

e–talanoa as an online research method: extending vā–relations across spaces

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Abstract

Talanoa (Moana-centred orality) is a widely used Indigenous Pacific discursive approach within research contexts across the diaspora. In a globalised and technologically enhanced era, the online space continues to shape Moana (Oceania) peoples’ talanoa engagement and communication. e–talanoa in this article is an extension of talanoa research engagement and practice. We unpack the contexts in which e–talanoa is negotiated and made sense, and employ talanoa–vā (relational sense-making and meaning-making) as a critical analytical framework for interrogating and unpacking the complexities associated with e–talanoa as a Moana–Pacific research praxis. e–talanoa considers our current post–covid research space and how Pacific researchers navigate their ethical vā–relations within the temporal–spatial and physical–online boundaries that govern meaningful research undertakings. Being open about the challenges enables further understanding of the dynamic and fluid, yet contextually grounded spaces in which e–talanoa as a method can be realised.

Keywords

digital tools and platforms, digital vā, e–talanoa, post–covid, vā–relational ethics

Introduction

Social and physical distancing continues to implicate our perceptions of post–covid relating (Enari & Fa‘aea, 2020). The use of digital tools and platforms and the online space have implicated research-related interactions and processes within higher education. For some, the move to online interactions has alienated participants who do not have access to technologies, as well as restricted researchers’ capacity to undertake meaningful research activities (Thomsen et al., 2021). Fifteen years since Vaiolēti’s (2006) conceptualisation of talanoa (Moana-centred orality and cultural

practice) as a research method, our collaborative conceptualisation of e–talanoa is a response to the global pandemic and our desire to explore the role of digital tools and platforms in ensuring Indigenous Pacific realities are activated and protected. e–talanoa is a response to the globalised and technologically enhanced world where Pasifika or Pacific peoples’ communal interactions and research engagements reflect their changing environment. Pasifika, as a category, was utilised by the Ministry of Education during the 1990s as a way to group the distinct Pacific migrants in Aotearoa-New Zealand (NZ) at the time (Samu, 2006). However, Pasifika is not a label in which all migrants from the Moana (Oceania or ocean) connect with, hence the interchangeable use of both Pasifika and Pacific in this article. Lopesi (2018), a feminist scholar of Samoan ancestry claims, “scholarship around Moana peoples online is currently so thin, and I do worry that we won’t be able to keep up with [the] evolutions of our dynamic cultures” (p. 21). Thomsen et al. (2021) argue that talanoa is an established Pacific research methodology maintained by vā relatings and pedagogical praxis that is “intrinsic to how we understand our researcher and lecturer identity” (p. 151). Our primary aim in this article is to articulate the ongoing vā–relations and negotiations through talanoa research, developed across temporal–spatial and physical–online boundaries.

Our concern for the state of Indigenous Pacific research and its conditions of practice within COVID-19 brought us together. Collectively, our Pasifika or Pacific positionalities are shaped by our diverse reference points and contextual interconnections with land and people across the diaspora in Te Moananui-ā-Kiwa (Pacific Ocean). We are a group of early career researchers located across Hamilton and Auckland, NZ, and Brisbane, Australia. We share commonalities as either former or current high school teachers and now researchers in University settings. In terms of cultural specificities, David is of Tongan and Samoan ancestry and has an affinity to Niue, his place of birth. Lute (Ruth), a Tongan woman, was born and raised in NZ, now living in Brisbane with her Samoan husband and children. ‘Elisapesi is a Tongan woman, born and raised in Tonga, and now living in Hamilton with her family. Dion is a New Zealand-born Samoan, raised in Australia and Samoa. Tepora is a Samoan woman, born and raised in Samoa, now completing her doctoral study in Hamilton. Alvin is of Indo-Fijian heritage, born and raised in Fiji and Head of Department at a secondary school in South Auckland. Our collective aspiration is to ensure talanoa research practice continues to grow and strengthen Pasifika or Pacific voices and lived experiences in the diaspora.

We position this collaboration as a postcolonial endeavour, embracing the decolonial agenda and inspirations endorsed within critical Indigenous research, seeking for empowerment, self-determination, and agency (Smith, 1999). The Calcutta-born Spivak (1988) is widely recognised as one of the most important postcolonial scholars of our time. Her work examined the effects of foreign and western domination on the former colonies of Britain and France. In her book, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Spivak, 1988),

she questioned whether the subaltern, the marginalised and colonial populations excluded from the hierarchy of power by the imperial coloniser, can be represented? As marginalised communities within higher education, it is within this critical talanoa space that we as Pacific early career academics from diverse ancestry seek to find a collective agency to unfold and sense-make the in-between space within e- and talanoa.

