# The Online Help-Seeking Behaviors of Middle Adolescent Students with Migrant Mothers

Kyzzell Nichole Z. Poserio and Rhoda Joy A. Avila
School of Advanced Studies, Saint Louis University, Baguio City, Philippines

**ABSTRACT.** The relevance of accessing care and support has been found to be valuable in sustaining well-being among adolescents. However, only a few studies have been conducted to understand the online help-seeking behaviors of middle adolescent students whose mothers work abroad. Thus, the study aimed to uncover the nature of online help-seeking behaviors and explore the facilitators and barriers to these behaviors. Ten (10) middle adolescent students were interviewed, and their experiences revealed several key themes using the phenomenological method. The findings revealed that the online help-seeking behaviors of left-behind adolescents include the availability of a helper, reaching out, self-reliance, and coping strategies. Additionally, facilitating factors include convenience and safe space, and hindering factors consist of the unavailability of helpers and negative perceptions toward help sources. The results highlighted the importance of leveraging informal support networks, seeking professional help, and maintaining communication with migrant mothers among middle adolescents.

## 1.0. Introduction

In the 1990s, Overseas Filipino Workers or OFW was a term used to refer to Filipino migrants who worked abroad when the *Republic Act No. 8042,* also called the *Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995*, was passed into law (Official Gazette, 1995). Many Filipino workers are forced to leave the country in search of new jobs and higher compensation to support their families and provide a better future for their children. This gave rise to the term left-behind children. The United Nations Children's Fund (2008) defines left-behind children as children raised in their home countries who have been left by either one or both of the migrant parents to seek work opportunities abroad.

Children perceive the absence of a maternal role as a change in the family structure, forcing them to take over the responsibilities their mother/s left behind (Cuaton & Teguihanon, 2019; Lam & Yeoh, 2019). In effect, these children tend to have higher anxiety due to high family demands and responsibilities that are unfulfilled by their migrating mothers (Cuaton & Teguihanon, 2019). Moreover, other problems might arise, especially when an adolescent child left behind by his/her mother searches for a nurturing role model to look up to.

Consistently, the rising number of Filipino migrants looking for employment abroad has a greater negative effect on the children who are left behind (Fellmeth et al., 2018), especially on adolescents who are in a transitional period and need more guidance as they grow older. The absence of mothers, specifically, induces uncertainty regarding the behavioral challenges of adolescents (Mao et al., 2020).

With the many changes during adolescence, maternal migration makes the transition even more complicated. Added to this, left-behind adolescents perceive maternal migration as a form of abandonment (Cuaton & Teguihanon, 2019). Thus, maternal migration is a risk factor for unhealthy behaviors among middle adolescent students (Fellmeth et al., 2018), and it has a detrimental impact on the mental and physical well-being of left-behind adolescents (Cebotari et al., 2018).

Studies, indeed, prove that children of migrant mothers experience a range of difficulties (Cleofas et al., 2021). But, to reduce or minimize the stress caused by the challenges they experience, they learn different coping strategies. Several studies show the different maladaptive coping strategies that left-behind adolescents develop and employ to respond to problems and difficulties they encounter, such as engaging in online activities resulting in an addiction to the Internet and self-harming (Wang et al., 2019). The negative coping behaviors increase the chance of adolescents' health risk, which may persist into adulthood (Chung et al., 2018). This implies that parents, especially mothers, have the most important

*Correspondence: poseriokyzzell@gmail.com
Kyzzell Nichole Z. Poserio, School of Advanced Studies, Saint Louis University, Baguio City, Philippines

role of giving continuous guidance and support, both physically and emotionally, to help the growing adolescent develop adaptive and effective coping strategies to deal with stressful and threatening situations (Simpson et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019).

Thus, one of the adaptive and effective coping strategies is seeking help, which is important to reduce the persistence and severity of the issues (Tahara et al., 2021) that adolescents face, which may affect every aspect of their lives. This being the case, adolescents need to learn and demonstrate 'help-seeking' behaviors, which Rickwood and Thomas (2012) define as the ability to communicate their concerns to others to gain assistance and interventions.

Based on the literature, only a few researchers have examined maternal migration's influence on the well-being of left-behind middle adolescents, particularly on their online help-seeking behaviors (van den Toren et al., 2020). The increasing rates of online help-seeking among adolescents (Wong et al., 2021; Pretorius et al., 2019) and the vast literature that claims that the role of mothers is important during the adolescence stage (Perry et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2018) added to the dearth of literature on this particular phenomenon motivated the researchers to conduct this phenomenological study.

