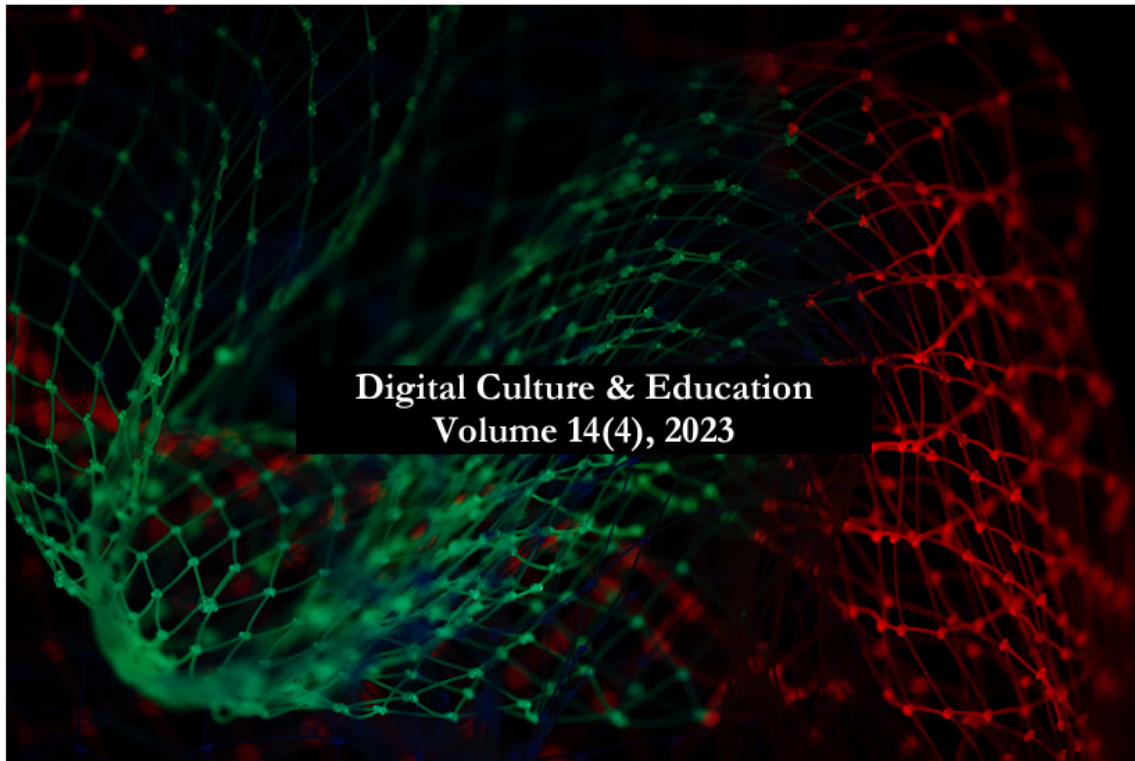Digital Culture & Education
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Identity gap formation: an exploration of participant experiences in a virtual exchange program

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IDENTITY GAP FORMATION: AN EXPLORATION OF PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES IN A VIRTUAL EXCHANGE PROGRAM

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Abstract: *Virtual exchange, as a tool for fostering intercultural understanding, allows participants to engage in online collaboration with international partners (O'Dowd, 2018). It offers significant benefits, such as the enhancement of participants' 21st-century skills. However, its effectiveness can be compromised by certain challenges such as dissatisfaction with communication (Brooks & Pitts, 2016), which has been considered to be linked to identity gaps (Jung & Hecht, 2004). In this qualitative study, we aim to explore the main identity gap(s) perceived in our data.*

The data comprises the first author's regular self-reflections during participation in a virtual exchange, as well as semi-structured interviews conducted with three volunteer participants from the same virtual exchange. We identified the main identity gaps and employed thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) on the data to explore the themes that could be interpreted as their underlying reasons. The findings highlight the role of facilitators, self-other alignment, and technology in the development of identity gaps. The study contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of identity gap formation in international online learning contexts, particularly virtual exchanges. Our findings can inform virtual exchange design and facilitator training programs, thereby enhancing the experience for participants.