The anglicising of talanoa using the prefix e- can look-sound-feel uncertain and vulnerable, and the evolution of Pacific languages in the diaspora is ongoing. According to [Taumoevalau et al. \(2002\)](#), “language can only be understood if more attention is paid to its relationships with the external world . . . [and] the way [it] represents reality in the mind” (p. 26). As Pasifika or Pacific communities adapt and integrate into their new environments across dominant western societies, cultural and spiritual continuity and survival are at the heart of their practices ([Enari & Fa’aea, 2020](#); [Faleolo, 2020b](#)). Our implementation of related Indigenous Pacific concepts and approaches such as vā or va (relational space and interconnections), tā-vā (time and space theory of reality), and talanoa-vā (relational sense-making and meaning-making) provide ethical frames that govern e-talanoa’s relevance and appropriateness for our Pasifika or Pacific communities residing in the diaspora. Although some Samoan scholars opt not use the fa’amamafa (heavy pronunciation) via the macron in their writing of va, it is a choice made by each based on their “education and beliefs” ([Taualaulelei et al., 2015](#), p. 186) and upbringing. In this article, we note the interchangeable use and representation of both vā and va because it highlights the cultural, linguistic, and generational specificities within Polynesian ethnic groups in the diaspora. Symbolically, developing e-talanoa requires an appropriate re-orientation and re-configuration of what is deemed relevant practice in light of the continuity and thriving of our generations across diasporic contexts ([Suaalii-Sauni, 2017](#); [Thaman, 1995](#)).

[Vaai \(2017\)](#) posits, “Relationality is in our blood. We came into being through relationships” (p. 17). From an ethico-relational ontology centred within the Moana, our intention is to briefly conceptualise e-talanoa that is appreciative of our current contextual realities and the challenges related to online research engagement and use of digital tools and platforms to maintain and care for vā-relating within the post-covid space. e-talanoa’s becoming in the Moana requires an intimate consideration and negotiation of vā’s responsibility and context within a holistic view that all entities in the world are connected ([Vaai, 2017](#)), weaved together through an ecology of Indigenous Pacific ways of being-knowing-seeing-feeling-doing ([Johansson-Fua, 2022](#); [Matapo & McFall-McCaffery, 2022](#)). At the same time, from an Indigenous philosophy of worldedness lens which claims “one thing is constituted by all things in the world” ([Mika, 2017](#), p. 34), this collaborative conceptualisation of e-talanoa as a research method can be attributed to “the working of the world on the self [and our collective selves]” ([Mika, 2017](#), p. 28). Conceptualising e-talanoa in this article, therefore, involves

articulating insights into the ways the method shaped our thinking and understanding and vice versa.

Naming a research method without articulating its whakapapa (genealogy or lineage) can have ethical implications on the people and knowledge involved ([Sanga & Reynolds, 2017](#)). Naming e-talanoa within this collaborative exploration acknowledges the talanoa research and methodological whakapapa as well as articulate how we contextualise talanoa engagement within the online space. At this point in time, we position e-talanoa as a method grounded in the talanoa research methodological tradition. We seek to unfold how research relationships and knowledge gathering and sharing are understood and negotiated as talanoa practice moves beyond the boundaries of physical presence into the online space, often perceived as unknown, unfamiliar, and somewhat vulnerable.

As we negotiate our relational positionalities and aspirations in this article, we embrace the label Moana–Pacific to highlight an ongoing space of decolonial struggle and negotiations ([Lopesi & Tecun, 2020](#)). Zimbabwean-born decolonial scholar, [Ndlovu-Gatsheni \(2021\)](#) affirms the world is an epistemic creation and that ontology is made of epistemology. This aligns with claims that under “Euro-American-centric modernity, epistemology was instrumentally and strategically deployed in accordance with the coloniser’s model of the world, whereby Europe and North America were put at the centre” ([Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021](#), p. 884). Indigenous Moana–Pacific knowledge (IMPK) shapes relational ontological becoming and transcends geographic boundaries not fixed nor confined to one geographic location. IMPK is grounded first in sacred and spiritual interconnections with whenua–fonua–fanua–vanua (land in Māori, Tongan, Samoan, and Fijian, respectively) within the Moana, and second in the fluid mobilities of our globally inspired communities residing in the diaspora.

Ignoring the grounding of knowledges and practices in their whakapapa can be deemed lazy and unethical. Samoan scholars [Suaalii-Sauni \(2017\)](#) and [Tunufa’i \(2016\)](#) state, articulating clearly the contexts in which a particular IMPK approach is framed, talking openly about the uncomfortableness linked to implementation and how we grapple with their use in research contexts will help steer a meaningful course for the next generation. Our desire is to unpack IMPK concepts in higher education research, shared by our leaders and scholars from the region ([Hau’ofa, 1994](#); [Meyer, 2001](#); [Nabobo-Baba, 2008](#); [Taufe’ulungaki, 2002](#); [Tui Atua, 2005](#); [Vaai, 2017](#); [Wendt, 1982](#)). Noting also that, this generative collaboration is a consequence of [Faleolo’s \(2020a\)](#) efforts to employ e-talanoa in her work that captures Samoan and Tongan families’ aspirations and mobilities across the diaspora.

Pacific–Oceania–Moana—articulating Moana research praxis

Looking from outside into the region often dominated how Moana–Pacific stories were interpreted and represented ([Enari & Viliamu Jameson, 2021](#)). Samoan scholar, [Wendt \(1982\)](#), conceptualised Oceania as an intensive and liberating agenda for Pacific people. Pacific–Oceania–Moana is positioned to highlight the complexities and specificities associated with our inherent ancestral and colonial histories within Te Moananui-ā-Kiwa. The Pacific has geo-political and socio-political connotations. References to Oceania and Moana invoke aspirations inspired by our Pacific elders to mobilise and operationalise Indigenous Pacific diversities and specificities ([Hau‘ofa, 1994](#); [Wendt, 1982](#)). Our reference to IMPK in this article is specifically framed from Tongan, Samoan, and Fijian perspectives.

