

# ARTICLES

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## NON-FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES' EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR DURING CRISES: A COMPARISON BETWEEN ESSENTIAL AND NON-ESSENTIAL INDUSTRIES

*Comportamento emocional de funcionários fora da linha de frente durante crises: Uma comparação entre indústrias essenciais e não essenciais*

*Comportamiento emocional de los empleados que no están en primera línea durante las crisis: una comparación entre las industrias esenciales y no esenciales*

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### ABSTRACT

The development of organizational strategies to face crises should identify, analyze, and use employee emotions. This study provides a comparative perspective between the emotions of non-frontline employees in essential and non-essential companies during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic – an event that caused major organizational crises. Content analysis identified the same emotions in both industries, albeit to different extents. Employees in the essential industry expressed more interest, less sympathy, and less anxiety, which may have occurred due to a more significant sense of purpose and security in this industry. Hopefulness, gratitude, and love appeared similarly in both essential and non-essential industries. Work-related variables and demographics have no significant contribution toward the prevalence of emotions. As a contribution, this study uncovered similarities and differences between industries, providing a relevant and profound understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the emotional state of non-frontline employees.

**Keywords:** Organizational crisis, employee well-being, essential industry, non-essential industry, content analysis.

### RESUMO

*As emoções dos funcionários devem ser consideradas como dados para identificar, analisar e utilizar no desenvolvimento de estratégias organizacionais durante as crises. O objetivo deste estudo é identificar e comparar as emoções dos funcionários de setores classificados como essenciais e não essenciais durante os primeiros dias da pandemia da Covid-19, classificada como uma grave crise organizacional. Uma análise de conteúdo mostra que as mesmas emoções existem em ambos os grupos, mas em proporções diferentes. Na indústria essencial, os funcionários demonstraram mais interesse, menos ansiedade e menos compaixão. Isso se deve a um maior senso de propósito e segurança conferido pelo tipo de indústria. Otimismo, gratidão e amor aparecem de modo semelhante em ambas as indústrias. Variáveis relacionadas ao trabalho e fatores demográficos não têm incidência na prevalência das emoções. Como contribuição, este estudo encontrou semelhanças e diferenças entre os setores e fornece uma compreensão relevante e profunda de como a pandemia da Covid-19 determinou o estado emocional dos funcionários.*

**Palavras-chaves:** Crise organizacional, bem-estar dos funcionários, indústria essencial, indústria não essencial, análise de conteúdo.

### RESUMEN

*Las emociones de los empleados deben ser consideradas como datos a identificar, analizar y usar en el desarrollo de estrategias organizacionales durante las crisis. El propósito de este estudio es identificar y comparar las emociones de los empleados que no están en primera línea, de industrias clasificadas como esenciales y no esenciales durante los primeros días de la pandemia de COVID-19, un evento que provocó severas crisis organizacionales. El análisis de contenido identificó las mismas emociones en ambas industrias, aunque en diferentes proporciones. En la industria esencial, los empleados demostraron más interés, menos ansiedad y menos compasión, lo que puede deberse a un mayor sentido de propósito y de seguridad otorgado por el tipo de industria. Optimismo, gratitud y amor aparecieron de forma similar en ambas industrias. Las variables relacionadas con el trabajo y factores demográficos no tienen incidencia significativa en la prevalencia de las emociones. Como contribución, este estudio encontró similitudes y diferencias entre las industrias y provee un relevante y profundo entendimiento de cómo la pandemia de COVID-19 determinó el estado emocional de los empleados que no están en primera línea.*

**Palabras clave:** Crisis organizacional, bienestar del empleado, industria esencial, industria no-esencial, análisis de contenido.

Emotions aren't noise. They are data.  
– Sigal Barsade

## INTRODUCTION

An organizational crisis may result from any political or social event that occurs at a macro level, causing uncertainty in the workplace (Hughes & Donnelly, 2022; Psychogios & Prouska, 2021). However, it is impossible to predict and prepare for every potential crisis (Riggio & Newstead, 2023). Given the contagion potential of COVID-19, firms worldwide responded by allowing employees to practice social distancing by working from home, either mandated by law or voluntarily, raising to 88% the percentage of the knowledge workforce performing remote work worldwide (Meister & Brown, 2020). The novelty of remote work, added to social distancing, generated a scenario of uncertainty representing a significant and intractable organizational crisis (Madero et al., 2020; Nava, 2022). The impact of crises depends on how well they are managed. Effective management is more likely to produce positive outcomes, while inadequate management may engender adverse consequences (Hamouche, 2021; Milburn et al., 1983; Riggio & Newstead, 2023). Therefore, comprehensive studies on critical events such as the COVID-19 pandemic are essential to derive valuable insights.

