

A netnography of emergent ESOL researcher identity and development in a virtual community of practice

Julian Chen¹  | Vincent Greenier²  | Sasha Janes¹

¹School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

²School of Languages, Linguistics, Music & Visual Culture (LLMVC), King's College, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

Correspondence

Vincent Greenier, School of Languages, Linguistics, Music & Visual Culture (LLMVC), Taylor Building, King's College, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB24 3UB, UK.
Email: vtgreenier@abdn.ac.uk

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Abstract

For emerging researchers, communities of practice (CoPs) can be a much-needed source of knowledge and support, particularly during a global pandemic. Within this context, a virtual CoP (VCoP) project was initiated for novice researchers in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)/Applied Linguistics worldwide to exchange perspectives and academic knowledge. Guided by netnography, our study explores the social, cultural, and professional practices of VCoP through multiple digital sources, such as webinar recordings, Facebook group posts, reflective journal entries, and one-on-one interview. The triangulated data aims to examine the effects of virtual mentorship on the agency, engagement, and identity construction of an emerging researcher. Findings illustrate that a VCoP facilitates international networking, fosters the repositioning of ESOL researcher identity, and promotes agency through virtual mentoring. Specifically, netnography opens a viable avenue for remote data mining in Applied Linguistics research.

KEYWORDS

higher degree by research (HDR), identity, mentoring, netnography, virtual community of practice, identity, mentoring, netnography, novice ESOL researcher, virtual community of practice

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要旨

對於新興研究人員而言，實踐社區 (CoPs) 可成為急需的知識和同儕支持來源，尤其是在全球新冠疫情大流行期間。在此背景下，為全球英語教學和應用語言學的新手研究人員發起了一個虛擬實踐社區 (VCoP) 計畫，以交流觀點和學術知識研究應起而生。透過網路民族誌的研究調查法，我們的資料取得經由網路研討會錄音、臉書群組貼文、反思日誌和一對一訪談等多種數位資源探索 虛擬社區的社會、文化和專業實踐面向。三角數據旨在檢驗虛擬指導對新興研究人員的能動性、參與感和身份建構的影響。調查結果顯示，虛擬實踐社區促進了國際人際關係連結，培養英語教學研究人員身份的重新定位，並通過虛擬指導鼓勵能動性發展。具體來說，網路民族誌為應用語言學中的遠程數據開闢了一條可行的研究途徑。

新興英語教學研究人員;指導;網路民族誌;虛擬實踐社區;身份認同

1 | INTRODUCTION

As our world is wired with internet-based technologies in the digital era, netnography, as a vibrant research approach that blends traditional ethnography with the exploration of online communities and their culture (Kozinets, 2010), has grown in popularity among researchers across disciplines such as marketing, tourism, sociology, education, social science, and, as in the case of this study, Applied Linguistics (Bengry-Howell et al., 2011; Dilletta et al., 2020). This transnational netnography sought to explore the impact of telecollaboration on higher degree by research (HDR) students' identity, self-efficacy, and professional development within a virtual community of practice (VCoP) through the active participation of the researchers as mentors. Varying conceptualizations of mentoring exist making it challenging to define (Nahmad-Williams & Taylor, 2015); however, typically, a mentee is supported by a mentor who assists with the mentee's personal and/or professional development (Jacobi, 1991). Within this VCoP, which took place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants collaborated remotely to develop skills, knowledge, and intercultural competence (Helm, 2015). These novice researchers underwent a conflictual process of identity and role negotiation and transformation in the pursuit of academic community integration and faced resistance as they constructed their researcher identity, requiring agency and creativity to identify solutions to contextual constraints (Teng, 2020).

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Telecollaborating in a virtual community of practice

Traditionally, a community of practice (CoP) requires negotiated enterprise, mutual engagement of participants who co-construct relationships and norms, and a shared repertoire of communal resources (Wenger, 2000). As potential community members adopt the community's norms, practices, language, and culture, their enculturation influences

existing practices and the co-construction of knowledge is enhanced (Wegner & Nückles, 2015). Within a CoP, learning constitutes not only knowledge acquisition, but also the social formation of members and identity development (Pyrko et al., 2017; Wenger, 1998). Moreover, CoPs facilitate reflective processes as members examine and contribute perspectives, beliefs, and practices (Nguyen, 2017). Thus, participation in the CoP enhances learning and this shared experience, via engagement, molds the practice so that the practice itself, social connection, identity, participation, and learning are intertwined (Gannon & Prothero, 2018; Wenger, 2010).

In an online environment, a VCoP also allows individual members to share and disseminate knowledge and co-construct an online community identity through social interaction (Pan et al., 2015). Within a VCoP, the role of a facilitator in initiating dialogue to encourage deeper thinking and understanding and to stimulate knowledge acquisition is central to the learning opportunities provided (Chauraya & Brodie, 2018). Knowledge sharing is significantly influenced by members' enjoyment in helping others (Hung et al., 2015) and intrinsic motivation (Lai & Chen, 2014). Coinciding with a VCoP's social constructivist underpinnings, telecollaboration is frequently employed within a "social learning frame" in which participants communicate, collaborate, and construct their abilities in pursuit of a shared goal or interest (Dooly, 2017, p. 174). Being learner-centered, telecollaboration not only promotes dialogue and digital competencies, but also fosters learner autonomy (Fuchs et al., 2012). Synchronous video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom) and online discussion boards (e.g., Facebook posting and commenting) build cultural awareness and understanding of other cultures (Angelova & Zhao, 2016) and facilitate online intercultural exchange using English as a lingua franca (Lewis, 2017).

