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Global South Sisterhood in a Virtual Exchange: A Critical Autoethnography

Bhavika Sicka[a*] and Arzu Atajanova[b]

Old Dominion University, USA

*Corresponding author (Bhavika Sicka) email: bsicka@odu.edu
Address: Old Dominion University, Virginia, USA

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Abstract

We are two women international students from the Global South, situated in Turkey and the U.S. respectively. In this article, we utilize autoethnography to critically reflect on our intellectual, emotional, linguistic, and cultural growth during a virtual exchange program that we participated in during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this co-exploration, we re-reflect on and analyze our experiences as participants in a COIL program to consider, more broadly, the evolution and trajectory of virtual mobility in an uneven knowledge landscape. Collectively, we improved our English language skills through our exchange, while simultaneously resisting a deficit orientation of English language learning. We also expanded our epistemic and discursive horizons, learning about the vibrant and thriving cultural traditions, thought traditions, and religious/spiritual traditions of Turkmenistan and India, our home countries. Through technologies such as Zoom and WhatsApp, we discovered each other's personalities and backgrounds, centering sisterhood along the way. We framed our analysis through a critical internationalization perspective, delineating the challenges and limitations of virtual exchanges and arguing for equitable, transformative exchanges that honor southern epistemologies.

Keywords: collaborative online international learning, critical internationalization, global learning, intercultural exchange, international higher education, virtual mobility, virtual exchange

Introduction

I, Kavya (pseudonym) and my co-author, Züleyha (pseudonym), are two international women graduate students from Asia. I am an international student in the United States, originally from India. Züleyha is an international student in Turkey, originally from Turkmenistan. Our story dramatizes the opportunities and challenges to international higher education that came to the fore because of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with regards to virtual exchange (VE) evolving as a viable alternative to traditional education abroad. Prior to the pandemic, I was scheduled to participate in a study abroad program in 2022. I, along with my classmates, who were graduate and doctoral students of higher education and community college leadership at a large public university in the U.S., were slated to travel to Turkey. However, COVID-19 was wreaking havoc in the U.S. and globally, with travel restrictions and border closures implemented to curb the spread of the virus. These restrictions made it difficult or impossible for students to travel to their intended study abroad destinations, leading to the suspensions and cancellations of many study abroad programs (Medel, 2023), including mine.

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The cancellation of educational abroad trips brought to the fore entrenched issues with short term study abroad programs and challenged educators to reconsider the 'abroad' in 'study abroad' (Gaitanidis, 2020).

The pandemic encouraged practitioners and experts in the field of internationalization to connect students across borders during a time of mass disconnection (Sebastian & Souza, 2022). Colleges and universities in the U.S. witnessed increased attention to creating virtual partnerships with other institutions, resulting in 'virtual' and 'digital' gaining momentum in internationalization (Erdei et al., 2023; Goodman & Martel, 2022). Many instructors transitioned traditional teaching methods into virtual educational environments (Mospan, 2023), repurposing unused funds from canceled education abroad programs toward financing VE initiatives (Fischer & Cossey, 2021). VE is defined as "activities involv[ing] some form of exchange across geographic borders where knowledge and ideas are internationally mobile with the support of technologies, rather than the students themselves" (Mittelmeier et al., 2021, p. 269). My professor was amongst these forward-thinking educators, reconfiguring her canceled study abroad program as a VE. She redesigned her program as a special topics course, embedded within which was a collaborative online international learning (COIL) component (Fischer, 2022). This was done in partnership with a professor from a university in Turkey, who was also a member of the COIL network. Our professor's aim was for us to experience a VE firsthand, know its advantages and disadvantages, and gain cross-cultural communication skills, cultural empathy, and awareness (Fischer, 2022).

I was disappointed at the missed opportunity of visiting Turkey but was grateful for VE emerging as a silver lining. While students of canceled study abroad programs during the pandemic missed out on embodied dimensions of overseas experiences (Di Giovine & de Uriarte, 2020), many students in online exchanges gained a deeper understanding or appreciation of the essence of study abroad (Barkin, 2021). VEs are founded on values such as reciprocity and mutual learning, offering a pedagogical platform to engage with multiple perspectives on particular issues or disciplinary areas (Helm & Beaven, 2020). VE is an effective alternative to traditional study abroad, allowing students to 'study abroad' without going abroad (Krishnan et al., 2021). VEs can also expose reductionist perceptions of 'Other' cultures and humanize that 'Other' through community-generated dialogue (Dorroll & Dorroll, 2020; Galina, 2020), reducing our anxieties and misconceptions about 'the Other' (Lee et al., 2022). VE, because it combines the benefits of digitalization and internationalization (Oggel et al., 2022), offers students means to develop intercultural competencies regardless of travel constraints, financial impediments, or disease outbreaks (King & Bochenek, 2021). This was also the case with me, as I was paired with Züleyha, an undergraduate international Turkmen student, during our COIL exchange.