Past research has shown how recurrently and unwaveringly emotions arise during organizational crises and significantly impact employee performance, engagement, creativity, commitment, and assertive decision-making consistently across industries and organizational levels (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Cénat et al., 2020; Hamouche, 2021; He et al., 2023; Hughes & Donnelly, 2022; Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013; Kirk & Rifkin, 2020; Sorensen et al., 2022). Emotions shape employees' behaviors at work and should be regarded as data that must be collected to understand what motivates employees and what makes them feel appreciated and enthusiastic at work, especially during times of upheaval (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016). Therefore, identifying emotions and exploring the factors that trigger them must be an ongoing organizational concern, especially in times of crisis. This understanding allows for capitalizing on positive emotions toward achieving organizational goals and proactively addressing the difficulties associated with negative emotions.

Research on the COVID-19 pandemic has assessed its impact on frontline employees, particularly healthcare professionals (e.g., He et al., 2023; Noor et al., 2021; Platania et al., 2022; Trumello et al., 2020), but academic research needs to address non-frontline employees as well. These workers, who do not have a hands-on role, are responsible for enabling frontline workers to perform efficiently and effectively. In addition, stressful events like massive social distancing, quarantine, and isolation were new to the workforce worldwide and posed further challenges beyond the work itself. This study constitutes the first effort, to our knowledge, to focus on the subjective experience of non-frontline employees by bestowing an in-depth understanding of their emotions and providing a comparative perspective between essential industries, i.e.,

those that partially operated to serve the population when governments declared lockdowns and non-essential industries, encompassing those that completely stop operating during lockdowns, observing the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies conducted during crises, are necessary but, unfortunately, scarce because of the low willingness of companies and individuals to be part of real-time crisis research. In addition, as organizational crises are becoming increasingly common (Sommer et al., 2016) and the economy can be divided into essential and non-essential industries, it is relevant to understand how employees react individually and collectively.

Current times, marked with increased uncertainty and unprecedented challenges, increase the relevance of qualitative management research. Based on functional emotion theory (Izard, 1992) and through content analysis, this paper aims to identify and categorize the predominant emotions that arise in each industry. Then a comparison between industries informed by affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) is conducted. As a contribution, this paper provides important insights into why certain emotions are more likely to appear in each industry type. Interest, an emotion that poses a strong professional impact, was observed more frequently in the essential industry, whereas sympathy and anxiety were more widespread in the non-essential industry. Hopefulness, gratitude, and love prevailed similarly in both industries. Demographic variables and the number of working hours showed no significance as drivers of emotions. This study has helped us understand how and why non-frontline employees in the essential industry seem to develop a better emotional state that allows for capitalizing on the changes derived from an organizational crisis. Approaches for human resources (HR) on how to capitalize positive emotions and proactively address the hardships of negative emotions are provided. These insights are precious to organizations in any field.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Organizational crisis

An organizational crisis significantly affects operations, stakeholders, and results (Milburn et al., 1983; Sorensen et al., 2022). While there are multiple definitions of organizational crisis, all of them express the involvement of various stakeholders, the crisis' imminent impact on achieving goals, whether it can be predicted, its association with positive or negative pre-conditions, and the possibility of positive or negative outcomes. An organizational crisis is a demand or threat that reduces an organization's ability to function and attain its goals, so it must be prioritized (Milburn et al., 1983). How the crisis is managed determines the effect on gains or losses. Severe organizational crises offer more significant uncertainty about how to resolve the situation, and if mismanaged, damages to the current image of organizations can occur (Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013).

Leaders and organizational stakeholders view crises as unanticipated, extremely significant, and potentially harmful (Wu et al., 2021). According to previous studies, there is no circumstance

where leadership is more crucial than in a crisis (Riggio & Newstead, 2023). Due to the significant impact of crises, there is a sense of urgency to address them quickly and wisely. Failure to do so may result in the organization's collapse as the consequences intensify over time (Riggio & Newstead, 2023). In addition, past research has found that organizational crises produce generalized negative emotions among corporate members (Ozcelik et al., 2020; Restubog et al., 2020), creating diverse implications for HR management (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Clercq & Pereira, 2023; Lloyd et al., 2020).

## Emotions during organizational crises

Emotions are basic information processing systems designed to understand and respond to contexts and circumstances. Functional emotion theory explains how emotions impact individuals' allocation of mental and physical resources to respond to messages or events (Adolphs & Andler, 2018; Izard, 1992). According to the theory, when an emotion is triggered, it comes with an associated behavioral propensity that influences the level of attention given to the stimuli and the deployment of resources to attain the goal activated by the emotion. Therefore, emotions prompt a selective reception of information and processing, allowing the attainment of motivational goals (Nabi, 1999).

