Autoethnographic reflections on creating inclusive and collaborative virtual places for academic research

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the collaborative dynamics and dimensions within a virtual multi-cultural and interdisciplinary workplace. The study focusses on the use of online communication technologies to enhance social inclusion and networking within academia.

Design/methodology/approach – This study uses an autoethnographic approach to draw on the personal experiences of a team of four scholars, including three early-career researchers and a senior scholar. Their reflections on their academic positionality and the institutional constraints reveal both the strengths and vulnerabilities of collaborating in a virtual workplace.

Findings – The findings offer insights into the complexities of navigating social dynamics, such as delegating responsibilities, organising meetings across various time zones and encouraging continuous collaboration, inclusivity and effective communication during an extensive timeline. As a result, their experiences revealed that a virtual workplace culture with similar and different attributes to a "normal" workplace emerged.

Originality/value – The paper demonstrates how to create an effective and inclusive virtual workplace by exemplifying best practices in academia and providing practical guidance for individuals and institutions based on honest, co-produced autoethnographic reflections of the authors' lived experiences.

Keywords Virtual academic workplaces, Multi-cultural, Community-centric values, Inclusivity, Collaborative autoethnography, Vulnerability, COVID-19

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Scholarly writing by multiple authors in different geographical locations and time zones is common in academia. Some notable fields with expanding numbers of authors based in distinct countries include sports medicine (Schrock *et al.*, 2016) and various subareas in biology with an interdisciplinary approach (Nabout *et al.*, 2015). Collaborations in the modern university workplace may also occur between academic research bodies, non-governmental

organisations (hereafter NGOs), government ministries and civil society organisations (hereafter CSOs). The research community has long encouraged and prided itself on being able to produce scientific publications by multiple authors who may live on different continents, speak different languages and/or come from various scholarly backgrounds (Zamenopoulos and Alexiou, 2018) .

Academia traditionally has had a long history of multiple authorship and collaborative research ventures (Finholt and Olson, 1997; Cummings and Kiesler, 2005; Christianakis, 2010). In addition to the existing complications involved with such collaborations, the COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges when learning and research tasks had to be conducted remotely from individual households, which catalysed the need for virtual workplaces. Some prominent issues that emerged included women scholars having to negotiate between academic productivity and household tasks (Gabster *et al.*, 2020), the hurdles and adjustments academics had to endure whilst transitioning into an online teaching modality (Mseleku, 2020) and decreasing productivity levels found amongst university teaching and research staff due to insufficient technological support from their administrators (AbuJarour *et al.*, 2021). Whilst there is extensive literature that explores and discusses how the academic workplace was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ortiz, 2020; Zou *et al.*, 2021), there are limited studies that explore the potential benefits that may have resulted from the global disruption, particularly regarding new opportunities for scholarly collaboration across geographic and cultural borders.

Given the identified gap in the literature, this paper provides a collective autoethnographic reflection about the collaborative dynamics and dimensions of the research and editorial process for a recently published book (*Islands and Resilience: Experiences from the Pandemic Era*) about how island communities in the Pacific and the Caribbean coped with border closures and neighbourhood lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, adapted to the unprecedented difficult circumstances and demonstrated resilience as they overcame a variety of challenging experiences in their respective contexts. The four editors of this book, representing distinct academic institutions across four time zones, worked together in a virtual multi-cultural workplace for nearly two years.

To establish epistemic rigour for the project, the editors adopted a cooperative approach (DiMarco, 2023) that allowed the primary researchers from interdisciplinary backgrounds to co-investigate with community members in various Pacific Islands, some of whom became co-authors of chapters. The book project eventually encompassed theoretical and practical knowledge from tourism and hospitality, climate and coastal research, disaster intervention and other relevant disciplines (i.e. gender roles in fisheries, social inclusion in marginalised coastal communities, Indigenous land management, wellbeing during COVID-19, etc.). The research and writing process allowed a purposeful workplace culture to emerge. For example, the Zoom meetings and email communications were consistently given a clear agenda and expected outcomes. The remote and virtual work mode gave the team few opportunities to generate friction as their bonding arose mostly from mutual intellectual curiosities, in addition to previously existing personal connections outside of the professional realm. Moreover, the authors did not compete for resources such as promotions and pay increases. In this way, the virtual workplace potentially limited friction and disagreements between competing academic colleagues who work in the same institution or have face-to-face encounters.

This study examines the potential of online communication technologies in enhancing social inclusion and networking within academia through the personal narratives of four academic scholars and editors of the *Islands and Resilience: Experiences from the Pandemic Era* book. It sheds light on several themes of virtual academic collaboration, such as community-centric research ethos, especially in the context of indigenous island societies, inclusive and collaborative research approaches within a multi-disciplinary team of authors

and the sensitive work dynamics between established and emerging scholars, particularly in terms of gender norms.

The four themes emerged "organically" through our collaborative autoethnographic method. After our book was published, we shared our experiences and our thoughts. The call-for-papers for this special issue galvanised us. Our collaborative, social and supportive method of collective reflection builds a common understanding and interpretation of what happened during the book production process. As importantly, we each individually wrote down our reflections for this paper. Those thoughts were not necessarily sharp and clear. But subsequently, we discussed what we each wrote. It is through these discussions that the themes emerged and became more focussed. These insights may offer solutions to aspiring scholars, early-career researchers and seasoned academics seeking to collaborate virtually across cultural and geographic borders during global disruptions that restrict international, regional and/or local travel and close interactions.