Over the course of a spring semester, Züleyha and I communicated via emails and WhatsApp text and voice messages. We 'met' via Zoom, documenting our learnings in Apple Notes and Google Docs. As we navigated this digital arena, touching base regularly through video conferencing and multiplatform messaging apps, we journaled how our experience shaped us individually and collectively during a period of global uncertainty. Additionally, we submitted formal assignments to Blackboard and organized our learnings via Padlet's virtual bulletin boards, gathering ample sources of qualitative data. Two years after the completion of our COIL program, Züleyha and I reconnected to embark on an autoethnographic exploration and share our learnings with academe. Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). We opted for autoethnography because it serves as particularly useful for international students to tease out their multidimensional identity constructions beyond the formal curriculum (Xu, 2023), including identity and agency formation and the acquisition of knowledge and culture (Lin et al., 2022). Autoethnography also considers intersecting identities and honors international students as multifaceted individuals (Shokirova et al., 2022).

We structured this article as follows: First, we lay out our positionalities and the purpose of this study. Next, we provide an overview of the literature on VE, underscoring the potential for VEs—particularly COIL programs—to broaden perspectives, promote mutual understanding, and cultivate a sense of global citizenship among students. By reviewing the existing body of research on the evolution of VE, we contextualize our experiences within its broader landscape. In the third section, we offer a theoretical framework, reflecting on VE through a critical lens. Instead of perpetuating unequal power dynamics in international collaborations, critical VE (CVE) seeks to foster fair, co-creative, and meaningful partnerships and collaborations. As Global South students, we make a conscious decision to frame our VE journey through a critical lens, to underscore respect, reciprocity, and shared decision-making among international partners and emphasize the human[izing] aspects of internationalization. Fourth, we present our methodology, detailing how we used autoethnography to document and critically reflect on our exchange. As data, we utilized Zoom and WhatsApp conversations, personal journal reflections, and formal assignments submitted as course requirements. In the final sections, we list our findings, followed by limitations and implications for future research and practice.

Positionality and Purpose

While generalized, top-down analyses of trends such as internationalization [at home] can offer efficiency and structure, they may overlook the richness of individual experiences or fail to capture the nuances present in diverse contexts.

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the discourse on the effectiveness of VE in fostering cross-cultural understanding, from a student-oriented and Global South-oriented perspective. International students are homogenized in higher education systems and processes (Gargano, 2009) and often presented as monolithic, flattening the intersections of our multiplicitous and intersectional identities (Hutcheson, 2020). The perspectives of Global South women are particularly invisible in the discourse on international students, considering the overlapping effects of structural racism, sexism, and imperialism within systems of global higher education (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004). The pandemic revealed the need to particularize and humanize the international student experience by recentering the diverse and intimate stories of students, particularly from the Global South (Bali et al., 2021). "In the micro-narratives of everyday teaching and learning, higher education is refracted through multiple lenses of experience and encounter" (Saltmarsh, 2011, p. 115). Our aim is to elevate the significance of Global South stories within the broader narrative of internationalization [at home] and contribute a more grounded and nuanced perspective to virtual migrancy in higher education.

Internationalization requires critical cultural awareness and understanding of ourselves, our positionalities, and our worldviews and values (Wimpenny et al., 2022a). Positionality refers to the researcher's awareness and critical consideration of their own social, cultural, and personal context, including markers of relational privilege, such as race and class, which can influence perspectives and impact the research process (Maher & Tetreault, 1993). By laying out our positionality, Züleyha and I seek to make transparent the loci of our enunciation and acknowledge the inherently value-laden, perspectival nature of knowledge. Both Züleyha and I identify as middle-class cis women in our twenties and thirties respectively. Züleyha is an undergraduate student, and I am a doctoral candidate. We are Asian: I am South Asian (Indian) and Züleyha is Central Asian (Turkmen). We are international students: I am pursuing higher education in the U.S. and Züleyha in Turkey. We both have backgrounds in English: While I hold undergraduate and graduate degrees in English literature and creative writing, Züleyha is pursuing a baccalaureate in English. We are multilingual: I speak English, Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu. Züleyha speaks Turkmen, Turkish, Russian, English, and German. I identify as a Savarna Hindu and Züleyha a Muslim. While I am relatively fluent in English, Züleyha is an English learner.

Literature Review

Definitions of VE

With the rise of technological developments such as the Internet and social media, virtual mobility increasingly entered internationalization (Deardorff et al., 2012), with 'online intercultural exchange,' 'virtual mobility,' 'virtual exchange,' and 'collaborative online international learning' emerging as part of internationalization at home (de Wit, 2016). There can be confusion surrounding what VEs mean, as VE is often used synonymously with telecollaboration, etandem learning, and other virtual knowledge exchanges. O'Dowd (2020) comprehensively defined VE as:

> a pedagogical approach that involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programs and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators. (p. 478)

While virtual mobility broadly encompasses virtual stay abroad, virtual campus models, joint curricular designs, virtual seminars, virtual projects, etc., VE is a specific type of virtual mobility (Novoselova, 2023). VE "promotes partnered teaching on a virtual platform, combining students and faculty from "away" and home campuses in both synchronous streaming classroom experiences and virtual group or partnered projects" (Di Giovine & de Uriarte, 2020, p. 336).