Basic emotions are discrete, psychologically primitive, include neural, bodily, and motivational components, and are independent of cognition (Izard, 1992). Emotions are not just disruptive and maladaptive forces that impact human beings but antecedents of behavioral intentions that reduce the negative states and enhance the positive (Lazarus, 1993; Spector & Fox, 2002). Positive emotions are related to organizational citizenship behaviors, while negative emotions produce counter-productive work behaviors, poor performance, and high turnover (Beetz & Ozcelik, 2021; Clercq & Pereira, 2023; Greenidge & Coyne, 2014; Ozcelik et al., 2020). For instance, greater workplace loneliness drives negative emotions, which relate to less affective commitment to the organization and lower job performance (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018; Sullivan & Bendell, *in press*). Hopefulness can help employees to engage in a collective process of resilience (Cénat et al., 2020), and gratitude offsets negative attitudes and promotes moral behaviors in the workplace (Chen et al., 2020).

Studies on emotional responses to crises have spotlighted negative emotions: anger, sadness, fright, and anxiety (Israelashvili, 2021; Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013). In organizational contexts, anger mainly occurs when the organization is blamed for the harmful outputs of the crisis. The loss of tangible or intangible benefits produces sadness. Fright results from uncertainty about coping with the crisis where avoidance or escape are seen as viable courses of action. Lastly, anxiety stems from the perception of imminent and unavoidable danger. Employees can feel anxious when they judge the organization as not doing enough to solve the crisis or by an “always on duty” work ethic that threatens work-life balance (Jin et al., 2012). Studies conducted on the negative effects of COVID-19 on work suggest that employees who experience anxiety may also experience reduced work engagement and performance (Clercq & Pereira, 2023).

Positive emotions may seem unwarranted and even inappropriate during a crisis. Nevertheless, they are elicited simultaneously with negative emotions. The most common emotions with positive valence produced during crises are gratefulness, interest, hopefulness, love, and sympathy (Israelashvili, 2021; Jin et al., 2012). Gratefulness refers to being appreciative of being better off than others despite the negative consequences of the crisis. Interest relates to involvement during the crisis, which elicits moments of alertness or curiosity. Hopefulness involves optimism amidst the challenges and troubles posed by the crisis. Love refers to feelings of closeness, support, and trust with other individuals. Lastly, sympathy entails compassion for those the crisis has more severely harmed.

The cognitive broadening resulting from feelings of positive emotion enhances the effects of coping strategies during adversity. In addition, positive emotions in the aftermath of crises safeguard resilient individuals from depression and other mental diseases, in line with the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, which posits that positive emotions are unique and adaptive as they broaden individuals' supply of thoughts and actions. Over time, this broadening also impacts individuals' physical, social, intellectual, and psychological capabilities (Fredrickson, 2001). Concurrently, expressing emotions at work or referencing private-life roles and items is discouraged in many workplaces. The underlying reasoning supports the assumption that the primary imperative of the "ideal worker" should be work (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015). While this facilitates the management of role responsibilities, it ignores emotions as valuable data with high predictive power. This explicit knowledge can help the organization thrive by cultivating desirable emotions and acting upon the non-desirable (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016).

## Essential and non-essential industries

The COVID-19 pandemic made governments across the world halt operations to limit the spread of the virus, dividing the economy into two clusters: essential and non-essential industries. The main difference is that essential industries faced a partial halt of in-person operations, whereas non-essential industries completely stopped or started to operate fully remotely. Research on this distinction has been scant and primarily focused on the economic impact of the pandemic. Regarding the HR scholarship, the healthcare industry has attracted the most research. For example, it has been found that levels of stress, burnout, secondary trauma, anxiety, and depression are significantly higher in frontline versus non-frontline employees (Noor et al., 2021; Platania et al., 2022; Trumello et al., 2020). In non-healthcare contexts, it was also found that essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced negative effects on their work engagement, prosocial behavior, supportiveness, and higher levels of exhaustion. Moreover, they felt undervalued and perceived inadequate support or recognition for their contributions (Beetz & Ozelik, 2021). In addition, a connection between being a frontline worker and engaging in unhealthy behaviors was discovered (Martin et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the extant literature on human resources falls short in conducting comparative research on non-frontline employees working for firms categorized as essential and non-essential within the same time frame. It is

highly probable that their emotional responses, attitudes, and behaviors may vary based on the nature of the industry they belong to.

Cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1993) and affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) constitute an appropriate explanatory framework to understand how organizational crises constitute affective experiences that influence employees' emotional states, impacting their attitudes and behaviors. Employees assess events differently; thus, appraisals can fluctuate among individuals (Nezlek et al., 2008). Both theories agree that when an event occurs, employees conduct an appraisal to evaluate if the event is beneficial or detrimental to attaining a desired goal, and based on this, the resulting emotion is deemed positive or negative. According to cognitive appraisal theory, the opinion that individuals form about events in their workplace activates an emotional reaction process which is the source of emotions and subsequent attitudes and behaviors (Lazarus, 1993). Affective events theory places events as antecedents of emotions and reinforces the importance of affective experiences at work (Weiss & Beal, 2005). According to the theory, the difference in the interpretation of an organizational event, or, in this case, an organizational crisis, lies in the employees' appraisal of it, leading to different affective reactions and behaviors.