2.2 | Exploring emergent researcher identity and agency through mentoring

Within a mentorship, the co-construction of professional identities occurs for both the mentor and the mentee (Asención-Delaney, 2012). For the mentor, a positive culture of professional support is fostered through collaboration and collegiality. Moreover, the mentorship role stimulates professional growth through the acquisition of new pedagogical approaches and self-reflection through observation and action research (Asención-Delaney, 2012). Mentor support to mentees may reflect "belonging" to make the novice feel welcome, "emotional" to encourage and build confidence, "pedagogical" to provide advice on developing teaching practice, and "space" giving them autonomy to try out their own ideas (Shields & Murray, 2017, pp. 322–323). However, mentors need to strike a balance between constructive feedback and emotional support to ensure a productive mentorship (Asención-Delaney, 2012). Mentorship communication requires a culturally responsive dialogue which is transformative, not only for the mentor and mentee, but also for the academic institutions which are confronted, shaped, and influenced by the cross-cultural relationship (Harris & Lee, 2019).

The identity trajectory of scholarly identity development is fluid and influenced by changing goals, personal histories, prior experience, as well as the specific contexts in which the student is embedded (Inouye & McAlpine, 2017). Professional identity is contingent on membership to a professional community, the capability to utilize particular practices, and professional training (Kim & Smith, 2020). Hence, effective supervision is a significant factor in developing researcher identity (Wang & Byram, 2019). Identity construction is conceptualized as an individual's understanding of their own identity and the concept of self used in performing social actions, and is negotiated through interaction with others and through one's performance within a given context (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014). Identity is contextual in nature, meaning individuals consciously share varying versions of self, facilitating the construction of different identities in specific contexts (Li & Deng, 2019). Whereas *self* might be described as a psychological construct, identity embodies "historical racial, ethnic, national, institutional, ideological, social and discursive perspectives of 'who I am'" (Li & Deng, 2019, p. 71). Fluid like identity, human agency is one's capability and action to "intentionally influence one's functioning and life circumstances" (Bandura, 2006, p. 164). Human agency is influenced by self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), with self-efficacy, under Social Cognitive Theory, being one's own judgement of capability to carry out a specific function (Bandura, 2006). Social Cognitive Theory is governed by three agentic properties: *forethought*, an

individual's creation of action plans and goal setting; *self-reactiveness*, self-evaluation of one's performance against a set of behavioral standards; and *self-reflectiveness*, self-reflection of efficacy to achieve certain challenges (Bandura, 2018).

2.3 | Netnography as a qualitative research methodology

Coined by Robert Kozinets (1998), netnography enables researchers to tap into a wide variety of social media channels to collect rich data generated from human social interaction or data analytics on the net, thus breaking the geospatial and physical boundaries (Addeo et al., 2019). Active participation occurs when the researcher is engaged and involved with community activities while passive participation reflects the researcher as an observer (Kulavuz-Onal & Vásquez, 2013). Costello et al. (2017) highlight that adopting an active rather than passive netnography, through conversation stimulation and prompt responses, better sustains the online community and the pursuit of community goals. Given its dynamic and flexible approaches to unpack the nuances of online community activities and practices, netnography has gradually entered the realm of Applied Linguistics as a potential research methodology (Kessler et al., 2021).

Naturalistic and based on a methodological bricolage, netnographic data collection is less consuming as travel is eliminated, downloaded data can replace the need for recording and transcription, and historical data is archived automatically on many platforms allowing the researcher to confirm trends (Addeo et al., 2019). In addition, changes to participants' identity, knowledge, and participation can be tracked in real time (Kulavuz-Onal, 2015). The collection of data continues until theoretical saturation is achieved (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and, typically, withdrawal from the online community through disengagement ends the study (Kulavuz-Onal, 2015). Access to the online community can be overt or covert; the former is ethically sound with participants aware of the researcher's role and intentions whereas the latter is unobtrusive yet presents ethical implications (Addeo et al., 2019). The researcher as participant contributes toward creating positive connections with participants, which encourages ongoing participation and facilitates insightful interviews (Kulavuz-Onal, 2015).

3 | THE CURRENT STUDY

As indicated above, *qualitative netnography* is adopted in this study to obtain insider perspectives and in-depth understandings of novice researchers' identity construction and professional development in a unique VCoP environment amid COVID-19. To reiterate, netnography "is a specific type of qualitative social media research. It adapts the methods of ethnography and other qualitative research practices to the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, networks, and systems of social media" (Kozinets, 2020, p. 19). Given the pandemic lockdown restrictions, our participants used this online professional community to connect with peers and researchers located in different parts of the world and, in a sense, to break free from social distancing. In this study, we focus and report on a unique netnographic account of a participant's trajectory—from initially identifying himself as only a language teacher to navigating, negotiating, and owning his researcher identity throughout his maiden telecollaborative experience. Specifically, we document how online mentoring, in tandem with a VCoP, came into play with his professional development and agency as an "emergent researcher" Grounded in netnography, the main research question is:

To what extent does telecollaboration transform the identity construction and professional development of a novice teacher researcher in a virtual community of practice?