Simply put, a VE involves two willing professors connected by technology who identify a mutually beneficial assignment in a structured educational program, even if their students hail from separate academic disciplines (Lanham & Voskuil, 2022). While VE is often showcased as a new approach to learning and teaching across cultures, educators have used such exchanges since the 1990s to bring classes into contact with geographically distant partner classes to foster authentic communication, meaningful collaboration, and a first-hand experience of engaging and learning with diverse cultural partners (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). One of the earliest such initiatives to pioneer global linkages was iEARN, a network originating from the New York/Moscow Schools Telecommunications Project (NYS-MSTP). What is 'new' about VEs is its exponential growth in the past five years and the convergence of a community of scholars, practitioners, and funders who now place different VE models under the umbrella term of VE (Guth, 2020). VEs are increasingly adopting diverse formats and cutting across different knowledge fields (Barbosa & Ferreira-Lopes, 2023), emphasizing content, interaction, and dialogue that is primarily learner-led (Lanham & Voskuil, 2022). In recent years, various approaches have evolved in different contexts and areas of education, with diverse organizational structures and pedagogical objectives (O'Dowd, 2018), often to complement rather than replace student mobility (O'Dowd, 2023).

Benefits of VE

The new demands of our contemporary era call for lifelong learners, multiliterate world citizens who can think critically and work collaboratively in multicultural and multilingual contexts (Antoniadou, 2011). VEs facilitate emotional intelligence (Salomão & da Silva, 2023) and intercultural learning by enabling students to share and discover the deep emotional narratives that structure their views of Self and Other (de Castro et al., 2019; Dorroll & Dorroll, 2020). Bringing videoconference technology into the classroom, linking with an international partner, and guiding student conversations can encourage students to expand their networks, look outside of their cultures, understand the values and beliefs of counterparts, and mediate multiplicitous worldviews (Aquino et al., 2023; Commander et al., 2022; Lipinski, 2014; Millner, 2020). VEs can also foster collaborative problem solving, critical thinking, communication intelligence, increased awareness and mindfulness of global and cultural dynamics, learner autonomy, transformative and active self-regulated learning, networked learning, and electronic and digital literacy skills (Duffy et al., 2022; Hauck, 2019; Helm & Velden, 2021; Radke et al., 2021; Rajagopal et al., 2020; Sadler & Dooly, 2016; Salomão & Zampieri, 2022). VEs can forge global solidarity and civic-mindedness (King de Ramirez, 2021; Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszylk, 2021), empowering students to leverage intercultural knowledge to address global uncertainties (Blaber et al., 2023).

VEs broaden access to cultural learning experiences and make global knowledge more readily available to students who cannot afford to travel (Alonso-Morais, 2023), including historically disprivileged students (Bryant et al., 2023). This potentializes the inclusion of more languages, peoples, and knowledges into internationalization (Guimarães et al., 2019). Students gain access to materials not available on campus and learn about alternative forms of knowledge production (Rogers, 2020). VEs also promote language proficiency and foreign language learning (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; Luo & Yang, 2022; Machwate et al., 2021; Pertusa-Seva & Stewart, 2008; Salomão, 2022; Tang et al., 2021; Van Maele et al., 2013), supporting meaningful interactions between learners of different lingua-cultural backgrounds (Dooly, 2017). VEs can promote language equity (Robbins, 2023) and authentic language use (Júnior & Finardi, 2018), helping participants see skills in multiple languages as assets, not as handicaps (Hilliker, 2020, 2022). VEs that integrate plurilingualism can help participants reconsider their language ideologies and question the hegemony of English and monolingualism in educational settings (Schmid et al., 2023). Additionally, VEs can serve as third spaces where Black, Chicana, and other pedagogies and conversations thrive (Company et al., 2023) and the knowledge agency, curricular and pedagogical needs, and resource requirements of Global South partners are honored (Glenn & Devereux, 2023).

COIL Programs

COIL, a specific modality of VE, has been adopted as an innovative pedagogical approach to offer students global learning opportunities from their homes (Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021; Nava-Aguirre et al., 2019). COIL was first established in 2006 at the State University of New York (SUNY) but has grown in popularity for faculty worldwide (Rubin, 2016). COIL was effective and witnessed renewed impetus during the pandemic (Ikeda, 2022; Garcia et al., 2023; Rubin & Guth, 2023). Courses are co-developed and co-taught by instructors from two countries, and students usually collaborate on group projects virtually (Guth & Rubin, 2015). COIL courses foster synergy between coursework and international relationships that may be lacking in traditional faculty-led study abroad programs (Wood et al., 2022), often centering active learning (Doscher, 2023) and empowering students to co-learn course content, co-build knowledge, and co-develop diverse personal relationships through the negotiation of meaning (Fowler et al., 2014). Students work through dissonant, contrapuntal experiences and seek the conceptual knowledge needed to solve problems (Harasim, 2012; Motley & Sturgill, 2013). COIL courses can sustain a global learning space in a post-COVID era (Cotoman et al., 2022), decolonizing fields (de la Garza & Maher, 2022) and internationalization (Finardi & Guimarães, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Technological innovation can enhance internationalization by providing opportunities for students to intersect and interact across cultures (Pitts & Brooks, 2017). Opportunities for social connection can cleave open a transformative third space where students can engage in meaningful and productive dialogic exchanges (Pitts & Brooke, 2017). However, mere opportunity for connection can perpetuate normative internationalization, resulting in superficial exchanges and the reification of Global North-South imbalances (Pitts & Brooke, 2017). Global higher education is unequal (Altbach, 2004), and globalization perpetuates historical inequalities and colonial legacies (Sicka & Hou, 2023). Andreotti and de Souza (2008) warned that educators who uncritically attempt to bring the world into their classrooms through VEs can unwittingly reinforce notions of supremacy and universality of Western epistemologies and ontologies, undervaluing other knowledge systems. The foundation upon which VE is evolving is intricate, shaped by issues related to gender, race, and age, institutional constraints such as inequities in support, technological shortcomings, geopolitical realities, and the

