Rethinking Oceanic-Pacific Methods of Data Collection During COVID-19: Insights From the Field

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted research regarding data collection methods during lockdowns and border closures. Consequently, online methods have become the present-day benchmark. This article shares our experiences adapting to COVID-19 while conducting focus groups and online interviews. Guided by the Samoan methodology Teu le va that recognises the special relationships between people from a Samoan context and the Talanoa method of storytelling of the Pacific people, we provide insights concerning the practical and cultural challenges of collecting data during lockdowns that strengthened the continuation and completion of the project. We demonstrate the importance of flexibility in the research design regarding apprehension, health, and research in New Zealand. We highlight the value of a multifaceted approach to recruiting participants, incorporating the services of Pacific leaders, and utilising telephone calls and letter writing for participants without digital access. Furthermore, we reveal an unexpected side-effect of COVID-19 regarding the ‘Pacific digital divide.’ The paper concludes with several avenues for future research on redesigning data collection methods during COVID-19.

Keywords
Ethics, indigenous methodologies, pacific people, qualitative research, research design

Introduction

COVID-19 brought unprecedented change and disruption in many parts of our lives as we face uncertainty in these challenging times. Consequently, qualitative researchers and research had to adapt to the constraints of social distancing measures and public health mandates that limited the continuation of research and prioritised participants’ and researchers’ safety (Rahman et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021; Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020). Qualitative research methodologies play a significant role in finding out how people make sense of the world and events by exploring various factors, intentions, actions, perceptions and experiences of phenomena, social interactions, and contextual circumstances (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Similarly, indigenous, and Oceanic-Pacific researchers seek to understand sense-making through indigenous peoples’ perceptions and experiences using traditional and ethnic-specific knowledge and methods (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001; Ofe-Grant, 2018; Spiller et al., 2011).

Due to the pandemic, many qualitative researchers had to transition from face-to-face to other forms of data collection that adhered to mandatory safety measures, such as online platforms (Halliday et al., 2021; Webber-Ritchey et al., 2021). Consequently, we had to rethink our data collection approach for this phenomenological study to maintain ethical and safety standards, continue the project, and demonstrate respect and cultural sensitivity to the Pacific people as participants. This paper shares our experiences of the challenges and highlights of modifying focus groups and interviews during COVID-19. Drawing from our experiences, we recommend alternative pathways as a way forward for other researchers studying...
Pacific people during times of crisis. We propose that researchers incorporate a multifaceted approach to data collection methods by adding more flexibility and reflexivity to their research design and developing a contingency plan.

This study adds to the growing body of literature on conducting qualitative research during the COVID-19 pandemic and the special attention given to methods when switching research efforts from face-to-face to digital online platforms (Archibald et al., 2019; Halliday et al., 2021; Lobe et al., 2020; Oliffe et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021; Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020). We share the challenges and advantages of modifying our approach regarding Pacific people and building rapport from a distance. We contribute to the research regarding the ‘digital divide’ that concerns marginalised groups and limited access to digital telecommunication and devices (Cullen, 2002; Ioane et al., 2021). Finally, this paper honours and promotes the escalating articulation of indigenous traditional methods and studies regarding Oceanic-Pacific people (Love, 2019; Ofe-Grant, 2018; Smith, 2012; Staniland et al., 2021). These methods celebrate indigenous wisdom and provide a channel of voice to participants that are not often studied in contemporary research.

This paper is organised as follows: we discuss the logistical and practical issues of organising focus groups and interviews during COVID-19 and the necessary measures for providing safer alternatives. We provide a historical background concerning Pacific people and New Zealand to provide context about apprehension, mistrust and misinformation that could impede data collection efforts. We detail our multifaceted approach to recruiting participants during the lockdowns and border constraints. Within this multifaceted approach, networks of relationships, radio and social media platforms were critical in recruiting participants, including Pacific networks, community leaders and the extended family. Next, a discussion of the mechanics of focus groups highlights Teu le va approach of Pacific styles of facilitation and coordination in garnering rich talanoa (discussions). Finally, we highlight some of the advantages and challenges of conducting online interviews and reintroduce other traditional methods such as the telephone and letter writing that are not often utilised or promoted in qualitative interviews.

Research Context

We situate our discussion of qualitative data collection methods during COVID-19 in a research project exploring low levels of literacy and numeracy in the general population of New Zealand with a focus on Māori (Indigenous people of New Zealand) and Pacific communities. Part of a five-year mixed-methods project, our overarching aim is to provide an empirical base for improved public policy delivery and effective interventions to improve the life-course trajectories and socioeconomic outcomes for people living with low literacy and numeracy skills. The quantitative component measures the relationship between skills and socioeconomic outcomes at the population level to identify patterns relating to risk and protective factors for low skills. To complement the statistical generalities, the qualitative component utilises focus groups and online interviews to provide in-depth stories that detail the lived experiences of Māori and Pacific people living with low literacy and numeracy skills.