Thus, this research aimed to determine and understand the online help-seeking behaviors of middle adolescents with migrant mothers. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following: (1) to understand the nature of online help-seeking behaviors of left-behind middle adolescent students with migrant mothers, and (2) to explore the factors (facilitators and barriers) that may influence the online help-seeking behaviors of left-behind middle adolescent students with migrant mothers.

## 2.0. Methodology

*Research Design.* The researchers opted to use a qualitative research approach that utilizes the phenomenological research design based on the model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to explore and gather in-depth insights into the lived experiences of adolescents in terms of seeking help online.

*Population and Locale of the Study.* The researchers interviewed ten middle adolescent students ages 15 to 17 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019) whose mothers work abroad. In this study, migrant mothers or OFW mothers should have at least worked abroad for one year before or during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the participants are from the province of Pangasinan. Another criterion for selecting participants was that these left-behind adolescent students have experienced challenges or adversities and have sought help from a non-professional helper during

this pandemic. Hence, the researchers used purposive sampling to target participants who qualified for the criteria.

*Data Gathering Tool.* The study used a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions to gather data from the participants. Considering the pandemic restrictions on face-to-face interactions, the researchers utilized a one-on-one online interview through the Zoom meeting application, and the interview guide questions were used as a guide. The interview guide was divided into two parts. The first part dealt with the participants' demographic profiles (i.e., age, sex, location, and mother's occupation and work location). The second part focused on the participants' lived experiences on online help-seeking.

*Data Gathering Procedures.* The researchers sought permission from the School Director of Divine Word Academy of Dagupan to use the students' profiles to identify the targeted participants for the study. The researchers selected the students who were qualified to participate in the study. Selected participants were immediately contacted by the researchers. Since the students are under 18, the parents' or guardians' permission was sought through informed consent. The parents or guardians were requested to sign the informed consent to indicate that they allowed their children/wards to participate in the study. Afterward, students received an email for the scheduled one-on-one online interview, and the informed assent was also sent to them since they are still minors.

In the conduct of the virtual interview, the researchers reiterated to the participants the objectives of the study, that their participation would be voluntary and would be treated with confidentiality, and that they could refuse to answer some questions or stop the interview anytime during the data gathering session.

*Treatment of the Data.* Thematic Analysis (TA) was utilized to analyze the data. As discussed in the research design and methodology, the researchers used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach to analyze the data collected. The said approach involves six phases. In the first phase, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data collected by transcribing it verbatim, then reading and re-reading the transcriptions and noting initial ideas. Then, the researchers generated and systematically coded the data and collated data relevant to each code. The responses were then grouped according to the following: a) the meaning unit (verbatim response of the participants); b) the condensed meaning unit (with description close to text); c) the condensed meaning unit (with the interpretation of the underlying meaning); d) the subtheme; and e) the theme. In the

third phase, the researchers searched for relevant themes and then reviewed the themes in the fourth phase. After this, the researchers defined and named the themes while carefully reviewing the specifics of each theme. Lastly, the researchers made a report wherein each theme was discussed and explained using related studies and theories.

The triangulation method was also used to further validate the results wherein the objective assistance of two psychometricians was sought to review the codes, sub-themes, and themes the researchers initially generated. Their inputs were likewise considered and incorporated in evaluating the codes, sub-themes, and themes to avoid biases and limitations and increase the data reliability of the study. Through thorough and interactive discussions and corroboration with the two co-raters, themes, and subthemes were defined and given final names.

**3.0. Results and Discussion**
Based on the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered, several themes and subthemes emerged from the participants' narratives relative to the nature of online help-seeking behaviors and the factors that influence online help-seeking behaviors.

In the exploration of the nature of online help-seeking behaviors of middle adolescent students with migrant mothers, the researchers identified the following significant themes, namely: availability of the helper, reaching out, self-reliance, and coping strategies. Under the coping strategies are three subthemes: positive thinking, support seeking, and distraction strategy.

Moreover, the identified major themes of the factors that influence the online help-seeking behaviors of middle adolescent students with migrant mothers are facilitating factors of online help and hindering factors of online help. Under the facilitating factors are two subthemes: convenience and safe space. Further, under the hindering factors are two subthemes: unavailability of help sources and negative perception towards help sources.

**Nature of Online Help-Seeking of Middle Adolescent Students with Migrant Mothers**

*Availability of the Support System.* As shared by the participants, they seek help online when they experience distress. Thus, when they seek help, they need to consider the availability of the support system. Middle adolescent students utilize any means to look for an available support system from which they can share their problems and seek support. Significantly, if adolescents encounter mental health concerns, they opt to engage in online help-seeking (Best et al., 2016).

