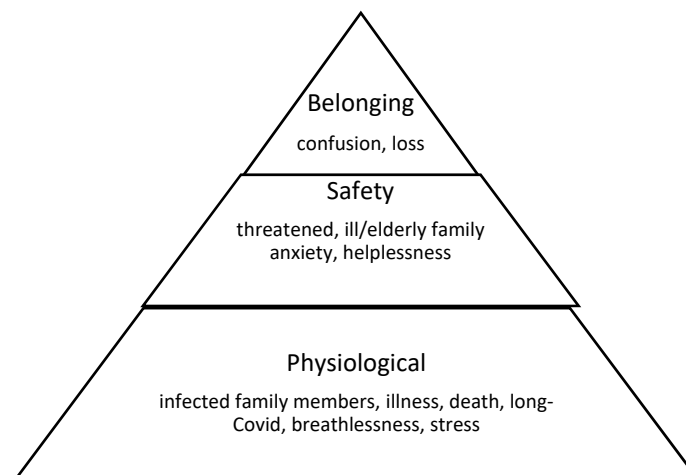


Figure 2. Maslow's Basic Human Needs: COVID Impacts on VFR Travellers.

3.2. Emotional Impacts

The emotional responses to the pandemic were mostly fear-based; fear for personal safety and a sense of uncertainty about what was happening and how long it would last. The role of emotions has, until recently [39–44], been relatively overlooked in the field of tourism studies. In VFR travel, feelings and corporeality (or embodied feelings) play an important role in these often taken-for-granted tourism encounters [45] and tourism spaces and are especially significant in a covid-VFR context. Emotions are widely understood to be contained by the psycho-social and material boundaries through which embodied personas are differentiated from each other and from their surrounding environments [46]. What it feels like, therefore, to be a migrant diaspora depends on individual relationships with new space, home space and perceptions of acculturation and fracture, amongst other things. In times of crisis, however, particularly health-threatened bodily-crises, which COVID-19 certainly was (is), disordered emotional experiences disrupt the order between our internal and external worlds. Therefore, how we felt about what was happening and what we could do about it were often in conflict.

Participants were asked to talk about their emotional responses to lockdown restrictions. It was apparent that emotions played a central role in the impact on diasporas. R14 for example, could find few ways of releasing pent up emotions, noting “I just had nowhere to put my fear and frustration. Being locked up at home, and locked in, to this country, at a time like that . . . it was too much. I started to feel sick at the thought of how long this might go on for. Listening on the news every day to the numbers of deaths. It was like being in some kind of horror show”. She continues, “at one point my son said, will we ever get to see grandma again? And that was what broke me. I had to run to the bathroom and lock myself in. I sobbed for about 15 min. And the truth was, I couldn't answer him”. Other participants talked about the relationship between their own emotional and physical health, citing an increase in headaches, nausea and anxiety brought about by worrying about themselves and their families abroad.

When asked how it felt not to be able to travel for VFR purposes a range of emotions were expressed (see Table 2 below for summary).

The emotional aspects of non-visiting, therefore, were keenly felt by all participants. 100% of the sample expressed multiple negative emotions across the categories listed above. While some talked about the positive aspects of time with their children, or in nature during lockdown, all felt negative emotions about being cut off from the families and friends in their homeland. For some, the changing regulations meant that return visits had still not happened, almost two years after the initial lockdown R. 43 expressed their emotions about not being able to travel as “very stressful: I was (and still am) constantly worried that something awful might happen to my parents and I wouldn't (won't) be able to be with them. I have rebooked my flight tickets several times and still haven't been able to visit my

family". Therefore, the longitudinal effects of this pandemic also require examination of both diasporas and homeland family ties. These findings, albeit about different themes, concur with Pearce's [33] observation of physiological and safety concerns as key Maslovian outcomes of negative traveller experiences.

Table 2. Emotions Felt Due to Restricted VFR travel.