Focus groups are a commonly used qualitative research method that facilitates discussions from multiple participants in a group setting, conducted by a facilitator at a predetermined venue and time (Morgan, 1998). There are numerous guidelines on conducting focus groups that typically involve creating informality, facilitating interactions among the group members, and eliciting valuable and varied perspectives (Antaki, 2000; Puchta & Potter, 2004). A schedule of questions is provided to steer the conversation toward a specific topic garnering numerous perspectives and insights from the participants (Morgan, 1998). Facilitators must maintain the topic of discussion and ensure equitable time among the participants (Sobrepeerez, 2008).

A diverse set of responses is a fast way of gathering data due to many participants building on each other’s comments. Thus, creating a richer yield of data in a short time (Seidman, 2006). Online interviews offer flexibility regarding interview times, location, and a less formal discussion environment (Cater, 2011). Hence, this study offered online interviews as a safety measure for participants and the research team and provided valuable avenues for qualitative research in the face of social distancing measures (Lobe et al., 2020).

Guided by the Samoan Teu le va methodology (Anae et al., 2009) that recognises the special relationships and connections between people from a Samoan context, and utilising the Tongan Talanoa (Vaioleti, 2006) method of oral storytelling enhanced the approach of the focus groups and online interviews with spiritual, cultural, and communal foundations of the Pacific. Talanoa is situated in phenomenology and is commonly used in Pacific qualitative research (Otunuku, 2011; Vaka et al., 2016). Talanoa translates as dialogue, discussion, open talk, informal and formal chat (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012; Halapua, 2002) that encourages conversations founded in mo’oni (purity, absolute, and authentic) and weaves stories, emotions, and theorising that produce informative knowledge and sense-making for addressing Pacific issues (Vaioleti, 2006).

Pacific People in New Zealand

Pacific people are one of New Zealand’s most established migrant communities and account for 8.1 per cent (381,642 people) of the total population. The term ‘Pacific people’, in the broadest sense describes indigenous individuals whose ancestry and heritage originate from the South Pacific and include the seven Polynesian islands of Niue, the Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji, Tuvalu, Samoa, and Tokelau, and the lesser islands of Rotuma and Kiribati (StatsNZ, 2018). Despite the
heterogeneity of Pacific people, there are similar fundamental institutions such as the family, collective worldview, spirituality, and value systems (Efi, 2003). Many cultures of the Pacific have almost identical and holistic ‘ways of doing and seeing’ whereby relationships are interlinked between the living and the dead, nature and the environment, and the tangible and intangible that work together in harmony and balance (Fairbairn-Dunlop et al., 2014). Although there are numerous commonalities shared between the Pacific nations, there are unique characteristics that distinguish each island such as status, power structures, and obligations (Ministry for Pacific People, 2018a).

At least 60 per cent of Pacific people are born in New Zealand and have strong affiliations with their church, island of origin, and the aiga (family) (Ministry for Pacific People, 2018b). Pacific people are relatively young compared to other New Zealand ethnic groups, with an average age of 22 years. However, more Pacific people live in overcrowded and low-quality homes, earn the lowest median income, experience poorer access to healthcare and are likely to suffer from poverty, illnesses, economic recessions, and pandemics (Goodyear & Fabian, 2014). Pacific people, alongside Māori, experience marginalisation and live with low literacy and numeracy in New Zealand (StatsNZ, 2018).

This research study seeks to understand what it feels like to live with low skills as a Pacific person in New Zealand. We want to find out the barriers that limit engagement of skills development, the literacy and numeracy programmes offered, the cultural enablers that support learning and key strategies that have proved successful for Pacific people. Our research team consisted of Pacific females, the lead researcher (Samoa) and eight research assistants (three Samoans, two Tongans, and three Cook Islands Māori). The research design, purpose, and methods aim to enhance Pacific people’s outcomes based on the data captured in this study. Toward that end, our research design incorporated Pacific philosophies and methods. Ethical approval was given by the Auckland University of Technology Research Ethics committee (AUTEC Reference 20/342). However, our research plans and efforts were complicated when COVID-19 entered New Zealand.

The Wellington focus group sessions were held at a Māori organisation’s conference room in an industrial area, near a shopping mall, where more Pacific people were situated. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 lockdown in Auckland (August 17 to December 3, 2021) postponed our plans to conduct focus group sessions in Christchurch and Dunedin.

**Recruitment**

Our recruitment strategies included posting an advertisement on social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn that was used only to distribute the advertisement without engaging or tracking potential participants. Interested participants were advised to contact the research team via email or mobile phone. Snowballing was used where consenting participants assisted with further recruitment by offering names of participants or sharing the project advertisement with others. Interestingly, a few participants voluntarily contacted others about the research study after a positive experience or supplied a list of names within their networks. To extend the reach of our recruitment participants, we contacted Pacific-based organisations in Auckland and Wellington and discussed the purpose and value of the study for advancing Pacific outcomes. Our advertisement was posted on a few government websites, and we presented our study at formal meetings. The strategies of participant referrals, community outreach and Pacific-based organisations did involve additional time to organise meetings and build rapport in the Pacific communities.