The virtual workplace

Over the past 2 decades, scholars have recognised the significant potential of online communication technologies to support qualitative data collection (Archibald *et al.*, 2019; Braun *et al.*, 2017; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014) and collaboration within the academic workplace environment (Redfern and Galway, 2002; Van Noorden, 2014; Maor *et al.*, 2016; Jordan and Weller, 2018). Advocates of online communication technologies argue that this research approach can be more attractive for researchers and research participants than in-person interviews, focus groups, or academic meetings due to its convenience, efficiency, cost-effectiveness and flexibility (Carter *et al.*, 2012; Horrell *et al.*, 2015). In studies that compare face-to-face interviews and in-person collaboration versus online communication, findings reveal that virtual collaboration offers a more open and expressive experience for those involved (Cabaroglu *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, in a study that employed video conferencing to conduct semi-structured interviews, Mabragana *et al.* (2013) found that the quality of interviews was similar to face-to-face interviews. Video conferencing has also been used to gain access to more extensive and more diverse populations (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014), conduct research with participants and colleagues over a large geographical spread (Archibald *et al.*, 2019; Van Noorden, 2014), interview more participants by eliminating travel time (Winiarska, 2017) and reduce unpredictable circumstances, such as poor weather conditions that would deter participants from meeting face-to-face (Sedgwick and Spiers, 2009).

Online video conference technology, or video over Internet protocol (VoIP), is often considered jointly with other asynchronous Internet communication technologies, such as instant messaging, online focus groups and email (Archibald *et al.*, 2019). However, VoIP technologies differ significantly from asynchronous methods. Whilst asynchronous online interviewing methods enable communication at different times, VoIP allows real-time interaction involving sound, video and written text (Sullivan, 2012). Thus, these technologies can transmit and respond to verbal and nonverbal cues, replicating and possibly improving traditional methods such as face-to-face interviews and in-person academic conferences (Braun *et al.*, 2017).
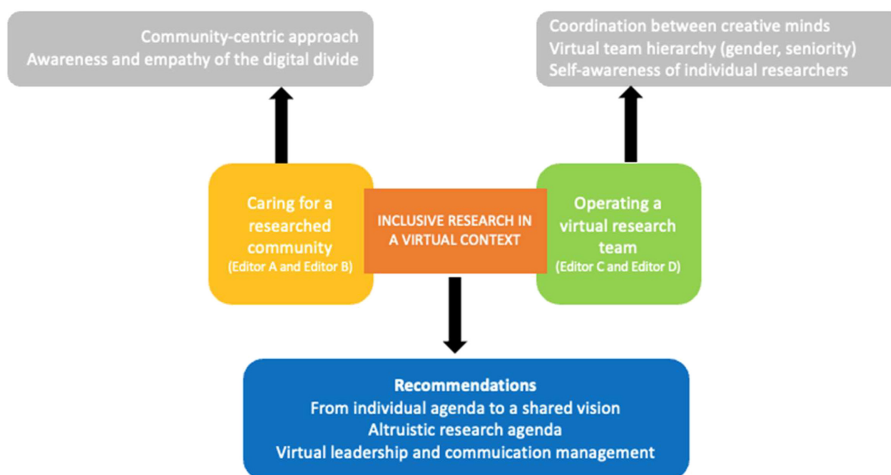
In the context of qualitative research, literature on the use of VoIP tends to focus on its applicability for online qualitative data collection (Gray *et al.*, 2020; Kok *et al.*, 2021; Lo Iacono *et al.*, 2016; Weller, 2017). In addition to supporting collaboration between researchers, participants and academic colleagues, Gray *et al.* (2020) argue that one of the most significant advantages of using VoIP technologies as a qualitative research tool is that it increases accessibility and inclusivity. For example, by limiting travel costs and removing logistical challenges, such as travelling to remote geographic locations, the use of VoIP creates new opportunities for participants and researchers to connect virtually, thereby increasing the

accessibility for researchers and enhancing inclusivity for participants. Furthermore, unlike a telephone interview, interviewees can participate in their own convenient space whilst still feeling personally associated with the interviewer. This approach also allows participants to stop and leave the discussion at any time, which may be less intimidating than in-person interviews. For researchers, the advantages of using VoIP platforms include time-saving, secure data generation and storage, personal safety and cost-effectiveness without jeopardising a meaningful connection with colleagues and participants (Weller, 2017). Finally, VoIP enables researchers to conduct interviews in their workspace, which allows them to complete administrative duties such as uploading interviews to secure servers for transcription and methodological journaling immediately after the interview (Gray *et al.*, 2020).

Most of the aforementioned studies have focussed on the functional aspects of using VoIPs for qualitative data collection. Advancements in communication technology, however, can also enhance the coordination and collaborative efforts of international research networks by removing the limitations of geographic dispersion (Leroy *et al.*, 2017). For example, over the last 25 years, scholars have recognised that the increase in scientific collaboration and international mobility has enhanced innovation and boosted the potential for scientific discovery, career development and cultural maturity (Wagner *et al.*, 2017; Zaer *et al.*, 2020). This article contributes to the growing literature on international collaboration through virtual spaces by integrating the functional advantages of working remotely amongst geographically dispersed colleagues with the social and cultural benefits that VoIP technologies can provide, as evidenced in the following sections (see Figure 1).