pervasiveness of Western hegemonies (Alami et al., 2022). To approach internationalization [at home] without critical awareness ignores relative power dynamics between participating countries, peoples, languages, and institutions. Without serious engagement with context, space/place, and positionality (Díaz et al., 2021; Klimanova & Hellmich, 2021), VEs run the risk of commodifying cultural knowledge and stabilizing unequal relations of dialogue and power.

Therefore, Züleyha and I were guided by CVE, a nascent field in VE practice and research that critically assesses topics regarding language, positionality, and power in VE. CVE draws from critical pedagogy, a theoretical approach that unsettles power and seeks to develop students' critical consciousness. CVE goes beyond surface-level interactions and cultural exposures in VE and focuses on fostering critical understandings of power dynamics, social justice issues, and cultural complexities (Hauck & Helm, 2020). CVE explores issues of inclusion and exclusion in VE-based efforts to internationalize higher education curricula (Alami et al., 2022) and recenters students who are often underrepresented in internationalization (Hauck, 2023). CVE also centers topics informed by and aligned with sustainable development goals (Hauck, 2023) and addresses shared planetary challenges such as access, democracy, gender, social justice, climate, disease for humanity, food, and hunger, by building bridges between linguacultures to find common pathways forward (Pegrum et al., 2022). CVEs encourage VE educators and participants to critically examine societal norms and power relations and promote critical digital literacies (Satar et al., 2023), defined as the awareness of how meanings are represented in ways that maintain and replicate relations of power (Darvin, 2017). CVEs can serve as safe/brave spaces where students critically reflect on the what, why, and how of global differences (Glimäng, 2022).

Methodology

Our method of choice was autoethnography, which blends autobiography and ethnography by examining how the self/auto is situated within larger cultural or social groups/ethno (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography entails "turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experiences occur" (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). Autoethnography involves doing self-conscious, deliberate identity work (i.e., the formation, understanding, and presentation of self), to understand or represent some phenomenon that exceeds the self (Butz & Besio, 2009)—in this case, virtual internationalization. Autoethnography is cultural analysis through personal narrative, involving the auto ethnographers researching themselves in relation to others (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). Autoethnography, further, allows minoritized subjects, who have historically been operationalized by hegemonic discourses, to self-represent themselves (Butz & Besio, 2009). Züleyha and I undertook a collaborative autoethnography, where multiple researchers or participants come together to collectively examine and interpret their shared experiences within a certain context. Collaborative autoethnography can be used by international students to give voice to social and cultural concerns by pooling their autobiographical materials and undertaking a co-exploration of experiences and identities and a joint meaning-making endeavor (Shokirova et al., 2022).

However, uncritical autoethnography that focuses solely on independent experiences and learning outcomes can jeopardize attention to larger cultural issues and reify power-imbalances (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). Therefore, Züleyha and I ensured that our autoethnography was critical, "to understand the lived experience of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 8-9). Critical autoethnography dovetails with CVE by challenging scientific notions of truth as objective, problematizing what counts as knowledge (Ellis et al., 2011), and rendering the personal as political (Griffin, 2018). Stylistically, critical autoethnography challenges dominant ways of articulating knowledge in the academy through its preferred mode of first-person narrativizing (Chawla & Rodriguez, 2008). Critical auto ethnographers are transcultural communicators who "scrutinize, publicize, and reflexively rework their own self-understandings as a way to shape understandings of and in the wider world" (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1660). Critical autoethnography is an empowering academic discourse for international students to resist racisms and linguicisms in higher education and center their unique ways of learning and being, through dialogue between Self and Other (Cho et al., 2023).

Data Collection

Over the course of a four-month semester, Züleyha and I engaged in a multifaceted approach to data collection. Our weekly Zoom meetings, each lasting 5 minutes to an hour, served as dynamic sessions for real-time communicative exchanges. These virtual encounters were not only opportunities to 'meet' but also sources of qualitative data. In addition to synchronous meetings, our asynchronous communications on WhatsApp provided a rich dataset. Sharing texts and emojis became a unique form of non-verbal communication, capturing our emotional states, reactions, and shared enthusiasm for the project. We also followed each other on the social media platform Facebook, which offered vignettes into each other's lives and personalities outside of the course. We submitted weekly assignments to Blackboard, which served as tangible data points and provided a structured means to track our growth. Each assignment focused on a different dimension of our

exchange. Finally, we informally jotted down our reflections on Notes and Docs, maintaining a narrative record of our learnings. Two years later, we 'met' again over Zoom to revisit our course and re-reflect on our learnings, recording our session for additional data. We were guided by the following research questions: What were the benefits and challenges of our VE? How did we center friendship in our VE?