3.1 | Setting and participants

This timely study was initiated in response to the impact of COVID-19 on HDR supervision and student well-being during the pandemic year 2020. Given the constraints of border lockdown and social distancing, the social-emotional learning state of the international HDR students had become our immediate concerns. Finding innovative ways to continue HDR supervision and offer moral support motivated the lead researcher in this study to conduct a telecollaborative project with his external colleague during this unprecedented crisis. Both academics are involved in teaching and supervising HDR students in the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and Applied Linguistics programs (one in Australia and the other, Scotland). Purposeful sampling was initially enacted to recruit their own HDR students, followed by snowball sampling to disseminate the project information via the lead researcher's professional Facebook groups related to Applied Linguistics, TESOL, and Second Language Research. Sixteen HDR students from around the world responded to the advertisement via Facebook, a majority of whom are non-native English speakers and pursued either a Master's or PhD in TESOL or Applied Linguistics at the time of this study. For ethical considerations, they were informed how their participation would benefit their HDR training and professional development, that confidentiality would be ensured throughout the project, and that they could withdraw at any point during the study.

To provide a more in-depth account, we focused on Gabriele's¹ trajectory against the following criteria. First, whilst all his counterparts are already PhD or MPhil students, Gabriele, an Italian male in his late 20s, was not enrolled in any HDR program when the study began. He joined the project to gather more information about HDR studies before applying for a postgraduate degree in TESOL or Applied Linguistics. Compared with his peers, Gabriele's status was rightfully epitomized as a pure "novice" without any HDR training and supervision experience. This unique status placed him at the peripheral circle of VCoP, making him an interesting case. Second, he is a non-native English teacher who speaks Italian as his mother tongue and has taught EFL in Vietnam for 3 years. This culturally, linguistically, and geospatially diverse background also encapsulated the keywords of the sampling criteria, an "international" "non-native" "ESOL teacher." Despite his peripheral status, Gabriele demonstrated a strong aspiration for pursuing an HDR degree throughout this project, which came to fruition later with his acceptance into an online Master's TESOL program in the United Kingdom. This transition from the peripheral to inner circle also warranted the netnographic approach of shadowing Gabriele during the VCoP. Finally, he had been active in all forms of telecollaborative participation amid the pandemic, whilst taking the opportunity to grow as an emergent researcher. As reflected in his second journal entry,

[COVID-19] gave me more time to read and think about my research. I'm still at the beginning of my research "journey" so I'm just trying to gather as much information as possible, trying to figure out my research design, and trying to "polish" my research questions. (Reflection journal entry 2, May 16, 2020)

3.2 | Data collection

Throughout the project, we conducted online "field work" to establish rapport with our participants whilst observing and documenting interactions in a telecollaborative CoP (Kulavuz-Onal & Vásquez, 2013) during the pandemic year 2020. Data was collected from multiple digital sources over eight months (April to November, 2020):

1. *HDR training webinar*: A key component of this telecollaborative project was to offer hands-on workshops for HDR mentees to upskill their research repertoires. A series of 12 webinars, hosted on the videoconferencing Zoom platform, aimed to target a wide range of aspects conducive to their HDR studies, such as how to conduct qualitative data coding and prepare journal manuscripts. Besides the two HDR supervisors who conducted the webinars, we also invited world-renowned scholars and researchers in the fields of TESOL and Applied Linguistics as guest

Entry 16: 02/08 In preparation for Seminar 5

1) "Discuss your research projects and/or research interests with attention to the theoretical framework and data collection methods you are/will be using and try to find commonalities. If your approaches are very different, discuss the reasons for your methodological choices, and offer each other suggestions."

The main project I'm working on right now is about the impact of emergency remote teaching on learner agency. I'm looking at agency from a complex dynamic systems theory perspective, and my main hypothesis is that my students' agency was negatively affected by the change in context (i.e. the "regular", in-class instruction) and that because of their perception of their own agency, their engagement decreased during ERT. As far as data collection is concerned, I'm doing qualitative research and used mostly data from interviews and from a survey. I'm also using the data of two brainstorming **tasks** we performed during ERT and after we went back to in-class lessons. I'm still working on how to use and present the data coherently.

2) "Talk about how your project, focus, and ideas have changed since you began your journey and the reasons for these changes. You might also talk about your supervisor's reaction to these changes. If you have not begun your study, you can talk about how your research or teaching interests have changed over the past few years."

Prior to joining this mentoring project, I didn't really have any concrete projects. I just had some areas that I was particularly interested in, such as learner variables, especially environmental and contextual variables. Over the past few months, I've read a lot about **Complex Dynamic Systems** (after reading about Marta's research) and found it super interesting.

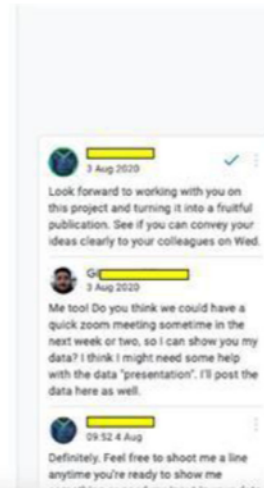


FIGURE 1 Gabriel's reflective journal entry shadowed by the lead researcher. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

speakers on topics related to their expertise and initial needs analysis results. Students had the chance to interact with the guest speakers in the main room and peers in the breakout room. All the webinars were video recorded for transcription, and text chat logs recorded in the sidebar and breakout room discussions.