> I will approach those who can help me with the problem I am facing. (Participant 1, personal, communication, April 6, 2022)

> Before I seek help from him/her or anyone else, I make sure that they are okay and mentally and physically prepared to listen. (Participant 3, personal, communication, April 9, 2022)

The participants would identify their family, other relatives, and closest friends as significant people who are part of their support system. Their support systems are a significant source of help that mitigates their distress. In a study conducted by Haner and Pepler (2016), it was found that distressed adolescents are likely to seek help or support online. They prefer to seek help online from their social support systems because they can contact them and ask for help from them easily. Help-seekers easily contact their help sources online only if they are available.

*Reaching Out.* Most of the participants verbalized that they share their problems with their social support system. They discussed how reaching out helped them to minimize the stress that they experienced.

> For any problems, I immediately chat with Mommy and also with Daddy. Upon waking up, they call me immediately. But when it is urgent or it is an emergency, they tell me to call them no matter what time it is in their time zone. (Participant 4, personal, communication, April 11, 2022)

> In my experience, I do not ask for much help. It is like I just vent out to my best friend. I just share so that I can get my problems out. (Participant 7, personal, communication, April 13, 2022)

As mentioned above, studies have shown the importance of the network of connections that binds people to others with whom they interact daily. Typically, this group of people is what they refer to as a "social space" (Pattison & Robins, 2004). Based on the articulated answers of the participants, the social space includes their families, relatives, and close friends as the middle adolescents' help sources when they encounter problems or distress. Moreover, individuals who see their problems as transitory can solve them by communicating with family members, friends, or any trusted community members (Hechanova et al., 2011).

***Self-Reliance.*** Interestingly, two participants mentioned that they do not immediately seek help when they experience distress. Rather, they assess and figure out first what they can do about their problems.

> It is because I do not immediately seek help when I have a problem. It is like I figure out first if I can solve it by myself. (Participant 3, personal, communication, April 9, 2022)

> Sometimes, I do not tell them my problems. I sometimes keep my problems to myself. Because sometimes I also think that they might think differently of me. It is better to keep it to yourself so it does not get worse. (Participant 6, personal, communication, April 12, 2022)

According to Ortega and Alegria (2002), self-reliance can be viewed as a component of resilience, conceptualized as a belief in one's capacity to evaluate strengths and accomplishments from the past to manage current difficulties. Self-reliance may manifest resilience for middle adolescent students, especially when they feel confident that they can address concerns and bank on their ability to adjust to and deal with challenging situations in life. Thus, many of these middle adolescent students have a high preference for self-reliance when they have problems because of their natural drive for autonomy and the capacity to deal with and solve their problems independently.

Moreover, a local study by Thompson et al. (2002) found that Filipinos use self-reliance to deal with their problems. It further emphasized that being able to cope with one's problem and taking it as one's responsibility is valued by Filipinos.

***Coping Strategies.*** In the *Positive Thinking Strategy* subtheme, the participants shared that they learned to keep thinking positively when they experience distress. They learned to be positive whenever they have problems because it helps them deal with and overcome them no matter how distressing they are.

> Even if there is the lowest of lows at the end of the day, there will always be the highest of highs in your life. I think with all the problems I encountered; I grew a lot. I became strong and independent. And I think I would not make those same mistakes or problems again. It seems that I will learn the lessons from those mistakes that I encountered because if there is a bad day, there will always be a good day

> in the end. (Participant 3, personal, communication, April 9, 2022)

According to McGrath (2004), "positive thinking" refers to an attitude reflected in one's thoughts, actions, feelings, and speech. The Broaden and Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001) suggests that positive emotions, such as optimism, relief, anticipation, hope, etc., can broaden awareness and response to events and build resiliency and coping mechanisms. This was also supported by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) and Petalla (2022), suggesting that people who experience positive emotions seek to achieve new goals. In addition, a local study conducted by Hukom and Madrigal (2020) found that adolescent students manage their stress by being positive toward the problem at hand. Thus, individuals who are positive thinkers appraise their problems with optimism and will use other coping strategies that are useful, efficient, and problem-focused. Furthermore, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested that positive thinkers appraise stressful events as less threatening and can cope effectively. It is because these people can give meaning to the stress or the problem by which it will determine its intensity.

Moreover, in the *Support Seeking Strategy* subtheme, the participants learn to seek help and support when they feel distressed. Sharing their problems with others helps them feel relieved because they can receive advice and comfort.