Keywords: *virtual exchange, identity gap, facilitator, self-other alignment, technology*

Introduction

Virtual exchange, also referred to as collaborative online international learning or telecollaboration, is a learning arrangement that provides participants the opportunity to have regular, (semi-) authentic communication with transnational partners online (O'Dowd, 2018). The participants usually collaborate for several weeks to complete tasks (often in the form of a project) and finally reflect upon the outcomes of this experience. During the past decade, virtual exchange has seen a surge in popularity. It has been extensively utilized not only in foreign language education (Dooly, 2017; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016), but also across the humanities (Schultheis Moore & Simon, 2015) and in business education (Lindner, 2016). Several organizations have also been established providing universities with the chance to involve their students in fully structured, mentored exchange programs.

Virtual exchange, as opposed to distance learning courses, involves sustained interactions between small groups of participants engaging in constructive discussions and collaboration (O'Dowd et al., 2020). These interactions are supported by trained facilitators or educational mentors (i.e., teachers), who play an essential role in leading participants to engage in deep discussions where they negotiate differences (Kramsch, 2014; Sauro & Spector-Cohen, 2023).

However, the effectiveness of virtual exchange has been questioned by some researchers. For instance, Richardson (2016) cautions that virtual learning initiatives often continue the prevalent assumption that learning will naturally occur through interaction. Furthermore, some scholars have pointed out that virtual exchange frequently falls short of achieving the desired learning objectives (O'Dowd et al., 2020), one reason for this could be reduced communication satisfaction (Brooks & Pitts, 2016).

In the context of virtual exchange, the exploration of identity holds immense significance. As participants engage with peers from different backgrounds, they encounter diverse perspectives, cultural norms, and communication styles (Helm, 2018). Identity is not merely a static construct but a dynamic and multifaceted process that is continuously shaped and reshaped by our interactions and experiences (Crocetti & Salmela, 2018). Rather than treating identity as a fixed, essentialist category, constructivism invites us to explore the intricate interplay of social, cultural, and individual factors (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

In this qualitative study, we offer an in-depth description of the dynamics of identity construction in a virtual exchange, which took place in 2022. It involved teachers, researchers, and education designers in higher education from all over the world. The virtual exchange lasted for 11 weeks (about 2.5 months), focusing on the topic of teaching development in digital, open and networked learning environments. The first author participated as a learner in the exchange. We draw upon data obtained from semi-structured interviews and reflective notes of the first author. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the main identity gaps that emerge from the reported experiences of the participants?
2. What are the dominant themes that inform our understanding of the identified identity gap(s)?

For this purpose, we leveraged the first author's self-reflections and semi-structured interviews performed with three volunteering participants in the same virtual exchange. First, we identified the identity gaps where we perceived tensions in the reported experiences. Then, we performed thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) on the data to determine the emerging themes.

This study contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of identity formation in international online learning contexts, particularly virtual exchange. The findings highlight the role of facilitators, self-other alignment, and technology. They can also help virtual exchange designers and facilitators to improve the experience for their participants.

Identity

The constructivist approach (Baumann, 2001) to identity acknowledges the fluidity of identity and allows for gaining a richer understanding of how individuals navigate their sense of self in a dynamic world (Swann, 2005). During the past decades, the study of identity has evolved from a static attribute to focus on the direct relationship between communication and identity. Mokros (2003) posited that identity is formed by self-reflection of discourse and interaction. Ting-Toomey (1999) emphasized identity negotiation, where identities are asserted, defined, or changed through mutual communication activities. According to Collier (1988, 1997, 1998; Collier & Thomas, 1988), identity is co-created in relationships with others and emerges in communication. An individual's identity is created through the internalization and negotiation of identities ascribed by others.

The Communication Theory of Identity is a communicative approach to identity that focuses more on the mutual influences between identity and communication (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 1993; Hecht et al., 2003). It posits that social relations and roles are internalized as identities through communication, and these identities are then enacted as social behavior through communication. Identity not only defines an individual but also reflects social roles and relations through communication. Furthermore, social behavior is a function of identity through communication. According to this theory, identity is formed of the following four intertwined layers:

Personal Layer: At the core, we have the personal layer, which represents an individual's self-perception. It encompasses how we view ourselves, our beliefs, values, and self-concept. This layer acknowledges that identity is not monolithic; it evolves as we introspect and construct our self-image (Hecht, 1993).

Enacted Layer: This layer focuses on the performed aspects of identity. It recognizes that identity is not merely an internal state but is actively expressed through our behaviors, language, and interactions with others. Our choices, roles, and communication contribute to shaping our enacted identity (Hecht, 1993).