Emotion/Theme	Most Commonly Expressed Phrases/Words
Negative	Awful, dreadful, suffocating, sad, devastated, angry
Loss of Control	Helpless, frustrated, stuck, trapped, locked-in "knowing that I could not go and that I was blocked in the UK was a bit overwhelming".
Separate	Isolated, lonely, apart
Anxiety	Insecure, worried, stressed, afraid

As time went on during the pandemic, there was a temporal shift of feelings for some respondents as they saw their British friends allowed to visit their families, domestically, within the UK. A range of complex restrictions and requirements meant that there were very different experiences and time frames for "business as usual" among the seventy respondents. R.2 observed: "one of the hardest things for me midway through all this, was watching my English friends delightedly go off on trips to see their parents and siblings again, when I couldn't. Christmas was very hard. Knowing I couldn't get to America to see my folks. And watching all the happy Facebook reunions. I mean, of course I was happy for my friends, but it killed me to not go home to check if my parents were ok, or maybe to even see them for the last time—we just didn't know how bad this would get, or if they were safe". Very few discussions of the impacts of COVID-19 take into account this place-identity lens and the very different lived experiences of diasporas from the native population of their chosen destinations. VFR travel is uniquely placed to examine this particular phenomenon.

3.2.1. Wellbeing Impacts

Wellbeing is largely defined as a good balance between physical, psychological and emotional/spiritual health [47]. The pandemic affected all aspects of participant wellbeing insofar as many people experienced poor physical health or even death, while others existed in a state of extended hyper-alertness and anxiety. In addition, social wellbeing was compromised by feelings of extreme isolation. Most reported a negative impact on their personal wellbeing when asked how the pandemic had affected it. One participant conversely, took a positive approach to their physical health and exercise "so that when the opportunity arrives to see family and friends I would not miss it". Negative effects on mental health were cited by 60% of respondents, while others expressed worry, guilt, sadness and loneliness. Interestingly, most respondents replied with emotion-based answers to the general wellbeing question, despite there being other questions centred around feelings. Thus, there is an essential need for emotion-centred affective research lens for VFR study.

Perhaps one of the most devastating parts of this study was listening to stories of ultimate loss and grief—where participants' family members had died from COVID-19. The anguish of not being able to visit, to "go home", symbolically and physically, had significant, lasting emotional damage for the six respondents who sadly, experienced this. Many UK nationals also experienced this terrible situation, due to hospital and care-home restrictions. There was something extra-poignant about being in a different country while experiencing such loss that participants expressed. R.19 had to pause the interview due to the remembered emotions of talking about this, saying "I can hardly to bear to think about it, even now. My gorgeous mum—who devoted her life to us all, dying alone, with only hospital staff to hold her hand. And me, trapped here—when I should have been with her in Dublin. It makes me wonder why I ever came over here to England. At the end of the day, family and who you are and where you are from is the most important thing, isn't it?"

When it all boils down to it. I'm not sure I will ever come to terms with what happened. Why couldn't the authorities let us travel, why wouldn't the hospitals let us in? Life will never be the same again for me". Questions arose, therefore, about the very essence of being a migrant, about life choices and values for participants. Another respondent, R4., was prompted to make a major life decision after the death of his father, "sadly we lost my father in the first wave of COVID. The rest of my family are still in India, and they were there. I feel like I let him down, and let them all down really. I am making plans to move my family home, to try make amends and to try make peace with what happened. I need to be near my father-his places, even if he is not physically there anymore".

3.2.2. Coping Strategies

So how did diasporas cope with severed travel? Technology was the saviour of familial bonds for most participants. Although, it was challenging for some, with time zone problems expressed, and elderly parents who could not use a computer or the main communication apps and programmes. For many, it was a steep learning curve. P.65 noted, "my mum had never used a laptop before COVID, and she only used her phone to call people. It was an old one so we had to try have someone help her to set up WhatsApp and Zoom but for a while nobody could go to anyone's house. Trying to get her to use it properly was very hard". The majority of study participants used Facetime, Zoom, video calls and regular calls to share thoughts, worries or to think of things to do during the most restrictive time.