The field of Human Resource Management (HRM) encountered a series of daunting and rapidly-evolving challenges, compounded by the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which derived in varying approaches and strategies in each organization (Amorim et al., 2022). Under the novel and uncertain circumstances of an organizational crisis, employees in essential and non-essential industries may evaluate the same event differently, potentially resulting in divergent emotional responses. Notably, such responses are shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by perceptions of risk and expectations contingent upon the industry classification (i.e., essential or non-essential) in which they are employed. Therefore, the following research questions were developed:

Research Question 1: Which discrete emotions are experienced by non-frontline employees during an organizational crisis?

Research question 2: What are the differences between the emotions experienced by non-frontline employees in essential and non-essential industries during an organizational crisis?

## METHOD

To answer the research questions, a qualitative content analysis was performed. Participants were asked to share their feelings and experiences during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic anonymously and confidentially through a self-administered web-based survey. No further information was given so the respondents could answer with free and non-directive speech. Demographic information and the number of daily remote work hours were requested.

Data were gathered in a single national context in the same location in Mexico to avoid cultural heterogeneity. A manufacturing company of medical supplies represents the essential industry (partial halt of in-person operations), and a private university represents the non-essential (total halt of in-person operations). Data collection occurred during April 2-16, 2020, with the support of both organizations. Table 1 shows the sample composition after scrutiny.

**Table 1.** Sample composition

		Essential		Non-essential	
Total		271		221	
Gender	Male	98	36%	87	39%
	Female	173	64%	134	61%
Age	22-39	110	41%	79	36%
	40-56	136	50%	115	52%
	Above 57	25	9%	27	12%
Lives with	Alone	12	4%	21	10%
	Friends	2	1%	7	3%
	Partner	34	13%	38	17%
	Partner and children	170	63%	121	55%
	Extended family	53	20%	34	15%
Number of working hours	6 - 7	64	24%	58	26%
	8 - 10	164	61%	101	46%
	Ten or more	43	16%	62	28%

Note. The contents of this table are based on the authors' own study and data.

Qualitative content analysis is a research method that allows the subjective interpretation of the content in a text through a systematic process of identification, classification, and coding of themes or patterns. Accordingly, the task goes beyond identifying, counting, and classifying words as knowledge must be uncovered by integrating the results into a profound and exhaustive description of the phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This study relied on accepted guidelines (Yin, 2017) to accomplish both academic rigor and strengthen its credibility. To ensure trustworthiness, participants' anonymity and the possibility of free speech allowed participants to express and reveal emotions. The answers ranged from one to several sentences and offered insight into the emotions that prevailed at that moment. For ensuring validity, data collection through a survey instead of interviews facilitated the collection of detailed, varied, and abundant observations during the desired timeframe for the study - the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, authors engaged in the process of challenging each other's interpretations and insights until consensus was achieved.

Following Boyatzis (1998) and Yin (2017), content analysis was conducted. First, responses were read, and preliminary codes were highlighted using NVIVO-12. Each response included one to ten codes. Second, a codebook was developed to classify similar codes into overarching themes. The first author classified all codes, and the second author classified a random set of 10% of the codes, resulting in 95% agreement. After discussion, 100% consensus was achieved. Third, through a series of theoretically meaningful appraisals and their interpretation, the themes were associated with different emotions. For that, the authors relied on general descriptions of emotions. For counting purposes, having at least one code in any of the themes associated with the emotion meant that the participant showed that emotion. As a result, the preponderant emotions in each industry were computed. Finally, descriptive statistics were calculated, and comparisons between industries were performed using Mann-Whitney U tests.

## RESULTS

The answers' examination, analysis, and coding resulted in the identification of 457 codes in the essential industry and 340 in the non-essential, which were classified into 22 positive and three negative themes. The subsequently included verbatim quotations were translated from Spanish into English for reporting, adhering to the exact wording so that meanings were not altered. The most common theme in both industries referred to showing love for their families, which included expressions of love and caring for family members: "I like very much to take care of my daughter and my husband, and that makes me very happy. Before, I seldom spent time with them except for Sundays." This theme was associated with love.