Relational Layer: Identity is inherently relational. The relational layer emphasizes how our identity is intertwined with our interactions in relationships. Whether it is family, friends, or colleagues, our sense of self is co-constructed through communication with others. Our identity adapts and responds to relational dynamics (Hecht, 1993).

Communal Layer: Beyond the individual and interpersonal, we have the communal layer—our collective identity. This layer encompasses group affiliations, cultural contexts, and shared narratives. Our membership in communities, whether based on nationality, ethnicity, or other social categories, significantly influences our identity (Hecht, 1993).

Jung and Hecht (2004) have proposed the concept of identity gaps, which are defined as inconsistencies or differences between various layers or facets of a person's identity, potentially resulting in dissatisfaction in communication (Jung & Hecht, 2004). A personal-enacted identity gap refers to the discrepancy between how an individual perceives themselves and how they portray their

identity through communication. It is not uncommon for messages to fail in conveying the exact meanings intended. Sometimes, individuals deliberately alter the way they present themselves in communication (Goffman, 1959; Petronio, 2000). In other instances, they might hold back from expressing their true selves (Jack, 1991, 1999). This identity gap could be considered closely associated with the concept of social conformity (Asch, 1956), which can be driven by three primary factors: the pursuit of precision, the longing for association, and the maintenance of a favorable self-perception (Kundu & Cummins, 2012).

Identity in Virtual Exchange

In the context of virtual exchange or collaborative online international learning, the exploration of identity is essential. As virtual exchanges offer an opportunity for intercultural communication, they can help participants understand their own thoughts, emotions, and biases and allow participants to approach interactions with empathy and sensitivity (Sauro & Spector-Cohen, 2023).

Identity formation within this dynamic landscape has been explored through various lenses. For instance, Peng and Dervin (2022) focused on the importance of managing moments of identity stress, in intercultural communication, particularly in educational virtual exchanges between Chinese and Finnish university students.

Peng and Dervin (2022) reported that participants used two main strategies during these moments, namely soothing and code-switching. Soothing is a positive strategy that involves offering comfort and understanding to others, while code-switching (alternating between languages) is used as an avoidance strategy. These strategies help to achieve self-other alignment (saving face) and keep the discussion moving forward. They also highlighted the emergence of different identities in the students' behaviors, such as the mediator, fence-sitter, and facilitator.

In 2016, Bostancıoğlu conducted a study on a form of virtual exchange program called Webheads in Action, designed for English teachers interested in incorporating Web 2.0 technologies into their instruction. The goal was to discern the elements that lead to the success of such communities. Over a period of nine months, data was gathered from the program's public group page interactions and interviews with 24 members. The findings indicated the key role of using technology for nurturing trust and fostering an inclusive atmosphere. The community provided social support in the online platform by encouraging the sharing of emotions such as joy and sadness and allowing the participants to share their personal lives. The participants felt a sense of community, believing that the Webheads were interested in each other's lives and would share significant life events with the community.

Brooks and Pitts (2016) employed a qualitative research approach to explore the identity gaps emerging within the context of a virtual exchange. Their participants included American university students who had participated in a series of online conversations with peers in Singapore. The theoretical framework of the study was grounded in Goffman's sociological work and was based on Hecht's communication theory of identity. Their findings indicated personal-communal and personal-enacted as the common identity gaps. Brooks and Pitts (2016) emphasized the importance of the latter gap in intercultural communication contexts and international education, as it may be linked to communication dissatisfaction and even negative mental health outcomes (Jung et al., 2007). However, identity gaps in virtual exchanges remain an under-researched area.

Virtual exchanges are being used for promoting intercultural competence and internationalization at home in educational and organizational settings. Nevertheless, identity gaps in such experiences may undermine participants' communication satisfaction (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Using the Communication Theory of Identity as the sensitizing framework, this study contributes to the current knowledge on identity gap formation in virtual exchanges.

We utilized data from semi-structured interviews with three participants in a virtual exchange and reflective notes of the first author who also participated in the same iteration of the virtual exchange. We provide insights into the main themes associated with identity gap formation within a virtual exchange. We draw upon the Communication Theory of Identity to explore identity formation in a virtual exchange. The findings of this study contribute to the body of knowledge on identity formation and can inform the planning and execution of online international learning programs, particularly virtual exchanges.