One student found it important to share the lockdown experience with others in the same shoes, noting, "I used facetime, calls, sharing feelings with other international students". For many, this was an isolating experience—away from their home country, robbed of the chance to integrate into normal student life, yet locked up in isolation in student halls of residence doing online learning only. "I've never felt so lonely, and I really thought I was going crazy. My room felt like a prison cell, and I missed my family so much. Even if I wanted to quit and go home, I couldn't get out". This links into the earlier emotions of entrapment expressed in Table 2. Helplessness and isolation were very real lived experiences and students suffered particularly badly. In fact, the legacy of moving to online learning led to questions about being an educational migrant moving forward. R 45 questioned "I'm not sure why I am still here really? Half my degree has been online and even now our bigger lectures are still online. What is the point of being here in England? I didn't get to see much of it, or to make proper friends. And worst of all I couldn't get home to see my family to make me feel better for a while, give me a boost, you know? It has been a waste of money and I've lost 2 years of my life. I feel cheated of the experience I dreamed I was going to have. And now I'm broke I wish I had never come here". So, technology was somewhat of a double-edged sword therefore, among participants, depending on the conditions of use.

3.3. Performing Connectivity

The final questions of the study examined the impacts on the lifting of pandemic travel restrictions, experiences and renewed ways of seeing old places and familiar people. A total of 90% of participants had since made a visit home at the time of response. They were asked to express how it felt once restrictions lifted and they were allowed to travel again and to describe the experience of their first return visit(s). It was apparent in the data collection that this ability to "perform connectivity" in person, in real life, in real places of familiarity and tradition was so very important to participants. "I can't wait to go in the door of home", one said, "to give my mother the biggest bear hug in the world, to smell her kitchen, to look at the view out over the fields where I grew up". Most first return trips home were positive experiences: "It felt really freeing to be able to go and spend time with them. It was emotional seeing them again and I hope I won't have to experience this ever again", declared one participant. Another said it was "utterly amazing, bonding, joyful".

Another referred to Maslow's basic need of security and belonging, observing that a visit home "made me feel like life was going back to normal, made me feel safe and reassured".

However, others had more negative, mixed or complex experiences, interestingly: "It felt very bittersweet as we had lost my father during the restrictions. If this had not been the case, I'm sure I'd have felt elated by the freedom". Another respondent felt "angry that I was kept from them so long". Whilst another said it was "nerve racking: I am afraid I might end up infecting my family". That continues to be the case for many, as COVID-19 continues to infect people despite a return now to largely normal travel opportunities.

A return to normality was important as time has passed during this COVID era. Going home and reconnecting with family and friends helped to re-establish bonds and place identities. The concept of "reinstated ritualization" was a central feature of the return of VFR visitation for many diasporas. "We just always go home in August. It's our family holiday. It's what we do and who we are", said one respondent, "the kids are so happy to see their cousins again—though they have all grown so much since we saw them before COVID! We go to our usual local taverna, walk on 'our beach', eat all our lovely Greek food we can't get in England, not the proper stuff anyway. We can be our (Greek) selves here, it is a relief".

The idea of home place-identity itself is heavily affected by an individual's childhood memories or emotional experiences [29]. This was apparent in May respondents' accounts of how important it was for them to go to their places of familiarity and also to ensure that their children knew those places and people too. Obrador [48] notes the invisibility of the family in tourism studies, and the blindness of academic research towards family focused relations and experiences. This study, of VFR and of families ruptured by a global pandemic helps to redress that gap somewhat.

3.4. *The Post-Covid Tourist Gaze*

As mentioned earlier in this paper, studies of the tourist gaze usually focus on the differences the tourist perceives between the visited place and the homeplace. Newness fires our ways of seeing in an exciting and novel way; we notice things that are different—the buildings, food and dress of these "other" places. But VFR travellers seek out the opposite, in that they actively (mostly) search for familiarity in their experiences as touchstones of connective practices. Seeing the faces of family and friends brings joy and recognition—visiting the restaurants, pubs and outdoor spaces of our youth gives us a sense of secure place-identity. In turn, comfort is gained too by families as they welcome home returned migrants, in a connective "mutual gaze" [49]. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, these rituals take on even deeper meanings and appreciations. This study showed that the post-COVID VFR tourist gaze becomes enhanced, with return migrants absorbing every detail of the almost-lost places and people paramount in their lives.

In fact, a VFR "post-pandemic mindful gaze" can be ascertained here through the thematic analysis of participant responses to these first return visits to their homelands. Mindfulness practices [50] core ethos centres on "in the moment presence" and intentionally noticing our emotions, thoughts, actions, and surroundings as they play out in moment-by-moment spaces. Mindfulness asks us to see things with keenly trained observation, noticing the details of nature and environment. These sentiments were reported as responses to the question "do you think you looked at your family, or your homeland in a new or different way this time, compared to other visits in the past?".