2. **Facebook group:** As a social networking platform, Facebook lends itself to an ideal space for a VCoP, allowing members to exchange ideas and receive instant feedback (Wong et al., 2011). We created a private Facebook group for all the members to share resources (e.g., virtual conference announcements or newly published books and journal articles), comment on the workshop topics, seek advice from peers and mentors, and show solidarity in a VCoP. The "Event" feature of the Facebook group also allowed us to announce and keep track of each upcoming webinar. All the group activities and multimodal posts were documented for data analysis. For this study, we collected and analyzed 25 Facebook posts initiated or responded by Gabriel as our focal case.
3. **Reflective journal:** After each webinar, participants were encouraged to continue reflecting on the workshop topic guided by our reflection prompts, and to initiate an entry related to any HDR issues concerning them. Google Documents were created as a digital repository for us to record all the journals and respond to each participant as their mentors (Figure 1). Online mentoring via dialogue journaling between mentors (supervisors) and mentees (novice teacher-researchers) has been proven viable in teacher training and professional development (Chen, 2020; Sato & Chen, 2021). In Gabriel's case, he completed a total of 19 journal entries (6163 words) by the end of the study, all of which were analyzed and triangulated with other data sources.
4. **Semi-structured interviews:** To better understand the effectiveness of this project, we conducted a focus group discussion and a one-on-one interview with all participants in the mid- and end-of-the project, respectively. These interviews aimed to further understand participants' experiences in this telecollaborative HDR approach, and whether their identity as emergent researchers had changed throughout the pandemic year. Both interviews were audio recorded via Zoom and transcribed later for analysis and validation of other data sources, such as their reflective journals, Facebook posts, and webinar text chat logs.

3.3 | Data analysis

Due to the nature of multimodal data gathered from various sources, we employed content analysis to seek, integrate, and link thematic patterns between and across the triangulated data. In order to understand the investigated

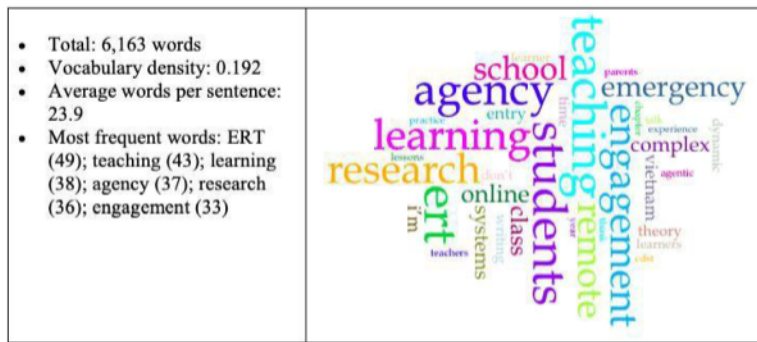


FIGURE 2 Left: summary of the textual analysis; Right: word cloud of Gabriele's journal entries. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

phenomenon as a whole, we used thematic coding through a hermeneutic approach of ongoing, holistic text interpretation (Addeo et al., 2019). That is, we commenced the first coding cycle individually screening, reading, and re-reading data to assign in vivo codes as this ensured the participant's voice was heard (Miles et al., 2014). As a continuous reflective process, we conducted further iterations in condensing text segments to reflect codes, with codes subsequently grouped into categories.

We then convened as a team to compare our individual coding, whilst discussing and resolving the discrepancies in coding and interpretation before the final consensus could be reached. Specifically, we followed the five operations in netnographic data analysis suggested by Kozinets (2020, pp. 332–333): *collating* (preparing, screening, and sorting various data sources in workable forms before coding); *coding* (reflecting, discovering, and detecting repeating patterns across the dataset); *combining* (revealing, linking, and merging conceptually related codes into a higher conceptual level); *counting* (quantifying and comparing key elements identified in qualitative data); and *charting* (visual representation to make holistic sense of the dataset and themes). The first four operations are mirrored in the Findings section, and the last (charting) is illustrated in the Implications section.

Figure 2 presents the result of our initial analysis of Gabriele's journal entries using an online tool (Voyant²) for textual/corpus analysis. The word cloud shed light on the salient elements grounded in his journal whereas the most frequent words and total word count helped us gain insight into potential thematic patterns. This facilitated the subsequent data coding and interpretation.

Netnographic "quality" can be judged by its "immersive depth, prolonged engagement, researcher identification, and persistent conversations" (Kurikko & Tuominen, 2012, p. 13). In our case, we adopted the notion of "immersive engagement" (Kozinets, 2020, p. 135), engaging not only socially, emotionally, and culturally with our participants during the VCoP, but also immersively in all forms of digital data mining as in social media (Facebook), webinars (Zoom), and dialogue journaling (Google Docs). Reciprocally, the rapport we developed with the participants allowed us to conduct member checking to share our initial findings with the participants in order to verify our data interpretations and ensure research rigor (Li, 2020; Sandlin, 2007). Finally, given the scope of this netnographic study, we focus primarily on data from Gabriele's netnographic trail, such as his journal entries, interviews, Facebook posts, and comments.

4 | FINDINGS

The analysis of data produced a rich description that highlighted salient themes in Gabriele's teacher–researcher trajectory. Findings were categorized into three key themes: *facilitating peer collaboration and networking in a VCoP*, *the repositioning of teacher–researcher identity*, and *promoting agency through virtual mentoring*.