Data and methods

The context of this study is a virtual exchange which was designed for educators, education designers, and researchers (doctoral and postdoctoral students) from any part of the world to discuss topics related to online networked learning using English as a lingua franca. The course schedule included one introductory week, eight weeks working on four open education-oriented topics with one reflective week in the middle, and one concluding week (in total 11 weeks). At the outset of the virtual exchange, the learners were randomly assigned to groups of 7-9 and given access to their online group space.

In each group, there were two facilitators (a main facilitator and a co-facilitator), whose task was to enhance the group formation and interaction. The facilitators were members of the organizing team, who had been either course developers or learners in previous iterations. Every second week, the groups received a topic that they had to discuss in their video meetings and jointly create an output presenting the main points. The participants in each group were encouraged to use diverse digital tools for creating the output.

While participating in the program, the first author wrote her reflections on the experience. A month after the completion of the program, emails were sent to all the participants for their consent to be interviewed about their experience in the virtual exchange. Three of whom consented to be contacted for the interview. Semi-structured interviews were performed with the volunteering participants during June-July 2022 in English. Details of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Details about the participants and dataset

Participant	Gender	Linguacultural background	Data	Profession
Richard (pseudonym)	Male	Native speaker of English	Interview (60 min)	University teacher
Chee (pseudonym)	Male	Non-native speaker of English	Interview (35 min)	Lecturer
Margarethe (pseudonym)	Female	Non-native speaker of English	Interview (30 min)	University teacher
Researcher	Female	Non-native speaker of English	Reflective notes (1983 words	Doctoral researcher

During the interviews, the participants were asked to tell how they perceived their roles in the discussions, their relationship with their group members, their teamwork dynamics, and their challenges and takeaways.

In the first step, to investigate the unfolding discrepancies in identity (identity gaps), we conducted qualitative analysis of the contents guided by the Communication Theory of Identity (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) on sections of the transcript where a feeling of discontent was perceivable. We pinpointed the layers of identity that could be in conflict within the informants in those segments.

Then, to explore the factors contributing to the main identity gaps, we used the thematic analysis method (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This method includes the following stages: (1) data familiarization, (2) data coding, (3) theme generation, and (4) theme refining and naming. Data analysis consisted of first organizing and preparing the data by transcribing the recorded interviews by means of an automated transcription software. Each transcription involved cross-checking the audio file with the text to ensure accuracy. Subsequently, each author engaged in multiple readings of the transcripts and the first author's reflections performed data coding individually. Following this, discussions were held regarding the codes, leading to the formation of themes.

As authors, we need to acknowledge our personal positionality concerning the virtual exchange discussed in the present study. The first author took the course as a learner in the same iteration (2022) as the interviewees. The second author participated in the course in a different year (2018) and was a co-facilitator in the following year (2019). These experiences allowed the researchers to have an insider's perspective on this online collaborative course.

Prior to the study, permission was obtained from the virtual exchange's organizing committee to perform this study. Also, the interviewees were informed of the confidentiality issues and provided informed consent to participate in the study. In compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the participants were pseudonymized.

Findings

In the following, we first outline the primary identity discrepancy that surfaced in the data. Following that, we discuss the themes that arose in relation to this main identity gap.

The analysis of the transcripts showed that personal-enacted was the most dominating identity gap in the reported experiences of the participants although there were few cases which could be interpreted as other types of gaps, such as personal-communal. A personal-enacted identity gap is a discrepancy between an individual's perception of self and the identity conveyed through communication. Sometimes, individuals consciously modify their self-presentation in communication (Goffman, 1959; Petronio, 2000), or in other cases, they may restrain from expressing their genuine selves (Jack, 1991, 1999). Regardless of the scenario, in the Communication Theory of Identity when the identity communicated deviates from an individual's self-perception, this disparity is termed as a personal-enacted identity gap (Jung & Hecht, 2008). This identity gap can be perceived and communicated as a sense of dissatisfaction with the local situation. Here is an instance from the author's self-reflections where the personal-enacted identity gap is perceived:

> ... when all the group members were sharing their concluding remarks on the course, almost everyone mentioned that the program structure had been ambiguous to them during the first couple of weeks. So, I realized that it wasn't only me who dealt with this challenge. At that moment, I thought that if we had shared our challenges with the program earlier in our meetings, it would have improved the experience for all of us. Personally, I didn't do so because I didn't feel comfortable in the group at that stage.