> It is a big help to have someone you can talk to about your problems. Seeking help online is already a big help. They try to give me advice, and they comfort me. (Participant 8, personal, communication, April 13, 2022)

Wang et al. (2019) defined social support as a form of social interaction wherein an individual receives support from other people. It is the perception of an individual that there is available assistance from other people who are considered part of their social support network. This is supported by a study by Barker (2007) and Ecang and Petalla (2022), where they suggested that adolescents' help-seeking behaviors establish a strong support network. Specifically, it has been a common phenomenon that asking for support and help online is easier because of the emerging rise of the Internet and technology. Furthermore, Rickwood and Thomas (2012) found that it is better to have awareness of the problems and attempt to resolve them problems than to deny them. Therefore, awareness of the problem is an initial step towards help-seeking. This will facilitate the help-seeking process to receive support from the

help sources.

Lastly, in the *Distraction Strategy* subtheme, participants shared that they engage in distracting activities such as playing games and going out with friends to forget and stop overthinking their problems.

> Sometimes, I invite my friends to go out with me so that I can stop thinking about my problems. So that I can be happy. (Participant 5, personal, communication, April 11, 2022)

Distraction is sometimes referred to as an accommodative strategy (Connor-Smith et al., 2000; Walker et al., 1997). This happens when one changes goals to accept unpleasant circumstances or problems. Just like the participants' shared experiences, they did not think about their problems other than to solve them. Thus, middle adolescent students use this to change their focus when encountering problems, especially when they appraise the situation to be unpleasant. Based on the responses of the two participants, distractions were indeed apparent, and they learned that distractions enabled them to forget about their problems.

**Factors that Influence the Online Help-Seeking Behaviors of Middle Adolescent Students with Migrant Mothers**

*Facilitating Factors of Online Help.* In the *Convenience* subtheme, most participants shared that asking for help online is convenient because they can access it anytime and anywhere. Help-seeking online is helpful for them, especially when they cannot openly share their problems with people around them. Existing research found that many individuals prefer seeking help online because of its convenience (Birnbaum et al., 2017; Frost et al., 2015; Haner & Pepler, 2016).

> It is easier for me to talk about my problems online than in person. I prefer online because I am shy in person. It is better online because I can say more. I tell them what I want to because I do not get to be with them in person as they are far away, so it is easier to chat. Even if I am not with them, they tell me things or advise me even if they are far away. (Participant 1, personal, communication, April 6, 2022)

Van den Toren et al. (2020) suggested that adolescents prefer to seek help online because the Internet is an easily accessible source of help while they feel uncomfortable sharing their problems in person. Other studies also found the ease of access and immediacy (Best et al., 2016; Bradford &Rickwood, 2014; Burns et al., 2016) are the benefits of seeking help online. As shared by the participants, they open up about their problems online because it is where they can do it easily and better. Similarly, other studies suggest that adolescents can express themselves online because they believe others will understand and help them with their situation (Greidanus & Everall, 2010; Horgan & Sweeney, 2010; Mar et al., 2014). These significant experiences benefit adolescents and encourage them to share and seek help online easily.

In the *Safe Space* subtheme, the participants view the quality of the support given by the help sources online as significant in the process of help-seeking. Studies found that young individuals prefer to seek help online because they are highly interested in looking for a space where they can share their feelings without fear of judgment and also where their privacy is protected (Horgan & Sweeney, 2010; Mar et al., 2014; Wetterlin et al., 2014).

> When I am comfortable with the person I am asking help from. I know that I will not be judged, who I know can help me. When I also trust that person, especially if it is about a private problem. (Participant 4, personal, communication, April 11, 2022)

Indeed, the convenience of online help and the safe space provided by their help sources help middle adolescent students openly communicate and share their problems and facilitate their help-seeking behavior online.

On the other hand, some factors hinder the online help-seeking behavior as shared by the participants.

*Hindering Factors of Online Help.* In the *Unavailability of Help Sources* subtheme, some participants shared that the unavailability of their help sources hinders them from seeking help online. Studies have suggested that difficulties accessing support from their help sources are the main barrier to seeking help (Clement et al., 2015;Salaheddin & Mason, 2016).

> If via online, ma'am, you are not sure if they are free, or even if sometimes you are online, you are not actually holding your phone; you are just online. (Participant 3, personal, communication, April 9, 2022)

Maybe the only problem is the time difference. (Participant 4, personal, communication, April 11, 2022)

The availability of help sources is important to facilitate adolescents' help-seeking behavior. Thus, these participants value the availability of their help sources so that they can share their problems and seek support from them. In a systematic review study conducted by Aguirre Velasco et al. (2020), the availability of help sources has been classified as one of the structural barriers to adolescents' help-seeking. Similarly, other studies found that availability is a primary barrier that hinders people from seeking help (Han et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2018).