Participants in the study universally referred to the (though not in the language of mindfulness) idea of feeling as if they were seeing their family and familiar places almost as if for the first time. R 68 said: "I just couldn't believe I was really home that first time. Flying in to the airport, seeing the different road signs in my language, all the small things you don't normally pay attention to, they all jumped out at me. When I saw my parents, I just cried and held their faces. I couldn't stop looking at them, I had to make sure they were real. And every small detail in the house came alive, all the old ornaments and family pictures. They meant so much because I wasn't sure I'd ever see them again, at least not

with my parents still there. The worry was so awful". Most said that their first visit home was very different to regular visits in the past because of "what might have been lost", as one participant phrased it. Experiencing near death gives us an immediate and jolting sense of our individual and collective mortality. But being offered a second chance by the reduction of the threat, in this case, the COVID-19 virus, gives us renewed joy and ways of seeing. The chance to see loved ones who were cut off for so long creates mindful awareness and, in this context of VFR renewed travel, offers a very unique, life-affirming experience.

The final question in the study asked participants to reflect on their views so far and to take stock of the importance of VFR travel to them personally, now, in light of all that has happened in the pandemic. Some found the situation exacerbated feeling of anxiety and guilt that already accompany (for many) living in a different country to your family. One noted, "visiting family is very important for me but it has been a source of endless stress, concern and guilt over the last few years". However, most participants affirmed the primacy of VFR connections to them. "Well, nothing at all is more important really is it?", reported one, "it is extremely important to visit friends and family. I cannot explain it, but it is vital. UK has been my "home" for many years, but I definitely feel that it is not my forever place. All my family is away and so it will never be the same", said another respondent. "It's very, very important to me", said another participant who said her priorities had now changed "my family, seeing us all together is the top of my list". Another reaffirmed the basic human needs aspect once more, saying, "it's paramount to mental health and feeling comforted". This sense of centrality of importance is apparent throughout the study, but surely must have generated even more intense feelings of conflict in place-affinities and familial loyalties in this very specific crisis context. As one respondent acknowledged in relation to VFR, "it is more important than I realised, and it was almost worth losing it for a couple of years- just to appreciate how important it is to spend time with family and friends".

4. Conclusions

This study captures a significant and specific moment in human history. The lens of VFR experiences offers a unique way of examining this moment within a tourism context. Whilst much of the literature and commentary about the COVID-19 pandemic focused on the economic impact on the tourism sector, this research is impactful in that it directs our learning towards the range of emotions felt by individuals in their diverse lived experiences of not being allowed to engage in VFR travel at a time when it was perhaps needed most. This fills a gap in the existing pandemic-related tourism literature. It also adds to the VFR travel body of research knowledge through its qualitative focus on the emotional and wellbeing impacts of restricted and then renewed travel. Theoretically, it adapts innovative phased uses of Maslow's and Urry's concepts to chart and understand the temporal shifts of basic human needs challenges during the pandemic, and the heightened tourist gaze of post pandemic experiences. Practically, it calls for the tourism sector to learn from the findings of this study in order to attract, encourage, nurture and create meaningful VFR experiences where connectivity, wellbeing and emotions are core values.

Limitations of the study acknowledge the small sample size overall and that it represents a demographic of mainly education sector VFR participants (staff or students made up almost three-quarters of the final sample). However, this sector is highly international in composition in the UK and is a source of regular, structured VFR behaviours. In addition, the nature of work and study for these respondents during the pandemic was converted entirely to online formats, which resulted in deepening senses of remoteness, dislocation and isolation for many. It is acknowledged that a full picture cannot be given across time and space of the changing COVID-19 travel restrictions as they happened across the timespan of the study, but the re-entry requirements to the United Kingdom were common to all respondents as part of their VFR experiences.