The personal-enacted identity gap highlighted in the excerpt reflects a discrepancy between the author's self-perception of her inner thoughts and the role she enacts within her group. This gap in this instance manifests as a reluctance to share uncertainties or challenges. The realization that others faced similar challenges suggests that creating a supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable voicing their concerns can enhance the group's overall experience. It emphasizes the importance of fostering an atmosphere of trust and openness from the outset, allowing for a more cohesive group dynamic. This approach could bridge the personal-enacted identity gap and improve satisfaction with the experience (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

In the following, we will focus on the themes emerging from the transcripts around the personal-enacted identity gap, namely the role of the facilitator, technology as a double-edged sword, and self-other alignment (Peng & Dervin, 2022). These themes represent the main factors that potentially contributed to the personal-enacted identity gaps perceived in our data.

Facilitator's role
Facilitators can play a vital role in fostering inclusivity by actively encouraging those who are quieter to contribute their viewpoints and acknowledging the significance of their input. This practice is particularly effective in maintaining the engagement of participants with diverse backgrounds, preventing them from disengaging or withdrawing. For example, the first author had limited practical experience with the main theme of the virtual exchange. After attending several sessions, she realized that her perspective differed from that of the other group members, because she was a doctoral researcher with less teaching experience in higher education. Here is an excerpt from her personal reflections:

> I sent an email to the co-facilitator and explained to her my challenge. When writing these notes, I wonder why I contacted the co-facilitator and not the main facilitator. Maybe it was because she had revealed some personal aspects of her life that resonated with me. So, this background knowledge about her had made her more approachable to me, and I could feel more comfortable letting her know my challenge in the program. Anyways, she acknowledged that we all have different backgrounds, and it is quite natural that we have diverse takes on the topics. But she encouraged me to offer my own unique perspective, which can be equally valuable. That helped me realize how my contribution can be worthwhile and motivated me to continue my participation in the meetings.

In the above example, it was the approachability of the co-facilitator that enabled the first author as a virtual exchange participant to share about her challenging situation. She felt comfortable reaching out for help, which proved to be a crucial step since it prevented her dropping out of the course. The role of facilitators in fostering an environment of trust is of key importance (O'Dowd et al., 2020). Trust encourages participants to freely express their thoughts and opinions during group collaborations (Roberson & Perry, 2022).

In the interview, Margarethe described the facilitators as "administrators" because, based on her experience, they had primarily been passive observers in the discussions. In her group, there was an active participant who took on a facilitative role. This participant helped foster a sense of inclusion. They did this by asking questions and encouraging others to share their insights, as pointed out by Margarethe (see the extract below). This approach helped to prevent the development of identity gaps.

> She [the participant] would always say, like in the meetings.... but Kevin, you haven't said anything. Just please say something or we have not heard from you. So, she would motivate people in a really nice way.

Although facilitators are recommended to remain neutral to enhance input from group members (Tassoul & Bujis, 2009), their role is to guide the teamwork process (O'Dowd et al., 2020). To foster an environment of openness, facilitators can employ a strategy of encouraging in-depth conversations. In these discussions, participants are invited to share insights from their own personal and professional life experiences. This approach can help to alleviate any potential gaps between individuals' personal identities and the identities they portray. In this regard, utilizing more open-ended questions and shifting the focus away from output production can be advantageous, as recommended by Richard (see below).

> Maybe the facilitator could have somehow enforced discussion, but... because there was a lot of very task-focused negotiation and stuff, but... but it would have been interesting to hear more open-ended discussions, which I can see some of the other groups appear to have had ...

Richard continues that the mere presence of the facilitators could inhibit participants from candidly expressing their frustrations as he suggests it might be considered disrespectful by the facilitator, who is assumed to be part of the organizing team:

> I suppose the presence of a facilitator inhibits that because we, well, we all know that... Facilitators are involved in creating the course and we respect the facilitator, and we

> don't want to hurt that person's feelings. So, we can't say that this is even though I think the facilitator would not have been offended.

When facilitators did not address the potential ambiguities regarding their own role, their presence could inhibit participants from expressing uncertainties, challenges, or honest opinions about the course. This may be because participants perceived the facilitator as an outsider or a member of the organizing team and wish to maintain a level of politeness. Another area where the facilitators could provide clarity is the guidelines for the virtual exchange. This was a subject that participants often discussed. The quote below from the interview with Margarethe is an example of such a situation:

> So ... the first week was really chaotic for me. So ... I would have liked ... Yeah ... Better... Like guide through the course. Because I think if we had known beforehand that we were supposed to decide on two meetings a week ourselves, we would have been better prepared for that.