Data Analysis

First, we immersed ourselves in our data, reading and rereading our journal entries, Zoom transcripts, and assignments to become familiar with the content. I took the lead in data analysis, mentoring Züleyha along the way, as this was her first time conducting a formal qualitative study. We conducted line-by-line coding, breaking down our qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences, as advised by Corbin and Strauss (2014). We identified significant phrases, events, and emotions in our narratives, assigning codes. A code is a label assigned to some piece of data (Shaffer & Ruis, 2021). The goal of initial coding was to remain open to all possible theoretical directions suggested by our interpretations of our data (Charmaz, 2006) and reflect on the contents and nuances of our data (Saldaña, 2021). Next, we employed values coding to capture and label our subjective values, attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives (Saldaña, 2021). We kept intersectionality at the heart of our research process (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022), acknowledging that the intersections of our respective religions, languages, ethnic affiliations, and educational backgrounds, etc., influence our sense-making. We presented our findings with an eye toward relating the micro details of our autoethnography to the macro implications of ideas and concepts in education (Starr, 2010).

Trustworthiness

Despite their value, embodied methodological praxes can raise concerns around trustworthiness, particularly in the minds of readers inclined towards research paradigms prioritizing 'objectivity' and generalizability. As Reed-Danahay (1997) pointed out, autoethnography synthesizes a postmodern autobiography (in which the notion of the coherent, individual self is called into question) and postmodern ethnography (in which realist conventions and objective observer positions are called into question). In taking a leap of faith beyond the conventional boundaries of research, we conducted our inquiry in a personalized, feminized, emotional, open, and vulnerable manner, eschewing Western, hegemonic, and masculinist research norms of research objectivity, rationality, disconnectedness, and universality (Allen-Collinson, 2013). We ensured trustworthiness not through criteria derived from positivistic or post-positivistic paradigms but through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2008; Le Roux, 2017). Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data, and transferability addressed by providing thick descriptions of context, to allow readers to assess the applicability of our findings to their own contexts. Dependability and confirmability were maintained by documenting our decision-making processes and ensuring that findings emerged from the data and not from unsubstantiated predispositions. Additionally, reflexivity was foregrounded through transparent disclosure of and ongoing engagement with our positionalities in relation to the data (Pitard, 2017).

Findings

Affirming Global South Epistemologies through VE

I knew very little about Turkmenistan before speaking with Züleyha, and the country and its cultures had seemed exotic, faraway, and elusive to me. Similarly, Züleyha primarily knew about India from Bollywood and global news, hardly ever from first-hand accounts. VA served as a window into our respective backgrounds and cultures. Through Züleyha, I was offered a window into Turkmenistan's rich and complex history, interwoven with Persian, Mongol, and Turkic influences going back millennia. "I'm happy to introduce my country to you," Züleyha exclaimed. "My country is really, really small, and most people don't know anything about it." Through Züleyha, I learned that Turkmenistan used to be a part of the Soviet Union, gaining its independence in 1991. Züleyha, proud of her country's independence, shared how October 27th, the date commemorating Turkmenistan's independence, is marked with patriotic events and parades. On my turn, I told Züleyha about India's rich history, including how India gained its independence from the British Raj in 1947 on August 15th, an occasion commemorated with flag-hoisting and ceremonies in India and its diaspora. Through discussing our countries' respective colonial and imperial histories and independence movements, we learned about self-determination, self-assertion, and collective pride, sentiments shared by many Global South communities.

Züleyha and I also learned about each other's religious, ethnic, and cultural traditions. For example, I learned that the cultivation of melons has a long tradition in Turkmenistan, with Melon Day celebrated as a time of pastoral vibrance and plenty. Züleyha described how, on this day, her town's streets are lined with melon stalls and locals partake in melon-

tasting, contests, and agricultural fairs. Listening to her narrate fond memories of Melon Day over my computer screen, her face expressive and animated, I found myself transported to her town, the scent of fresh fruits and the bustle of bazaars coming to life. Züleyha also spoke about the Turkmen festivals of Eid al-Adha (Kurban Bayram) and Novruz Bayram, the latter a spring holiday with its roots in Zoroastrianism. Eid and Navroz are celebrated in India, too, primarily because of India's Muslim and Parsi populations, but through our VE, I was reminded how festivals take on different cultural expressions, shades, colors, and meanings across contexts. Züleyha knew of Indian festivals like Holi and Diwali, but through our VE, she learned about lesser-known regional Indian festivals, such as Durga Pujo—a Bengali festival involving spirited rituals such as dhunuchi naach, sindoor khela, and the visarjan of Ma Durga's idol in the Ganges.

Further, Züleyha and I learned about shared aspects of our cuisines. Both Turkmen and Indian cuisines include a variety of flatbreads: In Turkmenistan, flatbreads like çöreks and yufkas are staple, whereas in India (and its neighboring countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh), rotis, naans, kulchas, and parathas are commonly consumed. Turkmens use local adaptations of clay ovens and grills to bake breads, much like the traditional tandoors commonly used in South Asia. Our cultures also have long traditions of meat-based dishes: In Turkmenistan, lamb and beef are commonly used in meals preparations, with dishes like shashlik being popular; in India, various meat dishes, such as seekh kebabs, tikkas, sabjis, curries, and tandoori preparations are widely enjoyed. I am a vegan and do not consume meat, and Züleyha thoughtfully shared names of plant-based Turkmen dishes. She asked me to try dolma—a dish traditionally prepared by stuffing grape leaves with a mixture of rice, minced meat, onions, herbs, and spices—with a stuffing of pine nuts and dried fruits instead of meat, and my mouth watered at the thought! We also discovered a shared love for tea: In Turkey and Turkmenistan, çay holds a special place in the hearts of people, like how masala chai is a cultural cornerstone in India.