Enjoying remote work was the second most common theme in both samples. Participants felt reinvigorated by the novelty of this type of work: "I very much enjoy working from home without interruptions and at my own pace." Some participants expressed more commitment to their organization for letting them work from home, as this was not a government mandate: "I'd like to express my gratitude to the organization for letting us work from home. Now I feel safe." Others referred to the opportunity for procuring their own professional development by learning new skills and developing new capabilities: "The pandemic has been an opportunity to develop new capabilities such as the use of communication tools and software." Productivity and innovation were also mentioned: "Technology and innovation allow us to go further and be more productive than before; of course, some discipline is needed, but I feel very motivated." A few others expressed enthusiasm regarding adapting a working area at home: "Since the beginning of confinement, I chose a quiet place at home and adapted it to make it more comfortable for my virtual meetings. This allows me to move forward with my activities." These themes and those related to reaching organizational goals and saving resources were associated with interest.

A set of codes related to how this crisis has been a unique opportunity to take care of spiritual, physical, and mental health were classified as procuring own well-being: "I think that working from home has been a blessing. I've been investing in my well-being. I eat healthy



breakfasts, don't get stressed in the traffic, and cook healthy dinners for my family and me. My well-being has positively impacted my work as I am more focused and creative." In addition, expressions about having a positive attitude amidst the pandemic were found: "The world crisis is related to growth when it is based on profound changes. This new situation must be taken as an opportunity for growth. I foresee unavoidable changes in our way of living and working. This will be an evolution. All changes are good." Participants also expressed acquiring work-life balance: "I miss going to my workplace, but thanks to this situation, I can spend more time with my family. I have found a work-life balance at last." Another positive theme refers to adaptation. The capacity to quickly recover from difficulties and challenges, commonly known as resilience, was articulated by several participants: "Adapt or perish, in all possible senses: labor, physical and emotional." They expressed that resilience and patience have been critical elements for making positive adjustments in their lives under the challenging conditions that prevailed: "Resilience is 2020's top capability." These themes were associated with hopefulness, along with enjoying new routines, living the moment, being patient, and making self-discoveries.

Another common theme is appreciation of different aspects of life, like having a job, which meant an income and access to material resources to alleviate the crisis. Codes about having health were also shared: "I have learned that we must cherish our health. We must value our jobs, our family, friends, and co-workers that are willing to cooperate with us and rise to the challenge." Participants also expressed appreciation for the lack of commute as a benefit that allows more time to spend with family, cook, exercise, or take on a hobby: "I extremely cherish not having to drive for three hours every day. I used to leave home at 6 am and return at 8 pm. Not having to commute is priceless." All these themes were associated with gratitude.

A few participants mentioned solidarity toward the people affected by the pandemic, either by sickness or economic loss: "Having compassion and empathy are important qualities. We need to step into the shoes of others and feel what they are feeling" or "We need compassion to provide safety and understanding for those in need." This theme was associated with empathy.

In what concerns the negative themes, health concerns were the most common, which is understandable given the severity of the virus and the lack of proper treatment and vaccines at that time. Some participants were also concerned about the government's poor capabilities to get them through the pandemic: "We need to acknowledge the fragility of our health, social, labor, and economic structures." Day-to-day concerns ranged from the lack of an appropriate environment at home to the increased daily workload: "I would like to work from home if the number of meetings hasn't increased so much. It seems that our leaders want us to be in meetings all day to justify our paycheck." More relevant aspects of work also surfaced: "We used to take for granted everything we had at work. Now we have lost our freedom. We are not able to make long-term plans anymore." Lastly, concerns about the conviviality in the household, namely the combination of work and domestic chores were mentioned: "It is tough to work from home as I must clean, do laundry, cook, and take care of my children while taking care of my customers, filing reports, and attending virtual meetings. I have been forced to change all my habits in an instant." The three negative themes identified corresponded to anxiety.

In the essential industry, the preponderant emotions, in order of frequency, were interest, hopefulness, gratitude, love, anxiety, and sympathy. In contrast, in the non-essential industry, the order changed to hopefulness, interest, gratitude, anxiety, love, and sympathy. As in prior research (Cénat et al., 2020; Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013; Sommer et al., 2016), employees experienced more positive than negative emotions overall. The steps followed in conducting the content analysis, the themes identified in each sample, and their associated emotions are provided in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Data structure: Codes, themes, and associated emotions

Step 1		Step 2	Step 3	
<i>Codification</i> <i>First-order concepts</i>		<i>Condensation of codes into themes</i> <i>Second-order themes</i>	<b>Association to emotions</b> <i>Aggregate dimension</i>	
Number of codes		Themes	% of respondents	
Essential industry	Non-essential industry		Essential industry	Non-essential industry
48	8	Enjoying new routines	41%	47%
29	23	Having a positive attitude	<b>Hopefulness</b>	
11	8	Living the moment		
10	11	Being patient		
9	14	Procuring own well-being		
4	10	Making self-discoveries		
6	9	Acquiring work-life balance		
6	8	Being resilient		
49	33	Enjoying remote work	41%	29%
34	9	Being more committed at work	<b>Interest</b>	
30	2	Reaching organizational goals		
11	14	Being more productive		
9	15	Being more innovative		
5	0	Procuring own's professional development		
5	4	Saving resources		
7	0	Adapting to remote work		