Method

Ethnographic research does not follow a direct path of theoretical conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis or report writing. Instead, ethnography is an ongoing process that engages simultaneously all these research components (Koning and Ooi, 2013). There are debates on ethnography (Gobo, 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), and this special issue has already indicated the breadth and richness of the field. Documents, public information and other relevant sources contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the community and the social phenomena studied. Ethnographic analysis is holistic and requires

Figure 1.
Autoethnographic
reflective mind map

Source(s): Authors

field researcher(s) to critically self-reflect on their encounters and lived experiences (e.g. Dahles and Susilowati, 2015). In this article, we have translated these reflections into a collaborative autoethnographic effort.

Autoethnography accentuates the researcher's experience and voice (Dahles and Susilowati, 2015). The researchers embody the social system, structures and institutions through their social experiences (Verver and Dahles, 2015). As a qualitative research method, the researchers then interrogate, reflect and reveal the social context and circumstances that led them to behave, believe and respond accordingly in a social, political, cultural and economic context (Chang, 2013). Collective autoethnography is a similar method involving a group of persons (Hernandez *et al.*, 2017). It draws attention to the social nature of knowledge generation and research. Ethnographic descriptions and analyses are necessarily selective, and there is a tendency for researchers to present themselves as "heroes" who have resolved challenges they encountered during their respective research studies (Clifford, 1983; Koning and Ooi, 2013). As such, fieldworkers must be reflexive and self-critical (Foley, 2002; Ooi, 2021). That self-reflexivity is inevitably autoethnographic, as the researchers also become the studied. In this article, we used a critical collaborative autoethnographic lens to reflect on our experiences of co-editing and co-writing a recently published book, *Islands and Resilience: Experiences from the Pandemic Era,* in a virtual workplace.

We, the book's co-editors and the other 17 co-authors, met for the first time through virtual spaces in September 2021 at the online Royal Geographical Society (RGS) Annual Conference. Our team bonded over a shared interest in island peoples' resilience and adaptive capacity in the face of global disruptions. We also shared similar values regarding community-centric research and prioritising inclusive collaborative research. Thus, we wanted to work on a publication together that emphasised our passion for island resilience and reinforced the need to conduct research in a more inclusive manner. However, since the individual members of our team were dispersed across various countries on three different continents, we had to find a way to collaborate despite the inability to travel and meet face-to-face. As a solution, we adopted Zoom as our virtual workplace environment for academic collaborative writing.

Zoom is a collaborative, cloud-based videoconferencing service offering features including online meetings, group messaging services and secure recording sessions (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2016). In selecting a VoIP platform, academics may choose from several different options, including Skype, Teams, Zoom, Zoho Meeting, Google Meet, GoToMeeting, Eyeson and Microsoft Team, to name a few (Gray *et al.*, 2020). However, most existing research has focussed on Skype (Nehls *et al.*, 2015; Braun *et al.*, 2017; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). Like other VoIPs, Zoom allows individuals in geographically dispersed areas to communicate with each other in real-time via computers, tablets, or mobile devices (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2016). Zoom also allows screen-sharing for all researchers, interviewees and collaborators in the live meeting (Gray *et al.*, 2020). In the context of our research, Zoom enabled us to work collectively with researchers and practitioners across geographical and cultural borders. English was the common language used by all team members to communicate. In addition to Zoom, we also communicated via emails, Google Drive and Doodle polls.

After approximately two years of collaborative work via Zoom, in April 2023, *Islands and Resilience: Experiences from the Pandemic Era* came to fruition. Once the book was published, we heaved a sigh of relief. We took a step back to ponder and share our thoughts about being part of the editorial team and co-authors of multiple chapters. The experiences were recent, and fortunately, we have a paper trail of agendas and meeting minutes summarising our virtual collaborative efforts via Zoom for nearly two years. Our session to celebrate the book's publication was a reflexive exercise for each of us. Because we constantly revealed and shared our thoughts, we were, in principle, doing collective autoethnography. We made our observations over the months, responded to the many tasks in the publication process and

related to each other in a cordial and supportive manner. We have become friends. But like in any workplace, there are also tensions. In this special issue, we reveal both the beneficial and the challenging interactions we encountered, thereby offering a comprehensive reflection of our collective experiences.

Research context

The authors of this article represent the editorial team, which comprises a senior researcher (Ooi), two Ph.D. candidates (de Waegh and Trifan) and a researcher (Zhang) who considers herself an early academic researcher. We voluntarily stepped up as editors through lengthy discussions during monthly meetings with other research collaborators and co-authors. In our case, the four editors, we have become comfortable and open to each other. There are advantages and disadvantages to that. The benefits are that it reflects the collaborative way we have worked together. Our thoughts, behaviour and values arise from our interactions with each other. We reflected together and highlighted the areas we are pleased with and where we feel vulnerable. Being open and self-critical reveals nuances and diverse interpretations of the same situation. Due to the supportive nature of the group, the danger of collective autoethnography is the development of groupthink. We may nudge each other in a direction with the least conflicts and generate an image of us as heroic researchers/editors. In autoethnography, to overcome this challenge is to be self-critical. In collaborative autoethnography, this self-critical reflexivity can be done in a group. We have reminded ourselves that we are different, and we should be frank and be able to raise uncomfortable issues with each other and admit that we may not have done a good job.