While emerging Pacific scholars have turned to Moana and Oceania as an inspirational and inclusive identifier in an effort to take back their place and space in the diaspora ([Lopesi, 2018](#)), Pasifika or Pacific communities outside of the academe do not always connect with such names. Our responsibility is to remind and articulate our framing of IMPK. We position and relate e–talanoa as a Moana–Pacific research praxis, used to disrupt colonial framings, re-centre IMPK concepts and frameworks, and activate mindset shifts.

Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta‘isi Efi ([2009](#)) draws from the Indigenous Samoan reference to disrupt western framings of Samoan knowledge and practices. Hawaiian scholar, [Aluli Meyer \(2001\)](#), makes references to Hawaiian epistemology and claims their understanding of the world compared to western views are different, and better comprehended in the way they “see, hear, taste, and smell the world differently” (p. 125). Such differences are neither simplistic, subtle nor imaginary, but are large and enduring ([Meyer, 2001](#)). Solomon Islands scholar [Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo \(2001\)](#) affirms the need for Native Pacific Island scholars to draw from their own epistemic frameworks rather than rely exclusively on the ways in which the coloniser makes sense of the world. Central to their claims are questions associated with epistemology based on:

who can be a knower, what can be known, what constitutes knowledge, sources of evidence for constructing knowledge, what constitutes truth, how truth is to be verified, how evidence becomes truth, how valid inferences are to be drawn, the role of belief in evidence, and related issues. ([Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001](#), p. 57)

Their questions enable an interrogation of the ways in which knowledge, truth, and belief are made sense. When engaging in e–talanoa practice, we unpack the ways in which knowledge, truth, and belief are extended and navigated across the in–person and shared online space.

Naming e-talanoa as a relevant method of research requires the grounding of Pacific talanoa conceptualisation within Moana-Pacific online practice during the post-covid context and space. Inspired by [Tui Atua's \(2005\)](#) call for Pacific research decluttering through clarity in how we frame and utilise ideas in academia, our employment of post-covid in this article places the concept within a post-truth condition. This enables us to re-orient and re-position post-covid not just as an afterthought of covid-19, but as a dynamic and critical intellectual space to re-think and re-conceptualise notions of truth, realities, relevance, and appropriateness, given the impacts of the global pandemic on our physical-online practices and the state and future possibilities of ethical vā-relations within higher education research. Post-covid as a concept and space through vā-relations, encourages speculative criticality that brings together past-present-future wonderings.

Etymology—talanoa, the hyphen (–), vā

The genealogy of talanoa can be traced back to predominantly Polynesian language and culture ([Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014](#)). Talanoa is a concept rooted in the Tongan, Samoan, Tuvaluan, and Fijian languages. Talanoa is made up of two ideas—tala (to talk, to tell, to discuss) and noa (common or ordinary, nothing, anything, something, an unknown), or purely imaginary or void ([Churchward, 2015](#); [Vaiioleti, 2006](#)). The noa space determines the condition of the tala—discussion and sharing and exchanging of ideas. The de-construction of tala and noa is not to remove but appreciate the richness and nuances in talanoa practice and engagement.

[Jones and Jenkins \(2008\)](#) developed the *working indigene-coloniser hyphen* as a way to symbolise the negotiation of intercultural differences between Māori and Pākehā in NZ. We employ the hyphen (–) to symbolise the intercultural sensibilities inherent within Indigenous Pacific themselves, who are similar yet specifically distinct. The hyphen is symbolic of the intersections and the negotiations of ethnic diversities, coloniality specificities, connections (and disconnections) to fonua-fanua-vanua and online locales or spaces. Similarly, we embrace the hyphen (–) within Trans-Indigeneity as an Indigenous critical theory and praxis emphasising the subtleties, nuances, and complexities associated with the Indigenous-to-Indigenous engagement and knowledge-making practices ([Allen, 2002](#)). e-talanoa allows for a negotiation of the ways in which talanoa and vā-relational ethics can shape and guide meaningful and respectful engagement and practice between Trans-Indigenous scholars of Tongan, Samoan, and Fijian ancestry. e-talanoa also allows for the unpacking of Pasifika or Pacific as settlers in NZ who continue to navigate the region, and make sense of what it means to be and become Pasifika or Pacific in relation to Tangata Whenua (Māori as people of the land) ([Stewart, 2018](#)).

From a Polynesian perspective, vā is a relational construct that represents one's sense-making of connections as well as disconnections with and between entities in the world

(Fa'avae et al., 2021). Such relational intra/interconnections are fluid and interdependent based on the vā-relations between people–people, living–non-living, animate–inanimate, physical–spiritual, including in–person–online, in search of some form/s of balance, order, or harmony (Ka'ili, 2017; Māhina, 2017; Suaalii-Sauni, 2017). The interconnected and interdependent condition of vā-relationality is ethically spiritual and sacred, evident in the Samoan concepts—va tapuia (sacred space) and teu le va (building and nurturing social connections), and Tongan concepts veitapui (sacred space) and tauhi vā (building and nurturing social relations) practice (Anae, 2016; Fa'avae et al., 2021; Wright, 2022). Vā-relations provide the conditions within the noa space and consequently shape the types or forms of tala. As a governing life spirit, vā shapes the interconnections between people–people, people–ideas, place–people, temporal–spiritual, seen–unseen (Supplementary Figure 1).