Continue

**Table 2.** Data structure: Codes, themes, and associated emotions

Concludes

Step 1		Step 2	Step 3	
Codification First-order concepts		Condensation of codes into themes Second-order themes	Association to emotions Aggregate dimension	
Number of codes		Themes	% of respondents	
Essential industry	Non-essential industry		Essential industry	Non-essential industry
57	35	Loving for their families	22%	18%
			<b>Love</b>	
30	32	Being appreciative of having a job	27%	25%
22	12	Being appreciative for saving time	<b>Gratitude</b>	
20	16	Being appreciative of being healthy		
6	0	Reinforcing spiritual life		
13	22	Being empathetic	5%	10%
			<b>Sympathy</b>	
24	20	Having health concerns	14%	22%
11	18	Having work concerns	<b>Anxiety</b>	
1	17	Having conviviality concerns		

Note. The contents of this table are based on the authors' own study and data.

The last part of the analysis focused on the comparison between samples. For each participant, the emotion's presence was accounted for if at least one code referred to that emotion. Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to examine the statistical significance between the emotions found in each group. Results are shown in **Table 3**. There were only three emotions with significant differences: The participants in the essential industry ( $M=.41$ ,  $SD=.49$ ) compared to those in the non-essential ( $M=.29$ ,  $SD=.46$ ) demonstrated significantly more interest ( $p=.008$ ). Participants in the non-essential industry showed more sympathy ( $p=.028$ ) (Essential  $M=0.05$ ,  $SD=0.21$ ; Non-essential  $M=0.10$ ,  $SD=0.31$ ) and more anxiety ( $p=.046$ ) (Essential  $M=0.14$ ,  $SD=0.35$ .; Non-essential  $M=0.22$ ,  $SD=0.41$ ). Differences between samples were insignificant concerning hopefulness, gratitude, and love. **Table 3** shows the Mann-Whitney U test results.

**Table 3.** Mann-Whitney U test results

		Essential		Non-essential		Mann-Whitney U Mean difference Test	
Emotion		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	z-score	p-value
Negative	Anxiety	0.14	0.35	0.22	0.41	-2.117	0.046*
Positive	Gratitude	0.27	0.44	0.25	0.43	0.423	0.749
	Interest	0.413	0.49	0.29	0.46	2.737	0.008**
	Love	0.22	0.42	0.18	0.37	1.495	0.166
	Hopefulness	0.405	0.49	0.47	0.5	-1.438	0.178
	Sympathy	0.05	0.21	0.10	0.31	-2.374	0.028*

Notes: \* p-value <.05, \*\* p-value <.01. The contents of this table are based on the authors' own study and data.

The influence of work-related and demographic variables on the prevalence of emotions was explored using several regression techniques. However, no results showed statistical significance toward differences across demographics. While disappointing, these results were not unexpected, as the codification of emotional responses captured their presence but not their intensity; thus, regressions lacked sufficient power to find differences.

## DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a major organizational crisis with solid implications for organizational behavior theory and practice (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Hughes & Donnelly, 2022; Kniffin et al., 2021; Madero et al., 2020). Despite its exploratory nature, this study adds to the growing body of literature on emotions at work by identifying the preponderant emotions of non-frontline employees during the beginning of an organizational crisis and providing a comparative perspective between industries deemed essential and non-essential.

### Theoretical implications

Drawing upon our research inquiries, identical sets of six fundamental emotions, namely interest, love, gratitude, hopefulness, sympathy, and anxiety, were observed in both

industries, albeit with varying degrees of manifestation. Consistent with previous studies, this investigation revealed that constructive emotions persist and hold noteworthy implications for organizations and their constituents, even in times of turmoil. The preponderance of positive emotions, as opposed to negative emotions, among non-frontline workers during the crisis is likely attributable to their relatively higher sense of control and agency in contrast to frontline workers who experienced a considerable reduction in their sense of control and agency (Hughes & Donnelly, 2022; Israelashvili, 2021; Jin et al., 2012; Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013). From this study, it is evident that non-frontline employees had a more profound cognitive broadening resulting from feelings of positive emotions which enhanced the effects of their coping strategies during the adversity (Fredrickson, 2001) and could adopt proactive and resilient behavior as found by extant research (Cénat et al., 2020; Kirk & Rifkin, 2020; Platania et al., 2022).