Whilst this paper focusses on the reflections of the four editors, we also acknowledge that we worked with a larger group of researchers in the individual chapters, who are all significant contributors to the book project. As such, we are embedded in social structures and institutions. For instance, whilst we consider that the team engages in a democratic writing and research process, we also recognise that there has been limited critical feedback from early academic researchers to senior scholars. In sum, collective autoethnography contrasts against other qualitative methods because of its social and collaborative ways of collecting, analysing and reflecting on data. It is not an individual's pursuit of knowledge. We are collectively interviewing each other in our conversation as we work through this paper. We support and query each other, forcing one another to interrogate ourselves and the circumstance that makes us behave, believe and accept certain actions and interpret situations in a particular way. Lastly, autoethnography acknowledges our interpretations of reality, which are socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The diagram below is a stylised form of illustrating our reflective and collaborative process (see Figure 2).
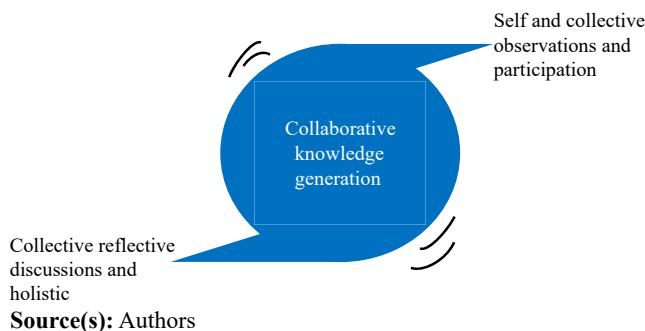
Source(s): Authors

Whilst we have reflected and shared our experiences, this article will present autoethnographic reflections on various aspects of our virtual workplace. Each author has taken the responsibility to write up their reflections. Thus, for each section, the individual editor's names are used because that person's voice would be loudest there even though the issues and discussions have been subjected to collective interrogations. Besides mutual support, a sense of accomplishment and pride, apprehension, anxiety and fears are presented as part of the reality of our virtual workplace.

Autoethnographic reflections of the virtual experience

A community-centric approach to research and collaboration in virtual spaces (reflections from Trifan)

Academic publishing primarily focusses on "the more knowledge produced, the greater the reward" (Hyland, 2016, p. 58). This usually results in more funding and more significant opportunities for the researchers involved in such academic pursuits. Despite this predominant thinking within academia, as co-authors or editors, we were more interested in ensuring that our book would benefit our local research partners and the communities that welcomed us to conduct our research. Furthermore, we wanted to ensure that our participants' lived experiences and knowledge were acknowledged and represented in culturally appropriate ways. These incentives and desired outcomes for our research are some of the common values we shared as a team of co-editors and co-authors of *Islands and Resilience: Experiences from the Pandemic Era*. Our interests in a community-centric approach towards our research, scholarship and collaborations and our collective priority to disseminate our research findings with local research partners to benefit the host communities are what brought us together.

The communication channels we used have been vital for our collaborative endeavour; however, acknowledging the emotional and social aspects of our virtual interactions was also significant (Henritius *et al.*, 2019) to ensure the equal participation and inclusion of our collaborators across the small island nations (Yusuf and Al-Banawi, 2013). Our interest in collaborating with partners *in situ* meant we encountered challenges despite being virtually connected through Zoom. For example, the remote locations of some island nations and limited access to stable Internet led to extensive periods before we could communicate effectively with our local research counterparts. Whilst these prolonged periods created a sense of anxiety, particularly in meeting the publication deadlines, it also developed greater empathy, which led to a genuine understanding of the digital limitations many of our local research partners experience daily.

Existing research on the digital divide and the struggles of women in accessing Internet technologies in developing countries (i.e. most of our research partners are female) shows that due to their traditional roles, women do not have basic digital literacy skills and, therefore, cannot reach their full potential (Antonio and Tuffley, 2014). In short, the digital revolution strengthened the gender digital divide (Moolman *et al.*, 2007). It reiterated women's discrimination in many facets of social life (e.g. work, salary, literacy, etc.) (Hilbert, 2011). However, using the Internet also has possible advantages in decreasing the digital gender divide, such as virtual social connections and identity expression, economic prospects, schooling and training opportunities (Antonio and Tuffley, 2014) as also identified by our *in situ* collaborators when reflecting on the research experience and the book collaboration.