Lastly, in the *Negative Perception towards Help Sources* subtheme, most participants identified problems and difficulties that hinder them from seeking help online. These negative perceptions toward their help sources hamper them from seeking help and support from them.

Also, when you chat online, you do not feel what they really feel. It is like they make you feel that it is okay for them to listen to you, but it is like deep inside, it is not okay for them because maybe they are tired or they are going through something. (Participant 3, personal, communication, April 9, 2022)

It is quite difficult to seek help online. Because they are not full-hearted in supporting you. Sometimes, you do not really know if they are really sincere in what they say. It is like they are just making up what they are saying. (Participant 5, personal, communication, April 11, 2022)

The adolescents raised concerns about confidentiality and the effectiveness of getting help and support as they experience some problems when they seek help from their help sources. Similar findings suggest that young individuals may have negative perceptions of online help. They found a lack of security and doubt about the effectiveness of online help (Stretton et al., 2018).

According to the Help-Seeking Model by Rickwood et al. (2005), the help-seeking behavior follows a process that begins with a) awareness of the problems; b) the identified problem must be articulated or expressed to others; c) help sources must be available and accessible; and finally, d) the help-seeker must be willing to seek help. However, if the help-seekers have trouble with the availability of their help sources, it will be difficult for them to continue the help-seeking process. The availability of help sources is significant in the process of the help-seeker receiving help and support from them. Furthermore, if the help-seekers have a negative perception of their help source, they might not be able to continue to seek help from them. Studies suggest that adolescents' attitude toward help sources plays a significant role in help-seeking intentions (Mojtabai et al., 2016; Wei et al., 2013).

Indeed, only a few researchers have examined the influence of maternal migration, particularly on the online help-seeking behaviors of middle adolescents. Thus, presenting results of the study are significant and beneficial to understanding better the experiences of these left-behind adolescents who are having trouble asking for help, specifically from their migrant mothers.

## 4.0. Conclusion

The online help-seeking behavior of middle adolescent students with migrant mothers first considers the availability of helpers. This has to be initially considered so that the adolescents can share their problems and seek support. Once available, they reach out to these help sources who are considered their support system. These support systems are significant individuals in their lives who can provide them with a positive impact on their well-being. However, adolescents highly prefer self-reliance because of the natural drive for autonomy and independence. Lastly, the participants learned coping strategies- positive thinking, support seeking, and distraction strategy- to help them deal with and overcome their problems or distress.

Some factors facilitate the online help-seeking behavior of the middle adolescent adolescents in this study. Through the online mode, seeking immediate help and support from their help sources has become easy and convenient. The perceived good qualities of help sources, such as being non-judgmental, trustworthy, and genuine, may also contribute to the help-seeking behavior of the participants; this helps them to disclose their problems if they feel that the help sources show genuineness. Some factors hinder them from seeking help. The identified preventing factors were the unavailability of their help sources and negative perception towards them.

Moreover, one of the remarkable findings of the study is that adolescent students with migrant mothers develop a positive view of life despite being away from their mothers. This was evident in their perception of seeking help online, and there are many ways by which they can reach out to others to overcome problems no matter how difficult they are.

**5.0. Limitations of the Findings**

The study acknowledges some limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, the sample size is limited to only ten (10) middle adolescent students with migrant mothers. Second, the study focused on middle adolescent students in Pangasinan. Third, online interviews were used due to the pandemic restrictions.

**6.0. Practical Value of the Paper**

The present study's findings would greatly benefit adolescents and parents as these will provide deeper insights into the online help-seeking behavior of left-behind adolescents with migrant mothers. Also, guidance counselors and other mental health professionals would be able to develop and execute innovative strategies and/or programs and services for migrant parents, especially mothers, that will help improve their adolescents' mental well-being. Further, this study will serve as a valuable reference for future researchers to conduct further studies, especially when exploring adolescents' personal experiences on this kind of phenomenon. Thus, this study can provide a better understanding of how left-behind adolescents with migrant mothers view help-seeking and how they seek help online when faced with problems.

**7.0. Directions for Future Research**

Future researchers may consider adding more participants to the study to identify and further explore the impact on online help, online help-seeking behaviors, sources of help, learned coping strategies, facilitators, and barriers to online help. Future studies may also focus on other variables, such as problems encountered by the participants and the kind of support they receive when they seek help online. Furthermore, future researchers may consider conducting a qualitative study on middle adolescent students with migrant fathers to see the differences, if there are any.

**8.0. Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

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**Additional Author's Information:**

KYZZELL NICHOLE Z. POSERIO
poseriokyzzell@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0847-9821

RHODA JOY A. AVILA
rjaavila@slu.edu.ph
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7258-4664