4.1 | Facilitating peer collaboration and networking in a VCoP

Throughout the study, Gabriele had an active telepresence and demonstrated his agency through his regular posts on Facebook and his consistent journal entries on Google Docs. Further, he believed that participating in this study was valuable due to the networking and collaborating opportunities it presented with other VCoP members and the researchers. His developed sense of belonging was bolstered by shared learning and knowledge exchange that played a pivotal role in positioning himself within an international community of learners and scholars (Pan et al., 2015; Pyrko et al., 2017):

The fact that you create connections with people that otherwise you will not be able to connect with, that's great . . . If you want to build a network, kind of, you know, of people, of a community working from different parts of the world or something like this project works really, really well. (Focus Group, 29/09/2020)

It was the capacity to share ideas and experiences with an international cohort that drew Gabriele to the study as he endeavored to expand both his knowledge and community of practice to support his emerging interest in research (Gannon & Prothero, 2018). Gabriele asserted that prior to joining the VCoP, while motivated, he was in a peripheral state and unsure how to navigate a transition to becoming a researcher:

In terms of knowledge pretty much. I started from zero, so I had no idea. Well, I have read a few papers and the research articles, but I have no idea how to actually implement research. (Focus Group, 29/09/2020)

The virtual meetings gave a much-needed space for Gabriele's voice to be heard. He affirmed that it was peer discussions with the VCoP members rather than guest lecturers or topic-oriented presentations given by the researchers that made him recognize and appreciate the benefits of interaction to pique his interest in and motivation for research (Hung et al., 2015; Pan et al., 2015):

I really liked when it was no speakers, when it was just a smaller group of people just talking about a topic. I remember we did a couple times during the second part of the study... So when I was there, there was a topic and we were talking about it was more like a discussion rather than just us listening to someone. (Final Interview, 23/12/2020)

Peer learning was reported to be a key element when considering membership in a VCoP rather than a focus purely on the transmission of knowledge via seminar lectures (Dooly, 2017). Gabriele pointed to the importance of peer-to-peer engagement by sharing his feeling that it was the shared, cooperative, and simultaneous construction of knowledge that made peer learning invaluable:

I like the idea of peer-learning and I think it's almost as important as top-down teaching. Having a mentor that knows more than you do is very valuable but having someone that is going through what you are, can help a lot. You might have similar struggles and work on them together, or you might have different struggles and you might be able to help each other. (Journal Entry, 16/05/2020)

Demonstrating an enthusiasm for collaboration, he also took an active role in initiating and continuing collegial dialogue on Facebook. For example, following the online seminar discussion on qualitative data analysis, Gabriele commented:

It would be interesting to know how people here take notes and organize their resources. I recently found a website called [X]. You can have a look at this tutorial video to see how it works. Let me know what you think. (Facebook Post, 20/05/2020)

He also used the Facebook group as a means to support other VCoP members. In one example, he gave encouragement to two members who had recently co-presented at a conference: "I just watched [your presentation] as well. I started using Grammarly very recently and, until now, I hadn't seen the potential for language learning. Great stuff!" (Facebook Post, 29/09/2020).

Further, in his final interview, Gabriele acknowledged the advantages of gathering and understanding international and multicultural perspectives on different issues (Harris & Lee, 2019; Lewis, 2017): "*It was just great to hear different perspectives, especially being from different parts of the world and having different backgrounds*" (Final Interview, 23/12/2020).

Throughout the project, Gabriele sought out opportunities to engage online using group (Facebook and Zoom) and private (Google Docs and email) platforms with both his VCoP members and researcher-mentors. His socialization in the group allowed him to feel more engrossed in the research community and led to a sense of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29), helping to develop his professional identity as a practitioner-researcher (Inouye & McAlpine, 2017; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014). Moreover, he commented frequently in his reflective journal on gaining a multicultural perspective on challenges in language teaching and research (Angelova & Zhao, 2016; Lewis, 2017), indicating not only an acknowledgement of and propensity for international networking (McAlpine et al., 2014; Wenger, 2010), but also a genuine desire to become enculturated within the research community and to develop his identity as a researcher through the discursive processes of professional engagement and mentorship (Pan et al., 2015; Wegner & Nückles, 2015).

4.2 | Repositioning of teacher-researcher identity

The co-construction of a professional identity as a researcher and practitioner was evident in Gabriele's narrative. As Inouye and McAlpine (2017) note, an individual may share their identity as a teacher or their developing researcher identity to gain entry into academia, and this is noticeable in the way Gabriele perceived himself as an outsider in the beginning of the study, self-identifying as a teacher and not a researcher: "*I was aware of the concept of 'practice-led research' and I am actually very interested in that, especially because as of right now I am more a practitioner than I am a researcher, at least, technically speaking*" (Journal Entry, 12/07/2020).