We take comfort that not only have we focussed on island community members as contributors to our book, but the book is written by a network of international researchers and practitioners. Each chapter has a collective of co-authors from different islands and continents who came together to share their learning geographically, theoretically and empirically. During the preliminary stages, when we developed the book's content as a team,

we tried to ensure that local voices, insights and experiences were integral to the vision that would eventually structure the book chapters. Consequently, each chapter provides insights into the lived experiences of cross-national research teams (Lokhtina *et al.*, 2022), such as resilience through the lens of social inclusion and the multifaceted and dynamic power relations within and between communities in Timor-Leste, Tonga and Vanuatu; the challenges faced by research participants in Fiji, Cook Islands and Tasmania, during the COVID-19 pandemic and the adaptation of traditional cultural values and beliefs to modern practices; grassroots resilience as seen in the acts of political resistance and self-determination of island people in Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in 2017; and a holistic model for operationalising resilience in Indonesia, Australia and Fiji.

These localised insights that research teams collaborating internationally are seldom investigated (Tigges *et al.*, 2019), particularly when drawing on communication within virtual collaborations and workplaces (Kosmützky, 2018). Hence, this reflective account highlights the social dynamics of collaborative endeavours using virtual spaces, particularly Zoom and reinforces the community-centric approach of the book's focus and design.

Creating inclusive collaboration through virtual spaces (reflections from de Waegh)
The benefits of online collaboration for inclusive research practices became evident as I started to compare my research experience during the pandemic era with research projects I participated in before the global disruption of COVID-19. As an early-career researcher, I was accustomed to playing a minimal role in research projects. For example, rather than being involved in the early design phase of a research project, senior members of these respective teams tended to only request my help near the end of the study to revise final drafts. Furthermore, instead of being encouraged to offer my perspective on new insights from the research findings, my contribution was limited to writing basic literature review sections.

The use of VoIP for remote qualitative data collection was also perceived to create an enabling environment that fostered a more robust and inclusive manner of conducting research, particularly when research takes place across cultural borders. From the perspective of one of our local researcher partners based in the Cook Islands, VoIP technologies were considered to offer a culturally appropriate method of engaging participants:

> What stood out the most for me with online interviews is unconstrained time and improved communication and increased connection. This meant that the values of respect and reciprocity could be at the forefront of the research ... Everyone involved in the online research gained something from it, and this strengthened research partnerships and made future research in the small communities of the Cook Islands more accessible. (Cook Islands research partner).

In the absence of parachute scientists, which occurs when international scientists (often from wealthy nations) travel to a country to conduct fieldwork and leave without meaningfully engaging with local researchers and community members (Stöfen-O'Brien *et al.*, 2022), the insights from my research experience during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that Pacific Islanders took leadership roles in research projects and became aware that they are just as good, if not better than non-Pacific consultants and foreign researchers.

However, it is equally important to note that whilst the constrained movement of people during the pandemic created opportunities for local engagement in international research projects, Pasifika researchers still face long-standing challenges which they endured long before COVID-19. For example, my local researcher partner from the Cook Islands explained that despite having obtained a Doctoral degree in their respective profession from a foreign accredited university, they were not successful in obtaining a consultancy job upon returning to the Cook Islands. They further explained that this was due to international experts and local elites dominating consultancy spaces, making them inaccessible to locals. Within the

existing literature, scholars have recognised that the accumulation of these negative experiences has resulted in self-doubt in the minds of Pacific Islanders (Gilbert, 2021; Nailatikau and Goulding, 2021).

The reflections from my local research partner in the Cook Islands confirm the former by revealing that despite the positive impacts experienced in the absence of foreign researchers on-site, there are concerns that these adaptations are only temporary and may not endure long enough to transform the international research agenda. This concern was echoed by development scholars Winterford *et al.* (2021), who worry that the temporary pivoting to more "localised" ways of working will only occur at a superficial level and that the power structures entrenched in the traditional donor-recipient model will remain in place. In summary, there need to be systemic changes in the processes of foreign-led research to avoid the exclusion of local experts who contain deep contextual knowledge and locally relevant technical expertise. In conclusion, my experience conducting research remotely through virtual workplaces has convinced me that VoIP technologies can enhance the efforts of foreign scientists like myself, who genuinely aim to actively include local scholars in meaningful research activities.

The dynamics of academic teamwork with zoom (reflections from Zhang)

I observed individual differences between creative people pose challenges in collective organisational performances (McWhinney, 1993) and that implementing creative ideas, not idea generation, is key to team success (Kingston, 2009). Based on this, I learnt two lessons from the editorial experience in a virtual setting. First, it is necessary for emerging scholars who aspire to lead a research project with international colleagues to acquire training, or at least awareness, of the managerial aspects of the process. Whilst a person may be intellectually capable of conducting independent research, they also need to be mindful of the communication barriers amongst virtual team members who share the same passion but perhaps with diverse perspectives and opinions. Second, whilst cherishing the liberating environment that Zoom may offer for effective academic collaboration, I recommend that the team leader clearly establish online communication frameworks at the beginning of the project to ensure conflicts may be resolved through proper virtual approaches. Finally, whilst Zoom and other technologies offer flexibility for academic workflows, having an effective leader and a clear organisational structure is equally important to ensure goals are achieved efficiently and time-sensitive.

We predominantly depended on two online communication tools: email and Zoom videoconferences. As a co-editor, I initially felt anxious because I had never met most authors in person. Furthermore, I was unfamiliar with their diverse writing styles and methods of expressing their research findings. Thus, when drafting group emails for task assignments and meeting announcements, I paid special attention to the tone, word choices and sentence structure. The choice in grammar and spelling was particularly important to me since I was the only researcher trained in the American academic environment. All other researchers were from Australian, New Zealand and British institutions. Nevertheless, this challenge was a learning opportunity about slightly different email etiquette, language expressions and spellings.