From a Samoan perspective, va is a central organising principle of social relations and governs all “inter-personal, inter-group, and sacred–secular relations and is intimately connected to a Pasifika sense of self and identity” (Suaalii-Sauni, 2017, p. 163). Pacific scholars draw from tā–vā as a theoretical framework to understand reality, truth, and relationality (Ka'ili, 2017; Māhina, 2017; Refiti, 2017; Seve-Williams, 2017; Va'a, 2017). This means, the self and the collective are closely interconnected, and the reality of social relations is better realised when considering time, contexts, and generations across places and spaces. To capture e–talanoa's potentialities, it is the socio–spatial and socio–temporal relationships we seek to unfold in this article.

Talanoa research scholarship

The first formal mention of talanoa can be traced to the writings of Halapua (2002). Shortly after, Vaioleti (2003) presented the talanoa concept at the University of Waikato's Pacific Research Education Symposium as a developing research methodology (Tecun et al., 2018). Three years later, Vaioleti's (2006) seminal paper progressed talanoa as a methodological approach in formal research contexts. Pasifika researchers in NZ and Pacific academics based in NZ and the Pacific region began to apply talanoa in their gathering of descriptive data through their interactions within schools, universities, and community forums. Free-flow talanoa is a familiar style of Pacific communication that researchers would have incorporated into their research approaches, using acceptable mainstream terminology like narrative or semi-structured interviews, as required by the academic institutions at the time (Tiatia, 1998).

The talanoa approach is evident across a range of disciplines within several Melanesian and Polynesian academic circles (Mila-Schaaf, 2010). To date, the theorisation and development of talanoa have mostly been through masters and doctoral projects across the diaspora (Faleolo, 2020b; Latu, 2009). Talanoa continues to form the basis of newly named narrative approaches yet embraces the free-flow dialogue synonymous with the talanoa approach (Fa'avae et al., 2016; Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014).

Even though talanoa has become a research method and methodology appreciated by Pasifika or Pacific researchers ([Matapo & Enari, 2021](#); [Thomsen et al., 2021](#)), it is not an approach that fully encapsulates the diversity and vastness within Te Moananui-ā-Kiwa and its bodies of knowledges. To assume talanoa is the predominant Pacific approach not only perpetuates the privileging of the few in Polynesia over the many in the Moana, but can also ignore the in-depth, similar yet distinct specificities and ways of beings-knowings-seeings-feelings-doings inherent within [Hau'ofa's \(1994\)](#) sea of islands. Our unfolding of talanoa and the projections of vā-relations across the temporal-spatial and physical-online boundaries are grounded within an ethical responsibility prioritising principles of generosity and care ([Fa'avae et al., 2022](#); [Ka'ili, 2017](#)).

When [Faleolo \(2020b\)](#) embarked on her doctoral study with multi-sited Samoan and Tongan families in Auckland NZ, and Brisbane Australia, she adopted the talanoa method to capture and honour the experiences and stories shared. The cultural ethics of talanoa practice helped minimise concerns related to the power imbalance in her position as the researcher, providing space for her participants to implement agency. What [Faleolo \(2020a\)](#) terms as e-talanoa was a direct response to the request of her participants, an extension of their existing talanoa relations using online forums. This methodological development provided flexibility, suitability, and ease for participants across temporal and spatial divide. e-talanoa prioritises vā-relations beyond the in-person, kanohi ki te kanohi (face to face, in person, in the flesh), by embracing the online space which continues to impact the way Pacific conduct research activities during the post-covid.

Over the last two decades, talanoa has become a widely used method of gathering what is widely understood within the western academe as narrative data from Pacific communities. [Halapua \(2003\)](#) explains the process of talanoa as being meaningful communication when built on vā between participants. Researchers who understand vā learn to unpack the talanoa approach in conjunction with tauhi vā ([Latu, 2009](#)) or teu le va ([Anae, 2016](#); [Wright, 2022](#)).

Online space—communication and digital tools and platforms

The online space is defined as digital environments in which individuals and groups interact in non-physical ways ([Saunders et al., 2011](#)). Internet skill plus a “strong sense of internet efficacy” ([Anderson, 2004](#), p. 36) allow users to adapt effectively to the requirements of engaging in online environments. We contextualise e-talanoa and explore the relational ethics of cultural and research engagement online. While e-talanoa within the digital space enables technological access for certain groups within the community, it can reproduce inequities making many less able to participate in e-talanoa research. The digital vā, however, is a critical space that enables Pacific researchers to confront and negotiate encounters and research processes that can further marginalize particular groups of people ([Enari & Matapo, 2020](#); [Koya-Vaka'uta,](#)

2017; Thomsen et al., 2021). Anae (2016) and Suaalii-Sauni (2017) position *teu le va* as well as *tauhi vā* (Faleolo, 2020b; Latu, 2009) as being important principles of ethical practice that seek to maintain collaborative interdependence, balance of power, and decision-making processes rooted in generosity and care. Enari and Matapo (2020), scholars of Samoan ancestry, explored the innovative use of the digital *vā* in relation to Pasifika university students' social connections in NZ and Australia. The digital *vā* was used to further extend Pasifika agendas, for example, Pasifika language maintenance and Samoan village meetings via Facebook messenger. Through these practices, Enari and Matapo (2020) proposed the digital *vā* as an indigenisation of the digital space.