Due to the initial ambiguity surrounding the program, participants lacked clarity regarding how to approach the tasks and may have been hesitant to express their views. This is in alignment with the researcher's reported experience:

> ... I had many ambiguities, especially during the first few weeks. For example, I wasn't sure how we were going to go about the tasks, how we were expected to add the documents, what would be the end-product.

An experience consistently reported by all the participants was lack of expression of ambiguities regarding the practicalities of the program, including the role of facilitators and program guidelines. However, in none of the groups reported by the interviewees this ambiguity was discussed openly, which could be associated with insufficient trust or desire for being aligned with the group.

Self-other alignment

The reluctance to express their own views or address ambiguities might be partly a result of a desire to align with the majority. Additionally, participants reported attempting to contribute to discussions as equally, reflecting this conformity. The extract below is from the interview with Richard:

> I think ... some things I contributed that benefited the group. But not too much. So sometimes I was just agreeing, even if the agreement was to some suggestion there wasn't a very good idea and just let's see what happens. And in my head, I'm thinking that's a stupid idea, but why were you doing that?

> So, I guess the kind of equity between participants had priority over like desire for a particular quality like come in one's own mind, and I'm sure the other people were ...I feel the other people were thinking in a similar way.

This is closely linked to the idea of conformity in decision-making (Asch, 1956), which can be driven by three primary factors: the pursuit of precision, the longing for association, and the maintenance of a favorable self-perception (Kundu & Cummins, 2012). Another instance of self-other alignment through self-silencing was noted in the first author's notes as follows:

> Sometimes, I had a hard time understanding some of the group members. This could have been due to our different backgrounds, their use of jargon, or their accents. As a

result, I felt a pressure to keep up with the discussion. I never shared this problem with the group because it seemed to me that the other members didn't have this issue. To resolve it, I tried to spend more time preparing for our discussions.

The wish for being aligned with the individual or group and the act of self-silencing could be the driving forces behind the difference between the "back stage" and "front stage" perspectives (Goffman, 1959). When teachers or facilitators notice that collaborations are moving forward without a variety of suggestions being put forth, this behavior should be acknowledged and addressed.

Technology a Double-edged Sword

A user-friendly website or platform is essential for participants to easily access the information they need. However, if a website is overloaded with information, it can have a negative impact on the browsing experience. In this virtual exchange, the participants, who were academics, anticipated being able to navigate the course website effortlessly to find the necessary information. However, the complexity of the website posed challenges for them in this regard, as highlighted by Chee:

> Getting the participants to be a bit more familiarized with the website. I couldn't. I ... I didn't know where to look for the link. You know ... So I had a bit of trouble. In fact, there was one point that... I ... I missed the meeting because of that ... because I wasn't quite aware. One of the links wasn't working.

Experiences like these can evoke frustration among participants who were experts in their respective fields (personal identity layer) when they miss a session due to difficulties in finding the correct link.

Nonetheless, technology could also serve as a tool for fostering relationships and cultivating a sense of shared group identity, as pointed out by Margarethe:

> So ... I had a really great experience. I think we were very lucky that we fit so well. We came from very different backgrounds, but still it was a lot of fun. The meetings and yeah, learning together.

> Things happen to people during the course, actually, because one of our participants is Ukrainian, so actually the war started for her while we were in the course, so she was suddenly holding meetings from a war zone. Another person lost their job.

> And we had cases of illnesses of children and husbands ... like more severe illnesses. So somehow the personal component always came in there. So I would say that I developed a friendly relationship with all of them because we also had the WhatsApp group and we would chat.

The above quotation suggests that the use of online networks for sharing life experiences can enhance feelings of support and foster a sense of community (Bostancıoğlu, 2016). As pointed out by Margarethe, the shared WhatsApp group made it possible for the group members to connect informally. This community feeling could have played a role in building trust, facilitating idea sharing and mitigating the emergence of identity gaps. This might explain why Margarethe views diverse backgrounds as "fun". Conversely, in the groups of Richard and the first author, where the focus was primarily on completing tasks, the diverse backgrounds contributed to the development of personal-enacted identity gaps.