Notable dissimilarities were observed between industries, with employees in the essential industry demonstrating greater levels of interest, lower levels of anxiety, and reduced displays of sympathy compared to their counterparts in the non-essential industry. The inquiry into the underlying causes of this phenomenon assumes particular significance. As functional emotion theory suggests, emotions facilitate adaptive responses to environmental challenges (Izard, 1992). However, employee evaluation about the changes in their workplace ignites the emotional reactions process as expressed by affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). The COVID-19 pandemic was perceived and processed differently by employees due to contextual factors (Kniffin et al., 2021), which explains differing emotions between industries. Within the essential industry, a subset of employees was allowed to work remotely, while others were obligated to perform on-site tasks. This circumstance engendered divergent assessments of security concerning the privileged position of those permitted to work from home in contrast to their peers who faced the hazards of venturing outside, and purpose, with the company regarded as an essential contributor to the common good during a period of hardship. Consistent with the predictions of affective events theory, the concurrent elevation of the sense of purpose and security engendered a heightened state of interest as a potent and dynamic emotion that precedes favorable behavior (Dupret & Pultz, 2021). Another noteworthy discovery is the observation that nearly half of the participants in the essential industry demonstrated interest, whereas, in the non-essential industry, the proportion was just under one-third. This observation may be due to the same principles of the affective events theory.

Sympathy was significantly less common in the essential industry. In the same vein, the evaluation these employees made of the situation led them to believe they were already contributing to the greater good as members of an essential industry. The emotional regulation that cultivates empathy and compassion toward others may exist in all participants. However, it manifested more in individuals in the non-essential industry whose sense of purpose during the crisis may have been affected (Dupret & Pultz, 2021).

While an array of negative emotions during the COVID-19 crisis has been identified (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021; Ozcelik et al., 2020; Restubog et al., 2020), in this study, only anxiety surfaced. This outcome was anticipated given the historical precedent of psychological distress stemming from contagion management tactics, such as social distancing and lockdown, as witnessed during the H1N1 outbreak in 2006 (Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013; Restubog et al., 2020). However, the relatively lower incidence of anxiety among employees in the essential industry was an unanticipated finding.

We posit that the evaluation of the event, as indicated by affective events theory, was influenced by a contextual factor, namely the type of industry, essential or non-essential, in which the individual was employed (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). As people interpret eliciting events differently, an enhanced sense of purpose in the essential industry can translate into more or better coping mechanisms, as shown by the greater number of codes related to adaptation, patience, and resilience (Cénat et al., 2020; Greenidge & Coyne, 2014; Platania et al., 2022; Vicario-Merino & Muñoz-Agustin, 2020). This crisis was probably viewed as a challenge to which they reacted with more emotional intelligence (Greenidge & Coyne, 2014). As emotions function as heuristics that inform individuals about how to behave in response to stimuli (Izard, 1992), an interplay between interest and anxiety may also exist. Thus, an interested emotional state derives in more productive and committed behaviors, decreasing anxiety (Ozcelik et al., 2020; Platania et al., 2022; Restubog et al., 2020). Furthermore, it appears that a dearth of action during a crisis, as experienced by employees in the non-essential industry, can elicit comparable emotional states and behaviors as an excess of action, as experienced by frontline workers (Martin et al., 2022).

Another critical finding lies in the absence of statistical differences between the industries for certain emotions: gratitude, love, and hopefulness. By functional emotion theory (Izard, 1992), emotions facilitate individuals' adaptive responses to challenges in the environment and the organization. The aforementioned emotions may be less dependent on the context (Chen et al., 2020), meaning they can arise regardless of the particular circumstances.

Finally, past studies suggest that demographics and specific working conditions influence the development of negative emotions. For instance, young employees have less work experience and typically hold lower positions, making them an economically vulnerable group with more propensity to negative emotions (Restubog et al., 2020). Similarly, it has been suggested that women suffered greater distress during the COVID-19 pandemic (Qiu et al., 2020). Also, organizational crises can have pervasive consequences for employees' well-being when paired with irregular and increased working hours (Restubog et al., 2020). Surprisingly, this study did not find a significant relationship between positive or negative emotions and the demographic variables or the number of work hours. As mentioned earlier, these results may be due to the codification of the responses, which captured the presence or absence of the emotion but not its intensity. It may also be the case that the benefits of remote work elicited a more positive appraisal of the event, which in turn has offset the negative implications found in past studies.

## Implications for HR

Human Resource Management encountered demanding and rapidly-paced difficulties while organizations tackled the COVID-19 pandemic in diverse ways (Amorim et al., 2022). This study's exploratory intention is to provide insights to inform HR practitioners on the particularities of non-frontline workers in both essential and non-essential industries. Through the findings of this study, recommendations can be offered to the HR practice for effective management amidst adverse conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic may mark a milestone for the chief HR officers, as the financial crisis in 2008 did for the chief financial officers. Leadership is particularly critical in times of crisis, and there are no circumstances where their active involvement is more essential (Riggio & Newstead, 2023). More than ever, they are entrusted with a huge responsibility and opportunity to provide the guidance and assurance needed to cope with uncertain situations (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021; Hamouche, 2021; Meister & Brown, 2020). Leading by example, they must allow the expression, measurement, and management of emotions in the workplace (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016), with a particular focus on cultivating the ones that directly impact organizational results. For instance, as uncovered herein, interest is the most common positive emotion experienced by non-frontline employees. Efficiency-oriented strategies such as intensive training to enhance job-related skills and individual performance metrics and rewards should be implemented to maintain employees' heightened interest (Rivera-Prieto et al., 2022).