Züleyha and I also discovered that the fabrics of our cultures are braided through with a common spiritual thread, despite our religious heterogeneities. We noted that Sufism—the mystical dimension of Islam—has had a profound impact on the landscapes of both our countries/regions. Sufism emphasizes an intimate and direct experience of the divine, and Sufi poets often use their verses to express their spiritual journeys and promote messages of harmony, love, tolerance, and non-materialism. Magtymguly, an 18th-century Sufi poet and spiritual teacher, is a nationally celebrated cultural icon in Turkmenistan and is often considered the father of Turkmen literature. Similarly, in India, Sufi poets—like Punjabi Sufi reformist and philosopher Bulleh Shah—are admired for their revolutionary verses that challenged social hierarchies and emphasized the unity of religions. Züleyha and I also discovered that our cultures cherished similar values. For example, both Turkmen and Indian festivities also often use lamps, fire, and candles, reflecting a shared emphasis on the symbolism of light. Züleyha informed that, on Novruz, her community members build a bonfire and jump over it, signifying purification of their souls and forgiveness of their sins by God. Similarly, we, as Hindus, light aartis; we cup our palms over the flames, which we raise to our foreheads, to cleanse ourselves and form a oneness with the Divine.

Contesting Damaging Stereotypes and Humanizing the Other through VE

Illiberal and conservative discourses and mainstream media narratives often pathologize the differences between racial, religious, linguistic, and ethnic communities, demonizing the Other (particularly the figure of the Muslim) through difference (Silva, 2016). In India, for instance, the rhetoric and ideology of Hindutva frames 'the Muslim' as a foil and a threat to the Hindu body politic (Anand, 2005). Many of these demeaning, dehumanizing, and deficitizing stereotypes can seep into the public imagination, driving people to hold biases and assumptions of Other communities. Through our VE, Züleyha and I were able to contest reductionist perceptions about our communities commonly perpetuated by populist and xenophobic discourses. For instance, I used to believe, quite wrongly, that Muslim women in Central and Middle Eastern countries were closed-off, religiously conservative, and male-dominated. However, Züleyha was friendly, open, and amiable in her demeanor. While being religious, she was also moderate and progressive in her views, caring deeply about issues pertaining to individual freedom, social justice, and the upliftment of her community. She was opinionated and spoke strongly about holding governments accountable and minimizing corruption in our countries. She was also educated and career-motivated, single-handedly shattering orientalizing and homogenizing stereotypes of Muslim women.

The context of the pandemic heightened the effectiveness of our VE, and let us look out onto the world, but to do so together. This was a time when everyone, everywhere, was struggling. The contagious Omicron variant of the virus was pushing India into a third wave of the pandemic (Chavda et al., 2023), and my parents, relatives, and elderly grandparents contracted the virus. I was often sick with worry but unable to travel overseas to be with my family. Züleyha was also away from her family, and while her family members did not contract the virus, she was also constantly stressed, as her parents were relatively old and high-risk. "Health is everything in life; without health, everything is meaningless," she said, wistfully. "Our time is so short. We have to look after ourselves and each other." Our VE helped us empathize with each other, reminding us that our hardships are shared. We discussed how structural inequities determine who has access to what, when, how, and how much. We also unpacked and took stock of our privileges, reflecting on ways we may have benefited

through unwitting alignments with systems of power. For instance, as a voluntary, Savarna migrant, I had better access to healthcare and mobility during the pandemic than involuntary domestic migrant workers in India.

Centering Sisterhood and Friendship through VE

As our VE progressed, Züleyha and I often referred to each other as "penpals" and "friends," suggesting growing warmth, companionship, familiarity, and camaraderie. Our relationship transformed from an obligatory academic exchange-ship to a sisterly friendship. Sisterhood, according to hooks (2015), rejects shallow and superficial notions of bonding to center bonding that shares resources and strengths. Sisterhood is a lifelong journey (Reynolds et al., 2021) that breaks through ideologies of neoliberal, white feminism (hooks, 2015), affirming all women—including and especially women of color—as collective knowers, whose different epistemologies, ontologies, and lived realities are accounted for (De Sousa & Varcoe, 2021). As Züleyha and I delved into our stories about our transcultural, transnational, and translingual experiences, we stumbled upon common ground in the challenges and triumphs we faced as women immigrants in our respective educational contexts. For instance, we both observed that we occupied liminal spaces, as international students, which on the one hand, granted us the freedoms to discover new cultures/countries and new versions of ourselves, but on the other hand, also pressured us to conform to the norms of new societies into which we were transitioning. "We have a double perspective on the world," she said brightly, implying an interstitial positionality.