The data revealed that Gabriele's trajectory toward becoming a researcher was influenced by his self-positioning, his interaction within the VCoP, and his mentoring experiences. This aligns with Teng's (2020) study of a language teacher's doctoral experiences which highlighted that the identity trajectory is continually reshaped by emergent researchers' self-positioning, relationships within different CoPs, and the social process of professional learning. Commenting on this developing sentiment of identity formation, Gabriele affirms a conscious recognition of the VCoP's impact on his self-perception:

I'm at the beginning of my career, so I probably didn't even have an identity when I started. So definitely this project had a big influence on my identity. . . It definitely contributed to my [identity], to the topics that I'm researching into things. (Final Interview, 23/12/2020)

While participating in the study was deemed a beneficial experience in preparation for his future academic pursuits, Gabriele acknowledged the challenges of transitioning to research without formal institutional support:

About my journey as a researcher, everything was stressful. This is pretty much all new for me, so it got a bit overwhelming. I had no idea what I was doing at the beginning and still don't, but at least I've got a direction and a rough plan. If it weren't for this project, I would probably be still debating whether I wanted to go into research or not. (Journal Entry, 02/08/2020)

He also initiated postings on Facebook to seek guidance from his VCoP peers on developing his research skills: "What is your experience with professional development in your institution? If you're further along in your journey, what's something you would have wanted to know earlier in your career? Looking forward to reading your comments!" (Facebook Post, 04/08/2020). After gaining insight into research academia and practice, on conclusion of the telecollaboration project, Gabriele re-envisioned his identity, perceiving his teacher and researcher selves as complementary and reciprocal:

So [the project] kind of made me merge the two identities, so before it was more like, OK, I'm researching, I'm doing, I'm reading about things that I know I'm not going to put in practice, probably. But now I'm researching things that I'm probably going to, will help me in my teaching career. Yeah. Yeah. So I'd say I'd merge the two identities. The teacher and the researcher. (Final Interview, 23/12/2020)

The data revealed that this assimilation of identities is not a seamless or unambiguous transformation, but rather that the novice teacher–researcher trajectory can be fraught with challenges. Gabriele reflected on the process of developing teacher agency and fostering awareness of linking theory to practice:

This is the end of my third year of teaching, and during the first two years, I was just trying to keep my head above water. This year, I've actually started to understand my practice and the theory behind my practice so I've started reading journal articles, research papers, and books, in order to get a deeper understanding of ELT. (Journal Entry, 14/05/2020)

In addition to his formal studies, Gabriele explained that the knowledge acquired from networking and the supportive mentoring throughout the project had a significant impact on his career trajectory. It helped him develop a strong sense of agency that further bolstered his identity as a researcher. In reimagining his possible self as a researcher and preparing intellectually and academically for postgraduate work, Gabriele's agentive behavior was clear in the way he anticipated, prepared for, and acted upon his goals:

I learnt that it's possible for me to go into a career in academia - before starting the project, you know, I only had a bachelor's degree in something and something completely unrelated. And now I'm almost halfway through my master's degree and looking forward to working on my Ph.D. proposal. (Final Interview, 23/12/2020)

During this nine-month project, Gabriele's identity was transformed through a process of group and self-affirmation and membership socialization that provided a source of professional knowledge and engagement, but more importantly a source of collegial acknowledgement and belonging. Repositioning his professional identity was actuated not only through confirmation into the research community, but, primarily, because of Gabriele's agency to realize his inclusion and to reify his aims through self-initiated learning, enrolling in an M.A. TESOL program, and beginning a research project of his own. Due to these activities and his engagement in the group, he overcame his outsider sentiment and coalesced his practitioner–researcher identity, leading to the continuation of his academic journey and to extended interaction and collaboration with his VCoP members and mentors during and after this study.

4.3 | Promoting agency through virtual mentoring

Mentoring in the project occurred virtually when participants interacted online using Zoom as a platform and through dialogue journaling via Google Docs. Gabriele found interactive online journaling particularly valuable in terms of stimulating reflective practice, gaining mentor feedback, and time efficiency (Chen, 2020; Sato & Chen, 2021). He vouched for its merit in the mid-project Focus Group session and his final one-on-one interview, respectively:

And the Journal, for example, for me was a great point of this [project], because I had the opportunity to write whatever I was interested in or some research proposals that I would be interested in writing and I would have [Julian's] comment on them. And I have the opportunity to submit the chapter proposal for his book. (Focus Group, 29/09/2020)

With a journal, you always asked to kind of reflect on what happened during the seminar, during the lecture. And it was good and also I had the feedback from [Julian], for example. So I was, it went deeper than it would have been if I was just watching a lecture and that's it. (Final Interview, 23/12/2020)

The data revealed the influential impact of a positive relationship between mentors and mentees on agency. Having a dynamic duo-mentorship in this project was also deemed by Gabriele as beneficial:

I think it just gave me definitely a lot of insight, a lot of mentorship as well. I mean, that was big, like between [Authors 1 and 2], there's been a lot of just pure mentorship in helping me with the paper that we are writing together. [Author 2] is also helping me with my PhD proposal and the book review that I'm writing as well. It's a lot of help that I needed. (Final Interview, 23/12/2020)

In line with the findings of Asención-Delaney's (2012) systematic review on mentorship for language teachers' professional development, desirable qualities for mentors were reported to be availability, supportive feedback, and listening. Gabriele again echoed the importance of being heard, perhaps reflecting that novice teacher-researchers often lack a platform to voice their ideas and concerns:

Availability would be one of the biggest, if I send an email, if I ask you something, you know, if you do answer, if you give me some help, that's the main one. Then it would be listening, that's a big one as well, like sometimes I don't know what I'm talking about, so I kind of have to think aloud and have my thoughts become clear while I'm talking so when, somebody is listening maybe they can input a little bit and then just I mean, yeah, just listening and being there, that would be quite important. (Final Interview, 23/12/2020)