Discussion

The present qualitative study investigates identity formation within the context of virtual exchange, acknowledging its continuous evolvement through interactions and experiences. Taking a constructivist approach and using the Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht, 1993) as the sensitizing framework, we focused on exploring identity gaps and related themes among participants using data obtained from semi-structured interviews and reflective notes of the first author. Findings highlight the personal-enacted identity gap as the overarching identity gap in our data. The personal-enacted identity gap refers to the discrepancy between an individual's self-perception and the way they express themselves through communication (Jung & Hecht, 2004). In the scope of this research, it signifies the discrepancy between the beliefs or thoughts that the participants privately held and how they expressed these ideas and viewpoints within their groups, as per their accounts.

In our study, three themes related to the personal-enacted identity gap were identified, which include the role of the facilitator, self-other aligning, and technology as a double-edged sword. These themes can be interpreted as the factors contributing to the development of the personal-enacted identity gap among the virtual exchange participants.

Based on our findings, we argue that facilitators can play an important role in bridging the personal-enacted gap through using strategies to help participants develop trust and build a sense of community. The insights from O'Dowd et al.'s (2020) research become particularly relevant. They also emphasize that strategic mentoring can enhance virtual exchange experience. By integrating the findings from Sauro and Spector-Cohen's (2023) research regarding the necessity of employing active facilitation strategies to foster emotional empathy, trust, and sense of community among participants, we can advocate for a more structured approach to mentoring that addresses the identity challenges highlighted in our research.

In the absence of enough trust among the participants, we noted that participants tend to refrain from voicing their uncertainties or differing views to "do" interculturality (Peng & Dervin, 2022). This leads them to align with the group consensus and keep the interactions moving and potentially creating a gap between their personal identity and the identity they portray within the group. The concept of group conformity, which is a form of self-other alignment, involves altering one's responses to align with those of group members (Asch, 1952, Asch, 1955, Asch, 1956). This concept has been studied over the past six decades in various fields (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

However, group conformity has been largely overlooked in the context of online international learning, where participants may be required to take risks in social situations, such as asking potentially revealing questions, providing potentially incorrect answers, and proposing potentially disagreeable ideas (Ilias et al., 2013). Due to the fear of judgment when a group member's opinion contradicts the majority, the individual may feel pressured to conform (Forsyth & Burnette, 2010), causing identity distress (Peng & Dervin, 2022). This phenomenon needs to be addressed by facilitators when they sense social conformity is present in decision making and discussions, especially when the goal of virtual exchanges is intercultural learning.

Finally, our findings indicate the two-sided role technology plays in relation to the personal-enacted identity gap. On the one hand, the difficulty in the navigation of the website was reported to be challenging because the overload of information contributed to the development of this gap by hindering the participants from enacting the digital skills they believe they have. On the other hand, the use of a WhatsApp group for the exchange of personal life experiences and offering social support

contributed to creating a sense of group identity (Bostancıoğlu, 2016) and mitigated the gap that could have developed due to the diverse backgrounds of the group members.

This research comes with a set of limitations. The researchers were themselves engaged in the virtual exchange, which could potentially introduce bias into the data analysis. On the other hand, their personal experience offered insights and knowledge that was useful to interpret the experiences of other participants. The scope of the data was somewhat restricted due to other participants' unwillingness to participate in interviews. Furthermore, the findings are specific to a single instance of a facilitated virtual exchange. As such, these findings may not extend to all virtual exchanges, which necessitates additional research for validation.

Conclusion

This study provides an insider's perspective on identity formation in virtual exchanges by utilizing the reflective notes of the first author. Our results highlight the influence of facilitators, self-other alignment, and technology in potentially inhibiting participants from revealing their authentic selves. This study can guide the design and implementation of future virtual exchanges. Facilitators can be trained to encourage authenticity and spot conformity, while creating a safe space for communication. The study underscores the role of technology in creating safe spaces for self-expression. This could result in more genuine interactions and opportunities for sincere communication among individuals from diverse backgrounds in virtual exchanges (Bostancıoğlu, 2016).

Considering the limited number of studies investigating the formation of identity in virtual exchanges through the lens of identity gaps, it is suggested that more research be conducted in this field. This additional research could shed more light on the elements that lead to identity gaps and provide insights into strategies to mitigate them. Examining real-time interactions to understand how identity is shaped within the dynamics of communication could also expand our understanding of identity formation in the context of virtual exchanges.

Acknowledgements

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