As revealed by this study, employees in the non-essential industry exhibited a higher level of anxiety. The HR function must identify and manage sources of anxiety, such as uncertainty. Participants in the non-essential industry showed more concern about losing their jobs or missing promotion opportunities. Anxiety can foster negative actions, which may include stealing company resources, hiding mistakes, or intentionally slowing down work. This is because they feel that their jobs are at risk, which may prompt them to act against the interests of their employer (Clercq & Pereira, 2023). Techniques that foster adaptation and resilience must be developed and shared among the organization members so that the accompaniment through the crisis is aimed toward mutual benefits (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021; Cénat et al., 2020; Pinnington & Ayoko, 2021; Sommer et al., 2016). Emotion-oriented strategies are also much needed to enhance purposefulness at individual and organizational levels. It is important to note that not everything is negative about anxiety. The shared stress and frustrations can form ties that bind colleagues beyond normal circumstances (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Cénat et al., 2020), and this should also be addressed.

Well-being research has been proven timely in academia and practice, specifically, the importance of mental health at work. As the future of the workplace is increasingly dependent on the worker's well-being, establishing effective coping mechanisms becomes crucial to attenuate or eradicate the harmful stressors provoked by the crisis (Ozcelik et al., 2020; Pinnington & Ayoko, 2021). As hybrid work models prevail, new forms of collaboration should be instituted to privilege the creation of positive emotions, employee engagement, and productivity during remote work (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). A newly created position such as a Chief Remote Officer would

provide employees working remotely with adequate communication, supervision, and support (Vozza, 2022). Special attention must be given to personal needs considering that not all employees have ideal working conditions at home. In addition, human contact, generally taken for granted, has proven vital for employees' well-being and work-related capabilities (Gao & Sai, 2020). On the contrary, isolation triggers negative emotions, disengagement, low job satisfaction, and poor performance (Vicario-Merino & Muñoz-Agustin, 2020).

Greater levels of communication are associated with increased propensities for persistence and innovation in response to COVID-19. This suggests that companies can enhance their ability to bounce back from COVID-19 or other crises by strengthening their communication strategies (Fuller et al., 2023). In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic can teach us about emotional functioning while in a crisis. The HR function should rise to the occasion with the optimal levels of sensitivity, flexibility, and open-mindedness needed to manage diverse emotions, especially in non-essential companies, in which coping strategies could be limited. However, a multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder-oriented approach is much needed as HR alone is unlikely to produce the required knowledge on all the physical, mental, and physiological challenges that a crisis presents (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Riggio & Newstead, 2023).

## Limitations and future research

This study, although valuable, has some limitations. One is the use of a single organization within each industry. We attempted to delve into how and why individuals felt the way they did through the content analysis of their answers, which is always subject to potential bias. Also, responses to the survey might have been influenced by the temptation to offer socially desirable answers despite the anonymity of the data collection instrument. Moreover, the findings might have been limited by the scope of the research question. A natural progression of this work is further exploring the distinction between essential and non-essential industries through more complex predictive models. Specifically, this study calls for more work on non-frontline employees and incorporating moderating variables such as employee hierarchy and tenure. Similarly, certain emotions may be more likely to be expressed based on an individual's personality traits, although this aspect was not investigated in the study (Spector & Fox, 2002).

Emotions arise recurrently and unwaveringly during unexpected events, impacting the employees' personal and professional lives differently (Kim & Niederdepppe, 2013). Examining these emotions, classified according to the personal or professional sphere in which they impact the most, represents another avenue of future research. As the evolution of the workplace environments to post-pandemic models has engendered new paradigms and challenges related to remote and hybrid work, further examination is required. Aspects such as employee well-being, quality of life at work, work-life balance, and even digitalization of work are fruitful avenues of future research that can be enhanced with a comparative perspective between essential and non-essential industries (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021; Pinnington & Ayoko, 2021).



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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

María Lucila Osorio: Project Administration; Formal Analysis, Conceptualization; Data Curation; Writing - First Writing; Writing - Review and Editing; Methodology; Visualization.

Sergio Madero: Conceptualization; Writing - Review and Editing; Investigation; Resources; Supervision

Ernesto Del Castillo: Writing - Review and Editing; Methodology; Software; Validation; Visualization.