Virtual mentoring can be utilized as a form of professional career development in which experienced academics guide novice researchers in their career options and stimulate increased autonomy (Jacobi, 1991; Shields & Murray, 2017). In the first focus group session, Gabriele mentioned the convenience of both the VCoP mentorship and the netnographic design of the research (Addeo et al., 2019):

So, if I look back at my bachelor's degree, for example, I felt that every time that I had to have a chat with my supervisor or a tutor, I would have to go to the university and talk to them, show them what I was doing, and they would give me feedback, it was just slow and clunky. While if we had a Google sheet [the reflective journal] like that, it would have been so much easier and faster. (Focus Group, 29/09/2020)

But more than just providing ongoing feedback, a significant role for mentors is to foment reflective practices through collaborative engagement (Asención-Delaney, 2012). Gabriele alludes not only to the emotional and professional encouragement of receiving feedback on his reflections but also to the benefits of synchronous and asynchronous communication with mentors, finding it a source of inspiration for greater self-efficacy:

As far as I'm concerned, [the project] had a huge effect on my career trajectory . . . because of the mentorship, when you have somebody that, for example, reads your writing and gives you advice, you build up some confidence in your skills. . . Without this project. I don't know, I think my career trajectory would have been a little bit flatter, a little slower. (Final interview, 23/12/2020)

He further reported that mentorship, in the form of guidance and different academic perspectives from the mentors, was a continuous source of scaffolding of both his knowledge base and professional identity formation (Asención-Delaney, 2012; Sato & Chen, 2021; Shields & Murray, 2017):

It's [the project] been perfect. I mean, every time I needed to reach out to any of the investigators, if I could, then they would be open to give advice. And, you know, they've been extremely helpful. It was the spread of their expertise because they don't work on the same things . . . You know, having the experience of two different academic systems might also give some extra insight. (Final Interview, 23/12/2020)

Sharing his ideas and experiences through peer interaction and receiving mentoring from the researchers afforded Gabriele a sense of agency and motivation to conduct action research that could improve his teaching practice and student outcomes. As he stated, "*I still wanted to do research before this project, but I didn't know how. So just starting this project kind of gave me a direction and actually also tools- tools and again, mentorship. Yeah, it's been really helpful*" (Final Interview, 23/1/2020).

Gabriele demonstrated agency not only by engaging his peers in Facebook discussions and initiating dialogue during online meetings, but also by corresponding frequently and enthusiastically with the researchers, helping to strengthen the mentor-mentee relationship and elevate his sense of professional development (Asención-Delaney, 2012; Jacobi, 1991). Mentees' desire to engender positive relations with mentors and fellow mentees creates higher active participation and multidirectional interaction and facilitates online community building (Culpeper & Kan, 2020). Further, through consistent reflective practice that afforded him ongoing engagement with his mentors, and by initiating an action research project, he was able to cultivate his teacher-researcher identity by giving substance to his agency and effort. Given his regularly seeking out support from and interactions with the researchers and VCoP members, Gabriele took an active role in his evolving identity formation and leveraged mentorship to foster his autonomy and agency. This online mentorship organically enacted in a VCoP ultimately led to his dynamic identity re-construction as a learner, teacher, and emerging researcher.

5 | DISCUSSION

Longitudinal in nature, this netnographic case study vividly depicts how a unique VCoP member, who initially stood on the peripheral, navigated his identity and eventually gained full membership as an emerging researcher through initiating and enhancing his relationships with fellow CoP members, guest speakers, and researchers over time. It highlights the importance of support from the members of a VCoP in bringing someone into the fold, helping to cultivate their identity collectively, and inspiring them into real concrete action (e.g., Gabriel began his MA in TESOL because of his involvement in this study). As a relatively new and underused methodological and conceptual approach, this study demonstrates the compelling potential for netnography in Applied Linguistics research (Kessler et al., 2021),

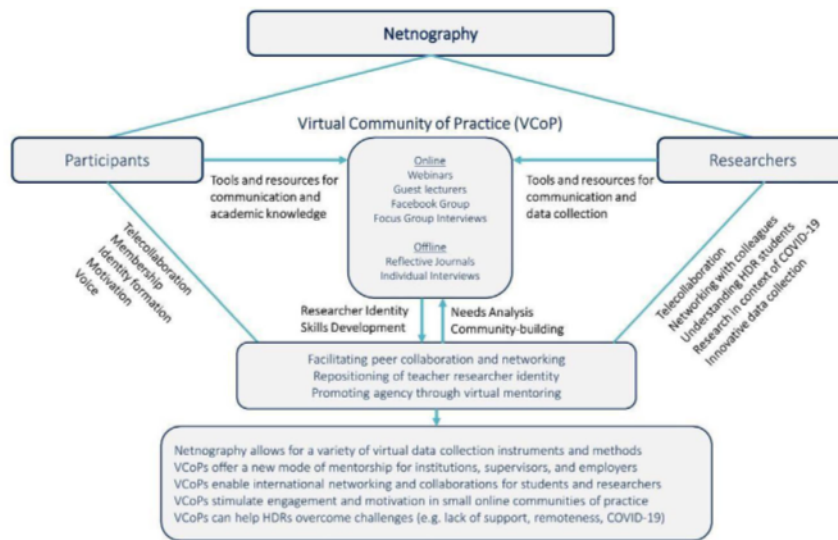


FIGURE 3 A visual representation of virtual community of practice through netnography. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

particularly in the circumstances of the global pandemic. Netnography allows for different modes of data collection in the virtual world, permitting researchers to conduct more immersive, context-specific, and community-focused qualitative studies (Addeo et al., 2019; Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2010, p. 2016). Employing numerous synchronous and asynchronous internet-based data collection instruments (Varis, 2016), the netnographic approach also enabled us to track continuous changes and development in our participants' engagement and identity formation (Kulavuz-Onal, 2015). Following the recommended operations in netnographic data analysis (Kozinets, 2020), Figure 3 charts the benefits of netnography for both the participants and the researchers, whilst highlighting the data collection methods and findings that inform the implications of the study.