Pacific researchers share their employment of digital tools and platforms when using *talanoa* as a data gathering method in their masters and doctoral projects (Faleolo, 2020a). Nasili Vaka'uta (2017), a Tongan theologian claims "talanoa is more than just talking to each other through an online network of that name" (p. 216). *Talanoa's* possibilities within the online space can be found in its capacity to bring together and connect Pasifika scholars across diverse disciplines in NZ, the Pacific and the world. e-*talanoa* provides an online space through digital tools and platforms that relationally connect those that might be otherwise temporally and spatially separated or alienated from one another (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Thomsen et al., 2021).

Online learning and engagement enabled access from remote locations in the Pacific. The University of the South Pacific's use of satellite communication and technology helped achieve distance learning given the geographic vastness of the region. Koya-Vaka'uta (2017), of Indo-Fijian and Samoan heritages, conceptualised digital *vā* as a context for interrogating "e-culture and cyber-identity form [as] a critical component of [Pacific youth's] sense of being and doing" (p. 61). She positioned *vā* to interrogate the state of relational connections and rules of engagement within cyberspaces. Facebook, Skype, and Zoom as digital tools and platforms not only enable communication across the diaspora; it has changed the way Pacific families understand their familial exchanges.

e-talanoa as method and talanoa-vā as critical relational analysis

To capture the potential possibilities of e-*talanoa* and honour the IMPK values and principles within it, we turn to *talanoa-vā* as an appropriate cultural framework (Fa'avae et al., 2021). Critical analysis through *talanoa-vā* as an Indigenous Pacific framework cares for what it means to *teu* and *tauhi* relational sense-making and meaning-making. Vaai and Casimira (2017) argue for a relational renaissance in the Pacific, opening up "conversation and critical thinking about the Pacific and its future" (p. 5), in particular, our "disconnection with the Pacific *itulagi*" (p. 5), a lifeworld centred on deep relationality. *Talanoa-vā*, coupled together by the hyphen, positions the sense-making and meaning-making of relationality as an ethical-ontological becoming across physical, spiritual, and sacred, including online spaces (Fa'avae et al., 2021; Matapo &

McFall-McCaffery, 2022; Wolfgramm-Foliaki & Smith, 2020). Talanoa-vā, through an ethico-relational ontological positioning, provides a critical framework that enables negotiation as an ethical praxis, unpacking critical encounters across the metaphysical, spiritual, spatial, and temporal dimensions (Fa'avae et al., 2021). Through talanoa-vā, the intersections between the living and non-living and time-space are guided by an ethics of generosity and care (Supplementary Figure 1). Moreover, talanoa-vā allows the cross-examination of socio-political notions like power imbalance, marginalisation, oppression, including critical and social transformation as a function and condition of vā's ethical relatings (Anae, 2016; Wright, 2022).

Before coming together, we were already connected through our Pacific colleagues and workplace settings. Our collective desire is to advance IMPK, sharing what it means to conceptualise and employ e-talanoa in higher education. Coming together to generate this article helped us comprehend collaborative and ongoing talanoa using digital tools and platforms such as emails, Google Docs, LinkedIn, and Zoom.

Findings and themes discussed

As co-collaborators, our conceptualisations and critical reflections of e-talanoa engagement were captured on Google Docs, a digital tool designed to enable synchronous and asynchronous online writing and engagement. Eight open-ended questions guided our collaborative e-talanoa which were captured in a table format. We were then encouraged to add initial responses to the questions and through an iterative process of reflection and commenting on others' responses to their ideas within their section of the table in Google Docs.

Our findings are in response to a series of eight questions:

1.

What were you thinking when you saw the term e-talanoa?

2.

How have you utilised talanoa within online or virtual research spaces?

3.

What digital technologies did you use to gather the data?

4.

How did you analyse and make sense of the data?

5.

How did you re-present the data?

6.

What were the challenges associated with e-talanoa?

7.

How did you grapple with and negotiate the challenges?

8.

What do you want to share with other Pasifika or Pacific researchers about e-talanoa?

The findings highlight points of tension between what matters to each co-collaborator—Fa’avae, Faleolo, Havea, Enari, Wright, and Chand, and what is deemed viable, culturally appropriate, or ethically sound practice as Moana-Pacific researchers within our specific research contexts. We re-present the findings, arranged under three themes: (1) e-talanoa defined and its challenges; (2) negotiating e-talanoa virtual spaces; and (3) future implications for the continued use of e-talanoa. Concurrently, we discuss the findings with the relevant literature.

e-talanoa defined and its challenges

Among the six co-collaborators, e-talanoa is conceptualised as a projection or extension of vā-relations into the online space. Enari defined e-talanoa as a new way of performing an ancient practice in the digital space. Havea, Wright, & Fa’avae defined e-talanoa as a new way of re-thinking and conducting talanoa. Collectively, caution was noted in ensuring vā-ethical practice within in-person or in the flesh talanoa was maintained by researchers throughout their online research practice ([Halapua, 2003](#); [Ka’ili, 2017](#); [Tunufa’i, 2016](#)).