In a learning environment that can be individualizing, soul-stripping, and competitive (Grant et al., 2023; Reynolds et al., 2021), Züleyha and I rejected the dominant ideologies of self-interest, self-promotion, and individualism to center critical sisterhood, allyship, and care in our VE. While we operated within a quantification paradigm, submitting assignments to Blackboard in return for grades and course progress, many of our insights surpassed the limitations of quantification. While our professors offered us guideposts and laid out parameters for our discussions, Züleyha and I let our discussions flow organically from these prompts, enriching our understandings beyond a structured academic framework. Our relationship also centered mentorship, as I am older than Züleyha and felt responsible in providing her with guidance. Züleyha wished to pursue higher education in the West, partly why she was keen to improve her English fluency through this VE. On more than one occasion, she asked for my advice on how best to prepare for Western higher education. I shared my learnings, highlighting the educational and professional opportunities I was afforded in the U.S., while also remaining transparent about the exclusions I had faced as a female student of color and early-career scholar.

I provided Züleyha with suggestions to improve her spoken English (like watching English television shows with subtitles on); English language learning was a core course outcome for Züleyha. However, I was careful not to suggest that being intermediate in English is necessarily a deficiency. ESL students, non-'native' speakers, and international students often experience a sense of deficit, otherness, and inferiority as a result of English hegemony in higher education (Tavares, 2023), and I did not want Züleyha to view herself as operating from a position of lack. I admired her familiarity with multiple linguistic and semiotic repertoires, and I did not want our VE to carry a deficit remedial English-learner mindset but strove to frame our multilingualisms as strengths. Together, Züleyha and I critically reflected on the richness and complexities of our multilingual language journeys and the factors that influence dispositions towards language and language learning in our cultures. These explorations not only broadened our linguistic horizons but also deepened our appreciation for the role language plays in shaping and being shaped by social, historical, and political contexts. Our sisterhood promoted transnational, multilingual, and intercultural thriving (Grant et al., 2023). Züleyha said:

> That we can meet after one point five years like this, it's a really, really super thing for me. That I know you, I can contact you, talk to you in a relaxed way [...] and have a new person in my life, who is from another culture, these reasons are really, really important for participating in exchange programs. What is important [in an English-learning VE] is not just improving your English but improving your friendships.

Limitations

Despite the affordances provided by VE, Züleyha and I faced challenges which are important to highlight, to problematize narratives that uncritically glorify VEs in internationalization. The most significant limitation, particularly for Züleyha, "was the difference of the hours," eight hours. This time gap often made it inconvenient to 'meet' at ease. While it was easier for me to attend our Zoom meetings during my mornings, Züleyha had to set time aside during her evenings. After Züleyha's classes transitioned online, she took up a full-time job to supplement her income. If our meetings took place on weekdays, they ended up extending her workday. Time gaps between partners' time zones can pose a significant logistical hurdle for students in VEs (Jaya & Saputri, 2023) and need to be considered by VE educators, when considering whether exchanges will be synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination of the two (Healy & Kennedy, 2020). There were times when Züleyha or I had scheduling conflicts which had to be worked around, or responsibilities that compromised real-time interactions, fragmenting our exchange and impeding the spontaneity of our interactions.

The second limitation of our VE was missing out on the corporal, sensory, and immersive aspects of an on-site exchange. Züleyha reiterated, on multiple occasions, that she would have liked to meet me in person. "I wish I could show you around Turkey and Turkmenistan," she said. I, too, felt that our VE could never truly replicate in-person conversations, and at times I wished I were sitting in a brick-and-mortar cafeteria with Züleyha, having coffee. I yearned to visit the town squares of Turkey, taste local dishes, participate in local gatherings, take photos of Turkey's architectural wonders for my Instagram, and interact with locals. Students who missed or were sent away early from canceled study abroad programs during the pandemic lost out on embodied dimensions of overseas experiences, such as hands-on internships, site visits, volunteering work, in-person research projects, cuisine tasting, and nightlife (Di Giovine & de Uriarte, 2020). According to Liu et al. (2022), the personal cultural immersions and associated embodied learnings of complex nuanced cultural instances cannot be replaced by virtual programming. Keeping these realities in mind, Züleyha and I pursued our VE not as a stand-in for an in-person exchange but as a unique modality of knowledge exchange.

The third limitation of our VE, particularly in the context of critical internationalization/CVE, was not having critical-enough conversations. Social justice is not a simple, technical process achieved through calculative rationality, as is often assumed within internationalization's neoliberal paradigm. Change requires grappling with the complexities of the social world and the attendant complexities of achieving educational and social change (McArthur, 2010). Züleyha and I treated our VE primarily as an exchange geared toward improving our language skills, building global competence, getting good grades, and improving our academic and professional portfolios. Only sometimes did we question power dynamics, and we particularly avoided discussing power imbalances within the Global South. We skirted around difficult and uncomfortable conversations, like the rise of religious and ethnic neonationalisms and neoliberal populisms in Central and South Asia, or religious and ethnic persecutions and censorships by illiberal governments. Züleyha suggested steering clear of "politics," and I adhered. Also, our professor did not design our course as critical, so any criticality we introduced went over and above course requirements. While it is crucial to push past superficiality toward genuine cultural learning (Pitts & Brooks, 2017), there remain challenges to confronting our own complicities and silences.