With the benefits of virtual academic collaboration, it is critical also to address the challenges of coordinating between the creative minds of our team. When a group of social scientists co-write multiple chapters, their unique experiences and personality traits contribute to the creative process (Grosul and Feist, 2014). However, managing this creative process by "creative people" (Yong, 1994) is not intuitive for someone who is a peer academic. As the lead author of one chapter, contributing author of two chapters and co-editor of the entire book, I was tasked to synthesise various writing styles and merge competing arguments to create a cohesive voice throughout the book. I became the contact person with whom my co-authors could confidently express dissatisfaction with the writing. Occasionally, I had to make difficult decisions whilst choosing between different opinions

for cohesiveness. At the same time, I needed to ensure that the authors with opposing ideas were recognised for their contributions. Doing so was challenging, especially when my team members were not in the same physical space.

Furthermore, we were restricted by time limitations during the monthly Zoom meetings. For example, during these meetings, not all authors were given the time to solve the issues pertinent to their chapters because the time was dedicated to discussing the collective progress of the book. As such, emails became the main communication tool for individual chapter teams. Textual and/or email communications can create confusion and suspicion because it does not convey one's full emotions. Sometimes, I could not detect one's true feelings through emails when writing arguments had emerged. Also, because of the few personal relationships amongst the authors, I could not recognise the individual personalities at the beginning of the teamwork process. This led me to guess how to appropriately explain a concern or disagreement with those in different national and/or workplace cultures.

Sense of uncertainty in the virtual workplace (reflections from Ooi)
The book project has been a very positive experience. As reflected in the earlier accounts, the editors and the contributors have been forthcoming, warm and supportive. But as in all workplaces, there are also tensions and issues stemming from deadlines, unambiguity of situations and trust. My reflections will focus on a few of these to highlight sociality in the virtual workplace, particularly on gender and academic hierarchy. These aspects shape any academic workplace, virtual or otherwise.

We worked as a team, but I was asked to lead the publication for two reasons. First, I proposed the idea of the book to a representative of Springer Nature and received a positive response. The second reason was my involvement in three of the five chapters. In our monthly meetings with all contributors, we agreed earlier on that less experienced researchers should be invited to be editors, with at least one senior researcher.

In 2021, I published a chapter on toxic masculinity in the field titled, "How masculinity creeps in: Awkward field encounters of a male researcher". That chapter made me even more sensitive to gender-related issues in the research workspace. I did not want to be gender insensitive. Regardless, I felt anxious sometimes, albeit unwarranted. Even with sensitivity and good intention, my action could still be misinterpreted. For instance, in another project at my university, we were coordinating meeting times. One female collaborator has two children and I asked if we should arrange a meeting time that would not clash with her children pick-up time. She scolded me, stating that I was pointing out her personal circumstance and assumed that she needed special consideration. That was not my intention. Fortunately, our editorial team could work in a gender-equal manner, respecting that we each has personal (gendered) circumstances and collectively, we work with our diverse needs.

Gender issues relate to academic hierarchy. It is a bit uncomfortable that I am a male and the most senior researcher in the team. I grew up in Singapore but left at the age of 31 to pursue my Ph.D. in Denmark, one of the most egalitarian societies around. After 20 years of working and living there, I adopted Danish directness. It did cross my mind to appoint a secretary at our meetings but that would fit into gender stereotypes. We did not appoint a "secretary" to document the minutes of our meetings and everyone took their own notes, and we shared our notes.

I coordinated with the publisher whilst Zhang communicated with the lead authors and contributors. We reviewed and edited all the chapters together, even those we did not contribute to. Within our Video over Internet Protocol (VoIP)-driven workplace, social considerations and dynamics bubbled.

In projects, there are challenges of free riders, personal conflicts and delays. For our team, we did fall behind a bit, but we caught up, and there were, of course, times when I could not

deliver, and the others picked up the load. Our virtual workplace culture seemed "perfect", but at first, I wondered if my co-editors were intimidated and did not know how to challenge me. They did size me up, and together we gallantly faced the project together. Tacit gender and hierarchy presence is found in the workplace and in our case, we collectively neutralised the effects.

Discussion

Caring for a research community

In qualitative studies, researchers typically engage in a reconnaissance phase before collecting any data (Liamputtong and Rice, 2022), which is the process of establishing an understanding of the local context and becoming familiar with the socio-cultural norms and language(s) (Ivankova and Wingo, 2018). However, due to the international travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, neither Trifan nor de Waegh (or most of the co-authors of the book) was allowed the opportunity to physically engage with local people to learn about their cultures, social norms, languages and values. This meant that as foreign researchers to these communities of interest, we had to develop relationships with local research partners that extended beyond the superficial need of "including a local researcher" to obtain a research permit. By means of VoIP technologies, predominately Zoom and Facebook Messenger, we dedicated between three and six months to slowly build these relationships with our local research partners and learn about each other on a personal level to understand each other's interests both within and outside the research. Using VoIP meant that we could communicate and see each other in real-time, which was essential to develop trust and respect and ensure that our research partnership would provide mutual benefits. In doing so, the research was no longer guided by us as foreign investigators but evolved into a genuine collaboration across different cultures guided by a shared passion for learning and sharing knowledge.