In question 1, the general response to when the co-collaborators saw the term e-talanoa was positive, with a slight sense of wonderment about its possibilities, or apprehension as to whether the change was ethical or not. e-talanoa provides an opportunity, flexibility, and freedom for Pacific researchers to explore not only what it may look like in specific research contexts but also how this can be defined within research projects. However, articulating the cultural and ethical relevance of each new methodological development we make in our work as Pacific researchers is critical ([Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014](#)). Our work is not our own but is shaped by those gone before us, keeping in mind the efforts of those who follow.

The challenges associated with e-talanoa ranged from ethical, technical, cultural, and emotional. [Fa’avae et al. \(2016\)](#) reflect on the vulnerabilities faced by Pacific researchers utilising talanoa as a research method across diverse research contexts. In this paper, Fa’avae highlighted the internal grappling he experienced with the concept of e-talanoa, and the implications of this recent talanoa methodological development within Moana-Pacific research contexts. During our group e-talanoa via Zoom and articulated also in the Google Docs, Fa’avae stated:

When I first saw e–talanoa in Ruth’s article, the first time in which it was named and published, I initially felt excited. But as I spent time looking at the hyphen and space in between the “e” and “talanoa”, it brought forth an array of mixed feelings—of hope and anxiety. Is it ethically appropriate to position the “e” in front of talanoa? Does that mean the online space has more precedence over the talanoa conversation?

In response to questions about how and why the term e–talanoa was developed, Faleolo noted in the Google Docs:

When I first penned the term e–talanoa on my ethics application, I was conveying the use of online forums to communicate with participants. I was wanting to get this ethically approved at the University of Queensland, fully acknowledged by the institution as a Pacific research method. I remember thinking about e–talanoa and the best way to explain the extended implementation of talanoa using the internet and electronic technologies via email, Face Time, private Facebook Messenger, Zoom, and Skype, helping to connect multi-sited peoples across vast spaces.

The concerns raised by Faleolo and Fa’avae can have ontological and epistemological implications and highlight the tensions between western academic demands and expectations versus honouring Moana–Pacific community vā–relational ethics. Those seeking to use e–talanoa are encouraged to articulate the challenges associated with progressing Pacific research methods and methodologies into and across research spaces and sites. Not only are we disrupting the conventional practices of dominant western-oriented research but re–shaping long-standing methods of knowledge-sharing that favour Eurocentric epistemes. In light of the challenges, we agree the priority is to grow our IMPK corpus of knowledge by articulating clearly and unpacking the specificities in IMPK methods and methodologies, as well as the ways they are utilised and operationalised across diverse disciplines, either uncomfortably, or in complex and nuanced ways ([Lopesi & Tecun, 2020](#)).

As a method, e–talanoa is strengthened when participants are familiar and can confidently use information technology and digital tools. The limited knowledge of information technology plus unstable internet access as well as varying broadband connections can impact the quality of free-flowing e–talanoa. e–talanoa can also expose the researcher’s limited competency and inability to use technology and digital tools efficiently. Havea explained in the Google Docs that some features researchers might want to use during Zoom sessions, such as sharing a document, are not always effective due to a lack of knowledge about technology or poor internet connection. Enari echoes this challenge of using a research method that relies on technology:

We normally physically engage with each other when we talanoa. The virtual space does not allow us to touch, feel and hold each other like . . . we do during a physical talanoa . . . It is dependent on technology to work. All parties involved must be connected to

technology otherwise e-talanoa does not work. This is not a problem in physical talanoa as physical talanoa can still take place without electricity.

While technology and virtual spaces provide opportunities, it is within these same spaces in which the implementation of e-talanoa can highlight researchers' natural anxieties. Concerns linked to the viability of e-talanoa as an appropriate way to engage Pacific people holistically within virtual spaces was raised (Enari & Matapo, 2020). Some of us felt uneasy about the quality of conversations during e-talanoa. In response to question 6, Havea noted in the Google Docs the differences in relation to vā māfana (a sense of warmth and positive emotion) usually experienced during in-person talanoa:

Based on my experience, face-to-face talanoa is usually heart-warming. There is a vā māfana when you talanoa face-to-face with your participants. And this is when the talanoa comes to a stage where the participants share some experiences and become emotional, so we end up in tears. As a researcher, I did not experience that kind of vā māfana during e-talanoa.

Similarly, Chand responded to question 6 in the Google Docs by illustrating the lack of vā māfana associated with the physical distance between people during e-talanoa:

The challenge with e-talanoa is that it's extra hard to gauge human warmth. Sometimes, it feels lonely and isolated when having e-talanoa. Technology can be an issue especially if the internet connection is poor. People can be talked over unintentionally as you may not know who wants to talk.

Generally, the six co-collaborators found it difficult to make sense of participants' body language and facial expressions during most online forums. Fa'avae responded to Chand's comment:

The challenges you're suggesting Alvin seem to be concerns to do with relational ethics. There is something about bodies, proximity, and eye contact that contextualises and evokes rich talanoa. Sometimes we can read what a person is saying through their facial and body gestures. It's hard to do that when you're online. I struggle sometimes when I can't see people's faces in Zoom because they've turned their video off. There is a particular kind of distanced feeling; a sense of distance in space and beyond one's reach.