To summarise, this study contains multiple key findings of significance: 1. It offers a spatio-temporal case study snapshot of the pandemic crisis in relation to the specific case

of VFR non-travel/renewed travel in a UK diaspora context; 2. Diasporic migrants with multiple identities and belongings, or indeed “(be)longings” for other places and people, absent from their everyday places of residence, faced a unique set of pandemic impacts across a long period of time. Indeed, suspended temporality for connection and for grieving the loss of loved ones caused extensive emotional distress for participants in this study; 3. The research showed that Maslow’s three base levels of human needs, physiological, security and love/belonging, were compromised repeatedly for participants during the course of the pandemic and caused high levels of negative impact on emotional and general wellbeing. The need for these basics is central to VFR travel and this message is important for visitors and sector alike; 4. Notions of identity, home and belonging were shown to be complex, fluid constructs, which interestingly became clearer for some participants because of the crisis. VFR was shown to really matter, deeply, to diaspora, and its value was further heightened/appreciated when it was taken away; 5. It was shown that people, not just place, are central to VFR identity restoration, something not often shown in this form of tourism research. Family matters most at times of threat and dis-connection due to VFR travel restrictions, has had serious personal impacts. A renewed sense of purpose around the importance of regular, repeat visits was shown across the study.

Two key themes are important for the focus of this research and for future VFR studies and practices: the role of emotions and wellbeing, and the emergence of a post-crisis gaze that is useful for capturing specific tourist behavioural opportunities. To examine the first theme, it was shown that the emotional impacts of this extended period of suspended VFR travel were far-reaching for many and displayed intrinsic temporality. During the pandemic, emotions of fear, worry and loss abounded. However, immediately after restrictions eased, there were emotions of elation, joy and gratitude. As time went on, reflective emotions of anger, grief and frustration took over for some respondents. The emotional effect of many elements of tourism is often not explicitly extracted from tourism studies [44] but is critical here—and arguably will continue to be for studies of VFR travel in the near future, due to the “legacy effect” of emotional fallout described above. A future research study assessing this impact longitudinally would make for interesting reading. The limitations of this work include the small sample size and education sector demographic. Future work that widens the scale and scope of study across a wider set of the population would be immensely useful. Simkova and Holzner [51] call for psychology to have a more central role in tourism practice and study, one which this study supports. The impacts of COVID-19 are perhaps extreme in their psychological impacts on VFR travellers. Yet, lessons can be learned about the primacy of psychosocial wellbeing that the field of tourism would do well to embrace more fully.

The second main emergent theme of this research proposes the new concept of the post-Covid “mindful VFR tourist gaze”, which it found had emerged amongst respondents. This highly-tuned attentive awareness characterised “first visits home” after restrictions had eased. Heightened observations of the places and faces of home helped to restore connective bonds between migrant families. Identities were re-affirmed through practices and performances of connectivity. New and renewed ways of seeing were important to respondents who felt the loss of time, particularly with elderly relatives. Unlike general holidaying, where the tourist gaze gives attention to difference, this post-COVID VFR gaze soaked up familiarity as anchoring points of reference and reconnection. Respondents actively sought out familiar places, venues, activities, foods and people from their childhood memories and imagined spaces of home. This study recommends further exploration of this very directed post-COVID gaze in tourism studies, again across wider cross-sections of the population.

Pre-COVID research by Backer and Ritchie [52] proposed an important role of VFR travel and tourism in crisis management and disaster recovery—perhaps somewhat prophetically, this is true now more so than ever. This research indicates that the economics and emotions of “recovery” are more intrinsically linked than they are given credit for. Recommendations for the tourism industry based on this research, include: finding out what

really matters most to general tourists as well as VFR travellers, can help the sector to reframe the essence of post-COVID tourism experiences and offerings. Fresh air to breathe, nature, wellbeing, heritage, and family, move from background contexts to centre-stage in the new world we occupy. Niche tourism opportunities exist in these green and blue space wellbeing contexts, and in new ways of “doing family tourism”. Co-creating travel and tourism experiences that allow families and friends to connect, spend time together meaningfully and safely will be key messages moving forward. Marketing campaigns and product provision that appeal to emotional connectedness, “seeing the old with new eyes”, shared legacies of individual and collective heritage of place over the life course—all matter in new ways to post Covid VFR travellers. As one of the largest tourism segments, the social and psychological lessons learned in this study can be applied in new ways and through new offerings in the VFR sector. Understanding how we can learn from this crisis through experiential reflection is paramount.

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