In the absence of foreign researchers *in situ* to conduct data collection and lead the respective research project, we recognised that our local research partners were stepping forward into leadership positions and creating opportunities for themselves to contribute beyond the initial data collection phase. For example, de Waegh's research partners participated in the data analysis and the writing of Chapter 2 of the book, thereby receiving formal recognition as co-authors in those respective publications. Similar studies in the Pacific region have reported that the increase in remote support training via VoIP was perceived to have beneficial outcomes, including increased rates of participation, greater access to information and better communication between donors and recipients (Olatunji, 2021). For instance, a Pacific member from the Pacific Capacity Development Programme stated that "the virtual delivery of remote technical assistance and/or training activities during the pandemic was either extremely or very efficient" (Pacific Capacity Development Programme, 2022, p. 22). In recognising the benefits of virtual training, the World Food Programme (WFP) recently launched a free online Training of Trainers (ToT) course for disaster management in Tonga, in addition to increasing free online access to disaster-related resources, information and training programmes (World Food Programme, 2022). However, whilst there have been benefits from increased online working, the Pacific Resilience Partnership also recognised how remote work using digital infrastructure may exacerbate pre-existing disparities in systems and structures between recipient countries and donor partners (Olatunji, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic underlined the persistent challenges faced by island communities, intensifying their existing struggles in both daily life and scholarly or work endeavour. The introduction of digital platforms for educational, occupational and collaborative purposes encountered significant hindrances in remote locales lacking

adequate Internet infrastructure before the global health crisis (Myers *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the societal burden of caregiving predominantly shouldered by women was notably exacerbated during the pandemic, with profound implications for female researchers engaged in cross-cultural collaborations (Minello *et al.*, 2021). Our research partners, predominantly women, grappled with extended periods where familial and communal obligations took precedence over their research commitments, necessitating an expanded timeframe to fulfil research tasks.

Interestingly, amidst the prolonged timelines required, local research partners, especially women, experienced an unforeseen empowerment. The absence of external "parachute researchers" created opportunities for these individuals to take on more significant roles within the research framework (Stöfen-O'Brien *et al.*, 2022; Stefanoudis *et al.*, 2021). This shift not only elevated their participation but also fostered a sense of ownership and agency within the collaborative research landscape. As foreign scientists, our experiences working with local research partners through VoIP technologies revealed increased collaboration between local and international social networks. Our observations and experiences were recently supported by development scholars who noted that the absence of international experts encouraged changes in established ways of working, which enabled shifts in institutional culture (Nailatikau and Goulding, 2021). For example, The United States Embassy in New Zealand considered there were more advantages than disadvantages linked to remote support work, as evidenced in their recent contribution of USD$300,000 to support capacity-building for the development of best practices in the use and management of virtual assets in Fiji, Palau, the Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa and Tonga (United States Mission New Zealand, 2022).

Similar findings were found in a newly published study conducted by the Locally Managed Marine Area Network International (LMMANI), an association of community-based marine conservation practitioners in the Indo-Pacific (Ferguson *et al.*, 2022). In response to the shortage of foreign experts and international researchers on the ground, local Pacific researchers from the LMMANI designed and implemented a study to explore the impacts of the pandemic in the Pacific region. Whilst foreign scientists would typically lead this type of socio-economic research, the findings from the LMMANI study revealed that Pasifika people took leadership roles in research projects and became aware that they are just as good as, if not better than, non-Pacific consultants and foreign scientists (Ferguson *et al.*, 2022; Stöfen-O'Brien *et al.*, 2022). From our experiences, our research studies would not have been possible without our research partners' leadership and essential contributions. Their participation was vital to our research and enhanced the value of our findings by pivoting the international research agenda to a more localised way of working. This, in turn, allowed for a deeper understanding of local communities' perspectives and lived experiences.

Operating a virtual research team
During the editing and writing process, we identified three areas of insights and reflections on a virtual research team's managerial and operational dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, our experience showed that virtual team engagements did not negatively impact our mental health. Zoom fatigue is a widespread notion associated with the decline of the mental health of office workers, as video conferences create stress (Shoshan and Wehrt, 2021), causing energy exhaustion, personal boundaries being invaded and prolonged meeting times (Williams, 2021). Nevertheless, our team addressed such concerns by building a "Zoom culture" with shared research goals and without the pressure to compete for financial or political interests on a college campus where various conflict situations have existed for decades (Volpe and Chandler, 1999). For example, colleagues often compete for the same resources or have contrasting views, generating a political divide (Muthanna and Sang, 2017).

The editorial team had opposing views in our case, but we also agreed that the book was a big tent and diverse opinions were welcomed. It is important to highlight that we exercised an altruistic attitude that reflected what Aloni (2019) would call a "relational ethic of caring" (p. 5) - an emphasis on genuine bonding and dialogues between colleagues over a competitive team culture. We benefited from the Zoom-enabled research engagements that enhanced our academic productivity, driven by intellectual inquiry and creativity. Zoom, in fact, supported our thinking by eliminating interferences that would otherwise be problematic in an in-person context. For example, Zoom allowed us to have efficient meetings. With a clear agenda, the team members could quickly start meaningful conversations, reducing casual talks frequently observed in in-person meetings. The VOIP technology enabled us to communicate in a way that was conducive to collaboration and cooperation. We were also mindful of each other's decisions and behaviours, kept the discussions on essential issues and maintained professionalism.