While considering the ethical relevance of physical proximity, Faleolo highlights valuing participants' preferences when choosing e-talanoa. She notes:

This is an interesting insight, out and about doing Zoom. When listening to a speaker, I turn my screen off to not distract the person listening or speaking. In a recent Zoom e-talanoa I had with a multi-sited Tongan collective (NZ or Aust), a participant decided to go shopping, other participants and I in the discussion group were okay with this arrangement. The participant had muted but we could see her and the children walking

around the shopping mall. So, whose perspective really matters in e-talanoa, the informant, researcher, or both? How do we ensure both the informant and researcher are empowered in the process?

Faleolo's reference to doing Zoom in an academic forum in comparison to her role as the chair of the meeting can have diverse implications on e-talanoa. Being present, engaged and listening, if not speaking or seen, is necessary. Being mindful of the intrinsic or extrinsic pressures on researchers is essential. What researchers may perceive as inappropriate may not be perceived in the same manner as their participants. Our anxieties about how we perform as researchers and grappling with doubts or fears about whether our methods or methodologies are ethically appropriate may not usually be understood by our participants. Nevertheless, these pressures and emotions are useful and articulating them can improve research practice for the next generation. Whose perspective really matters in e-talanoa is a question that requires careful negotiation. Clear articulation will also help to pave a way forward for researchers hoping to maximise the online space and employ e-talanoa as a relevant and valid approach during the current pandemic restrictions.

Negotiating e-talanoa virtual spaces

Negotiation enables the visibility and sharing of power dynamics within research. The quality of e-talanoa negotiation between researchers and participants depends on their willingness to tauhi vā and teu le va. For us, the socio-cultural and socio-spiritual aspects of talanoa were vital in our e-talanoa practice. The values of respect, reciprocity, humility, love, care, and generosity were identified as important elements within e-talanoa (Anae, 2016; Ka'ili, 2017). As Halapua (2003) points out, tauhi vā enables respectful communication during in-person talanoa.

To maintain online vā-relations, vā māfana in e-talanoa required us to turn to cultural protocols for instance—prayer, Pacific greetings, introductions, as well as the use of storying or storytelling to explain interconnections to one another and places. Wright, Chand, and Havea shared their e-talanoa routines, encompassing Pacific cultural protocols commonly used during in-person talanoa contexts. According to Wright, Chand, and Havea:

I try as much as possible to authentically engage in and encourage preliminary conversation to give time for the participants to feel comfortable. I take time to acknowledge the participant's time and express sincere appreciation for their consent and willingness to participate and invite them to raise any questions. (Wright)

e-talanoa was scheduled via email. A reminder was sent a day before the e-talanoa. Participants were asked if they are comfortable if the screen can be recorded. I greeted the participants before the beginning of e-talanoa discussions. We take turns to introduce ourselves and talk about our genealogy. (Chand)

One of the approaches I tend to use in e-talanoa to create and maintain cultural connections and māfana warmth and spirit of the talanoa with my participants is starting it right. I followed Tongan protocols, doing a prayer first and acknowledge them in Tongan language and English if there are non-Tongan participants. I make sure that I say every person's name during the e-talanoa and get everyone involved and take turns to speak. (Havea)

Clear communication before, during, and after e-talanoa was emphasised by the co-collaborators. Implementing reciprocity whereby information is accessible and flows freely to prepare the virtual spaces for effective and meaningful conversations is important. Faleolo noted,

following Samoan and Tongan protocols of setting the tone through prayer or cultural greetings and introductions or acknowledgements of our connections, especially at the first e-talanoa, and then finishing off with a word of thanks or prayer to close before signing off left a warmth or māfana that would allow for further free-flow communication and a less formal start to our next session.

Regardless of the technological or digital tool and platform used when implementing e-talanoa, there are simple but effective ways of bringing vā māfana to an e-talanoa forum, as outlined in the excerpts above. To enable vā māfana, Wright suggests the significance of the preliminary stage of the e-talanoa. For Havea, starting it right requires a prelude of social, cultural, and spiritual references. Similarly, Faleolo would use a similar procedure at the start and end of her e-talanoa session. Among the six co-collaborators, the cultural and spiritual protocols through greetings and connecting with participants should be followed to promote what Fa'avae refers to as unsettling the space and relationally grounding one's self prior to the formalities of the meeting proceeding.

Future implications for the continued use of e-talanoa

Pacific researchers require a sound understanding of ethical and socio-cultural principles to navigate meaningful online vā-relations through vā māfana and a good grasp of the communication services and online forums they and their participants can access together. Time allowances for setting-up the technology, pre-meeting communication, technical problem-shooting during e-talanoa, maintaining conversational engagement, retrieving recorded data, post-meeting communication, collaborating on analysis, and reflections about the process are all practical demands on researchers and their work. All six co-collaborators acknowledge their learning journey with regard to implementing e-talanoa in their Pacific research contexts.

Faleolo and Enari advocate that e-talanoa should not replace in-person talanoa, but should be looked at as another way of extending talanoa research practice:

It is another means to perform face-to-face or in-person talanoa. But e-talanoa should not be used as a full replacement. I used both physical and e-talanoa. I too would do this interchangeably as this allows the benefits of both physical connection and isolated convenience.