Finally, there were times when our technologies failed, our cameras froze, our Wi-Fi connections were disrupted, and our meetings had to be postponed. Poor Wi-Fi connections, outdated devices, and other technological challenges can make VE engagement hard, if not impossible (Lanham & Voskuil, 2022). Züleyha and I were fortunate, overall, to have the finances to afford internet bandwidth, the digital literacies to navigate technological hurdles, and the physical learning spaces (such as a workstation or desk) to carry out our VE. Technological glitches and non-access, while present, were temporary and easily fixable, not posing any significant barrier to our exchange. However, students from less privileged backgrounds may not have access to the tools, equipment, timetables, learning spaces, or even knowhow required for fruitful VE interactions (Filius et al., 2019). Not everyone's home is as camera-ready as others' (Bali et al., 2021). Moreover, Züleyha and I were relatively unburdened and unencumbered by familial duties, in the sense that neither of us were parents to children or caring for sick or elderly relatives. In fact, my husband worked full-time from home, providing me with opportunities to free up my time for my VE. But everyone is not so privileged; family conditions, including child/parent care responsibilities and family health, may be barriers for some students in VEs (Cahapay, 2020)

Conclusion and Discussion

Engaging in a VE program during the spring of 2022, amidst the challenges to health and mobility posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, provided Züleyha and me with a profound lesson in shared humanity, sisterhood, and friendship. Harnessing our capacities as collective knowers and drawing from our respective knowledge banks and histories, together we embarked on a life-changing journey of intercultural exchange. We learned about the vibrant and thriving spiritual, cultural, religious, and intellectual traditions of our respective countries (Turkmenistan and India). We also learned about our international student journeys in Turkey and the U.S. respectively. Given our experiences in different transnational trajectories that involved multiple discourses, we brought to the VE table many different strands of thought. Along the way of our VE, we dispelled misconceptions and stereotypes about race and gender in the Global South, confronted and contested Islamophobia, and saw humanity in each other. We also built confidence in our identities as Asian women—situated along different positionalities (Züleyha, a Turkmen Muslim, and I, an Indian Hindu)—by recognizing our shared histories, struggles, and aspirations as migrant women of color. Global South women are often portrayed as homogenous, static, and lacking in agency (Mohanty, 1984), but our VE helped us understand the nuances of our subjecthoods.

Our VE also allowed us to test, to some extent, the confines of neoliberal, normative intercultural exchange. By tapping into the disruptive power of digital third spaces, we were able to write, think, meet, collaborate, ideate, and produce at our own pace. We prioritized our moral, social, and emotional growth, engaging in knowledge production and sharing beyond measurable markers of intercultural development. We recognized that, despite our diverse backgrounds, we shared common hopes, fears, and dreams, particularly dreams to pursue higher education and build meaningful lives for ourselves and our communities. Much like our classmates in this VE, both Züleyha and I grew in cultural self-awareness and global

perspectival expansion (Fischer, 2022). We honed our spoken English skills while simultaneously thinking critically about hegemonic norms of language and learning and asserting pride in our multilingualisms. The future of internationalization requires an approach that demystifies faraway places and focuses on enriching international interventions without fetishizing embodiment (Barkin, 2021). This VE helped me 'travel' to Turkey, without the costs or the carbon footprint involved, and to do so through the stories and personal narratives of my international partner. Turkey is no longer a faraway and foreign place shrouded in oriental lore, but a familiar place with Züleyha's face.

Our experiences suggest that VE should be seriously contemplated by higher education leaders, not as a stopgap for study abroad but rather as a unique and promising form of mobility, in and of itself. VE might potentially overcome some of the traditional barriers and exclusions that have historically existed in internationalization by reaching a wider and more diverse range of participants, particularly those from the Global South, and facilitating exchanges of novel ideas and curricular materials. However, current VEs still operate from a modern, capitalist paradigm, and there is need for more critically oriented, decolonial VEs that move away from exploitative, extractive, or hierarchical partnerships toward fair, co-creative, and equitable partnerships that honor the needs and knowledges of Global South learners. There is also a need to decolonize definitions, categorizations, and philosophical underpinnings of VE, and to include students in these conversations. The landscape of VE is rapidly evolving, and scholars are recommended to continue to map its trajectory. We also recommend future VE scholarship exploring ways to destratify knowledge exchanges, share resources, and focus on the needs of Global South partners. Centering sisterhood in VEs could enable a shift from a competitive to a cooperative paradigm, nurturing mutual empowerment among partner institutions, facilitators, and students.

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Bhavika Sicka, PhD, is an international student from India pursuing a doctoral degree in Higher Education at Old Dominion University, USA. She holds a BA in English from Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University, and an MFA from Old Dominion University. Bhavika serves as the Professional Development Co-Chair for the Graduate Student Committee of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE). She works as an Adjunct Professor of English and a research advisor for TRiO's Student Support Services and McNair Scholars Programs. Her research applies Third World feminist and de/postcolonial theories toward advancing equity in higher education. Email: bsicka@odu.edu

Arzu Atajanova, BA, is an international student from Turkmenistan pursuing an undergraduate degree in English at Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University in Turkey. A graduate of Mary Secondary School 2, she speaks Turkmen, Russian, Turkish, English, and moderate German. Arzu is passionate about learning new languages and approaches her higher education journey with patience and ambition, guided by her personal motto to 'dream, believe, and achieve.'