The second contributing factor to our team's success was the awareness of how gender affects team dynamics and the optics of gender inequality prevalent in academia (Elliott and Blithe, 2021; Casad *et al.*, 2021). Our editorial team consists of three female early-career researchers, one of whom is an ethnic minority and one senior male researcher with extensive scholarly achievements and from an ethnic minority background. The unique combination of the editors' demographic backgrounds encouraged us to acknowledge the impact of our intersectionalities on individual vulnerabilities in self-representing and expressing ideas in a virtual environment. We aimed to have discussions that made all possible concerns and voices visible – a primary focus of engaging with the implications of intersectionality (Al-Faham *et al.*, 2019). Victimhood was never abusively used by one to defend his or her opinions. There was also a lack of the Alpha figure in the team, resulting in a decentralised management style in which each editor was empowered to handle the administrative duties throughout the editorial process and to make suggestions on other's decisions (Hempel *et al.*, 2012). Through a side reflection of the male editor, who was cognisant of the privilege embedded in his gender role, he expressed that he was constantly conscious of wanting to emphasise that all editors were equal. He recognised that the virtual workplace had been supported by colleagues rather than co-workers in a hierarchical structure. He felt happiness, satisfaction, anxiety and ambiguities as he practised gender sensitivity to maintain equity in the virtual workplace (Turesky and Warner, 2020).

Lastly, in building a healthy virtual team culture, our team advocated for a flat management structure under which academic seniority was not a determining element for power and voice. We rejected the notion that senior researchers would know more than their early-career counterparts, even though they are perceived to have more accumulated resources and authority in research production (Abramo *et al.*, 2016), particularly in a virtual environment, where one interfaces with individuals on a computer screen, one's status is hardly expressed through his or her attire and other materialistic symbols. A top-down approach in our editorial decision-making was not sensible, as argumentation was built on reasoning rather than one's established status in academia. Initially, the senior scholar on our editorial team wondered whether the other editors were being respectful towards him because of his seniority. In their collective reflections, the other editors mentioned that they never considered seniority an influential element in their communication. Instead, they focussed on individual personalities and capacity for problem-solving, regardless of age or gender.

It is fair to say that Zoom-enabled research engagements may substantially benefit academic productivity, especially for social scientists or humanities scholars. The hardships and challenges linked to the COVID-19 pandemic enabled our team to exercise empathy in project coordination, as some of our team members were either infected with the virus themselves or knew someone who had endured the physical and mental exhaustion caused by the virus. Thus, it was collectively decided amongst the editors and co-authors to be

lenient with deadlines, resulting in a few much-appreciated extensions throughout the collaborative writing journey. This empathetic understanding was not based on politeness or formality but on genuine consideration of the practical and psychological impacts of the pandemic on our team's professional responsibilities and personal wellbeing. Overall, sensitivity was a critical element in the success of our virtual collaboration.

Conclusion

The development of *Islands and Resilience: Experiences from the Pandemic Era* exemplified our collective approach, harnessing the collaborative efforts of local researchers, a network of senior international scholars and early-career researchers. Our utilisation of advancements in communication technology significantly enhanced the inclusive nature of our research methods, particularly crucial amid the constraints imposed by COVID-19 travel restrictions. These technologies bridged our culturally diverse and geographically dispersed team, facilitating effective collaboration across our diverse team to operationalise a virtual research team. Interdisciplinary scholars across the world increasingly recognise the power of online video and communication technologies to enhance international collaborative research and foster interdisciplinary knowledge exchange across economic, social, cultural and physical barriers (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz, 2020; Lupton, 2018; Zaer *et al.*, 2020). As Lupton (2018) points out, virtual workplace environments encourage inclusive and culturally responsive academic relations, echoing our own experiences.

Our experiences support the former, as evidenced by how we collectively distributed responsibilities, shared leadership roles and developed research relationships built on trust, respect and mutual benefits. Furthermore, the virtual workplace environment accommodated us to acknowledge our vulnerabilities, such as our perceived limitations due to a lack of experience or the optics of gender and academic hierarchies. From this position, the virtual spaces created by improvements in online communication technology, particularly Zoom, diminished the emotional and social tensions typically found in competitive academic research environments (Henritius *et al.*, 2019) and allowed for equal representation and meaningful participation of co-authors, regardless of their geographic location, culture, language, career, or socio-economic status.

In our exploration through this critical collaborative autoethnography within a virtual multi-cultural workplace whilst developing the book, we gained insights into the social dynamics of knowledge creation and the vital role of positionality as a self-reflective analytical tool. This experience highlighted the significance of embracing diverse perspectives within interdisciplinary teams. Integrating autoethnographic research and encouraging reflection on the social dynamics of multi-disciplinary research teams are invaluable aspects. We recommend that project proposals, research grant programmes and research permits integrate these facets to deepen their scope and embrace the multi-layered aspects of collaborative research.

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