Enari and Matapo (2020) emphasise the importance of both physical and online forms of connection for Pasifika learners during the global pandemic. This is because of the contextual surroundings that influence the knowledge-sharing processes. “[T]he relational vā becomes entangled in the digital vā, generating new modes for engagement and connection . . . indigenising the digital environment to embed cultural ways of being and knowing” (Enari & Matapo, 2020, p. 8). Both modes of communication—in-person talanoa and e-talanoa—are required in this pivotal time of re-engagement and re-connection across multi-sited Pacific collectives (Faleolo, 2020a). Online research interactions should not dismiss Pacific traditional values and practices that rely on nurturing generous, safe, and generative collective connections.

Havea recommended e-talanoa as supplementary to in-person talanoa, especially if there were unexpected events affecting the option of meeting physically in-person. Chand claims that e-talanoa is a method used to collect data with Pacific students familiar with technology. Even though Fa’avae acknowledges e-talanoa’s possibilities during our Zoom session, he reminds the co-collaborators to story the practical challenges in which we grapple with e-talanoa in research engagement and practice, including the experiences that have a tendency to make us be-know-see-feel-do vulnerable.

Wright suggests how we might deal reflexively with these challenges and feelings of vulnerability, by documenting as much as we can about how we use e-talanoa, the challenges faced, and the lessons learnt. Similarly, Faleolo shares:

as a Pasifika researcher, representing my people accurately is my worry and so I kept an ongoing journal that gave me room for reflexive practice. I continually reflect on what I was thinking, what I thought participants were saying, why I thought about these things, who they were in relation to me, and what was happening in their world and contexts at the time. It helped me fully understand what participants were saying when I revisited scripts at a later stage and dampen down my own noisy thoughts so that I could concentrate on what they were really saying to me.

Based on the co-collaborators’ comments linked to authentically engaging in e-talanoa, Fa’avae raised the concern as to what constitutes authentic engagement? The idea of authenticity can often assume one proper way or true experience of doing talanoa as a research method. This further raises the question; is e-talanoa authentic talanoa? The matter of e-talanoa’s validity takes into careful consideration contextual relevance and

appropriateness and requires a collective and considered discussion to negotiate a way forward.

Further use of e–talanoa within the digital vā

The move to employ e–talanoa reflects our global pandemic realities. This validates the contextual relevance of e–talanoa as a research method within the post–covid space. The digital vā is a space of possibilities and enables the interrogation of e–culture and online identity projections through digital tools and platforms (*Koya-Vaka’uta, 2017*). Reliable e–talanoa practice within the digital vā context relies on vā–relational ethics. This means that articulating and realising e–talanoa’s possibilities by–for–with Pacific in this article relies on our collective and shared vā–relational sense-making and meaning-making. The digital vā space has the potential to empower subaltern or marginalised voices and critical practice in western-oriented higher education (*Fa’avae et al., 2022; Spivak, 1988*). e–talanoa as a research method portrays the challenges, negotiations, and significance of vā–relations projected across time–space and physical–online boundaries.

IMPK–centric ethico–relational ontology grounds e–talanoa’s post–covid relational becoming within the Moana (*Matapo & McFall-McCaffery, 2022; Wolfgramm-Foliaki & Smith, 2020*). To capture the ways in which e–talanoa can be utilised as a Moana–Pacific research praxis relies on open discussion about the challenges involved in enacting ethical vā–relations based on generosity and care (*Enari & Matapo, 2020*). This is central to understanding the kinds of talanoa engagement and practice accessible both physically in–person and online, and the responsibilities of digital tools and platforms in enacting vā’s ethical projections and extensions across and between people, places, and spaces. The quality of e–talanoa engagement and practice depend on the relational ethics of vā māfana interactions, the associated human–warmth embodied, often experienced through *teu le va* and *tauhi vā* (*Anae, 2016; Halapua, 2003*).

Talanoa–vā as a process of critical analysis has provided a framework for understanding the complex layers and nuanced meanings embedded in unpacking the intersections between e– and talanoa as well as the diverse understandings of connections between the six co-collaborators in this article. The epistemic struggle associated with the anglicising of talanoa with the prefix e– calls to relevance the hyphen as a critical space for negotiating vā’s responsibilities within the shared space of relationality (*Supplementary Figure 1*). Naming e–talanoa as online research engagement has inspired and empowered the co-collaborators to articulate talanoa’s online and post-covid possibilities in the diaspora. e–talanoa is symbolic of the evolving nature of IMPK and practices that acknowledge the diverse locales and places in which Pacific people now reside (*Faleolo, 2020a; Lopesi & Tecun, 2020*). Vā–relations helped frame the understanding of the intimate yet intricate space in–between the ethics of talanoa

grounded on generosity and care which are meaningful across in-person-online research engagement ([Enari & Fa'aea, 2020](#)).

Conclusion

e-talanoa within the digital vā context provides an extension to in-person talanoa research discourse and scholarship. Although much of the scholarship has focused on physical in-person talanoa, the online space continues to shape talanoa engagement and practice. Rather than ignore the relevance of the online space and digital technology, given today's global pandemic challenges, we highlight the potentialities of the e-talanoa method as supplementary to extending and projecting vā-relationality and data gathering in ways that ensure teu or tauhi maintains the mana and agency of Pasifika or Pacific people. While e-talanoa is an extension of discursive in-person talanoa, its responsibility as identified by the co-collaborators is to sustain ethical conditions of socio-spatial and socio-temporal shared interactions.

Authors' note

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