Beyond methodological interest, findings suggest that the higher education sector might do more to involve students, teachers, and researchers in virtual skill-building and collaborative activities (Helm, 2015). More specifically, institutions could help establish small-group VCoPs which can be less formal, more engaging, and impactful for HDR students as evidenced by Gabriele's data and supported by the existing literature (Chauraya & Brodie, 2018; Hung et al., 2015; Pan et al., 2015). Accordingly, supervisors can help build real CoPs with their own students. In coordination with international colleagues and collective cohorts, they can help promote networking opportunities and enhance participation and agency during the HDR journey.

While supervision and mentorship are essential for HDR students' academic progress (Asención-Delaney, 2012; Teng, 2020; Wang & Byram, 2019), building an international network and community as well as gaining a multicultural understanding is also imperative for academic pursuits as it can help novice researchers acquire and appreciate different perspectives and understand the importance of developing relationships and engaging intellectually with others. Gabriele highlights the positive washback that such engagement can bring as he continuously seeks out opportunities for interaction, demonstrating the potential for VCoPs to cultivate professional development and give space for students to share their voice and concerns (Hung et al., 2015). Yet, ongoing feedback from both mentors and peers was reported to be the key element in facilitating online engagement and identity development. As Gabriele acknowledged, virtual platforms provide enormous potential for novice researchers to receive feedback beyond their own colleagues or supervisors.

Finally, VCoPs provide a haven for impacted stakeholders to get through the stressful, uncertain, and sometimes lonely transition from being an undergraduate student or a language teacher to a legitimate member of the

research community (Inouye & McAlpine, 2017; Wegner & Nückles, 2015), as evidenced in Gabriele's case. Therefore, VCoPs could help HDR students, or language teachers wishing to engage in research, persist through difficulties beyond spatiotemporal boundaries. This is particularly the case for those who are isolated and/or working/studying in remote locations, in countries severely impacted by COVID-19, or limited by other challenges of resources and accessibility.

6 | CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding, an inevitable drawback of VCoPs is also noted in this study. Although VCoPs offer promising opportunities for inter-institutional and international collaboration and a means for innovative research, the lack of available resources, namely reliable internet connectivity, can hinder and even prevent involvement, further exacerbating marginalized identities for those restricted by technologically related challenges in their work/study circumstances. There is no easy solution to this constraint, but more asynchronous engagement within a netnographic frame might help connect members who can only periodically engage online with their CoPs.

In terms of methodological limitations, the study focuses on a purposively selected single case and hence generalization is not feasible. However, it is worth reiterating that netnography emphasizes the technological discourse gleaned from social media and other online data sources in order to recognize and understand changes in individual participants' engagement, learning, and identity (re)construction (Kozinets, 2010; Kulavuz-Onal, 2015). A final limitation noted in this study is that a nine-month duration (March to December, 2020) is still a relatively short period of time to examine the evolution and maintenance of a CoP/VCoP. Therefore, more longitudinal examinations of existing or new VCoPs in the field of TESOL/Applied Linguistics would serve to better exemplify the effects they can have on the academic, discursive, and social practices of emerging researchers during their HDR experience and in their professional life that follows.

Despite the limitations, this study shows the potential for VCoPs to optimize mentorship and enables the inclusion of members from around the world. International telecollaboration not only facilitates and supports ongoing professional development and networking in the field of Applied Linguistics, but also fosters a deeper interest and greater sense of belonging in the research community, thus allowing members to reposition their identity and become agents of change for oneself and others.

ORCID

Julian Chen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7788-0462>

Vincent Greenier  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6844-2209>

Notes

¹A pseudonym name is adopted to protect the confidentiality of the participant.

²Voyant (<https://voyant-tools.org/>) is a web-based platform for researchers to conduct textual and corpus analysis, particularly in social media research or digital humanities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Julian Chen is a senior lecturer of Applied Linguistics/TESOL at Curtin University, Australia. His research involves technology-mediated task-based language teaching, 3D virtual learning, netnography, teacher identity, and action research. His work has appeared in multiple flagship journals such as *Modern Language Journal*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Teaching Research*, *System*, *Computers & Education*, *ReCALL*, and *Computer-Assisted Language Learning*.

Vincent Greenier is a lecturer of Linguistics and TESOL at the University of Aberdeen, UK. His main research interests are creative approaches to language teaching, leadership, and professionalism in ELT; language teacher identity; learning spaces; and innovative approaches to qualitative research. His articles can be found in journals such as *TESOL Quarterly*, *System*, *RELC*, and others.

Sasha Janes is a casual academic at Curtin University, Australia, and a doctoral candidate at Edith Cowan University, Australia. Her main research interests include exploring culturally and linguistically sustaining pedagogy in teacher education, and examining teacher identity.