Initial recruitment in Auckland progressed well and resulted in 80 consenting participants attending two large focus group sessions. However, the Auckland lockdowns (14-17 February and 28 February to 7 March) limited our recruitment endeavours for the Wellington focus groups, where we could not physically leave Auckland to recruit participants. For this reason, our only option was to recruit entirely online via emails, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and mobile calls.

At the time, we realised that the number of consenting Wellington participants was too low, so we had to rethink our recruitment strategies considering COVID-19 restrictions, our research goals and commitments, and project completion. As a result, we concentrated our efforts on making connections with Pacific reverends, leaders, and chiefs from within our networks, such as Matai (Samoan Chief) and Ariki (Cook Islands Chief), to assist in attracting Pacific participants to our focus groups. Furthermore, the lead author of this paper is a female Matai who contacted Pacific colleagues from ‘closed’ and ‘hard to reach’ Pacific communities (Ministry of Social Development, 2017, pp. 13, 40) to help with sourcing participants. These strategies were helpful and enabled us to recruit a more diverse sample of participants.

A Pacific-based radio station heard about our research study and offered free timeslots for an interview with the lead researcher to discuss the study and provided ‘on-air’ advertisements for the Wellington focus groups. These advertisements

**Method**

**Location**

Originally, we intended to recruit up to 200 Pacific participants, at least 50 participants from each location in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin who work or previously worked in New Zealand, to participate in our focus group sessions. These locations were pivotal for recruitment and data collection due to the many Pacific people living and working in these areas (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2019). The first Auckland focus group session was held at a Pacific business centre, and the other at a university lecture room in Manukau City, South Auckland.
were posted and played at peak morning and evening times. Moreover, other Pacific people reposted our recruitment advertisement on several personal and online community sites: LinkedIn, Pacific Communities Noticeboards, University Pacific networks, various Skills and Training sites, Pacific conferences, and government websites.

**Focus groups**

Initially, we planned to meet with the participants prior to the focus groups or online interviews as part of our commitment to the *Teu le va* framework, that is, to build trust and form relationships to set the appropriate context for *talanoa* (Vaiolo, 2006) and to ensure that the participants understood the purpose of the research study, their role, and confidentiality. We could not physically meet with the Wellington participants, so we anticipated that our relationships would be strengthened once we met in-person at the focus group sessions. We obtained the participants’ demographic information and consent forms either in-person or via email prior to the interviews.

The focus group sessions commenced with a prayer from a Pacific reverend. Then, we formally welcomed the participants and acknowledged individuals with an honorific church or cultural title as a mark of respect regarding Pacific hierarchy, social institutions and *va* (spatial relations). We introduced the research team and briefly discussed the research study before breaking into smaller focus groups of about five to seven participants. Each group was assigned to a researcher in a designated area. An icebreaker used in the focus groups was formal introductions and sharing family names, islands, and villages to connect Pacific ancestry via genealogy, kinship, and beliefs. Furthermore, we employed the *talanoa* method of open discussions and storytelling to enhance and guide our focus groups. At the end of the sessions, each participant received a Countdown gift card voucher and was invited to share in a Pacific catered lunch to recognise their knowledge, time, and efforts to support the research study.

Lunch consisted of Pacific cuisine such as *sapa sui* (Samoa chop suey), *ika mata* (Cook Island raw fish with coconut cream), *banana poke* (Cook Island banana dessert) and *rukau* (Tongan roasted taro leaves in coconut cream) and other tasty Pacific dishes. We anticipated that using a Pacific catering service at each focus group session might entice Pacific participants to join our focus group sessions and support Pacific issues.

**Online interviews**

Our initial approach considered COVID-19 and AUTEC ethics protocol regarding possible lock downs, and therefore, we offered online interviews using Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and telephone calls as alternatives to in-person focus groups. Following consent and demographics submission, two research team members organised mutually convenient dates and times for interviews with the online participants. They received an outline of questions regarding their literacy and numeracy experiences and observations before their interview. At the commencement of the interview, we reminded them how the session would be delivered. We endeavoured to make the interviews as comfortable as possible to allow the natural flow of *talanoa* and *va* in the conversations. They, too, received an online voucher as a token of appreciation for their contribution to the research study.

**Findings**

**Apprehension.** Very early into the recruitment phase, we noticed a growing number of Pacific people who outrightly expressed that they did not want to congregate with other Pacific people at churches, large halls, or business conference rooms due to fear of COVID-19. We understood, given the present situation of COVID-19 and the exposure that could happen in any circumstance. For this reason, we expected that a few participants would prefer in-person or online interviews but had not anticipated 24 per cent (or 37 of 154 individuals) choosing individual interviews at their homes, work offices, or online.

**Multifaceted Recruitment Approach**

To compensate for the lack of face-to-face recruitment, we undertook a multifaceted approach to recruiting participants for data collection. The research team reviewed their internal networks and conversed with family, friends, and work colleagues to advertise the upcoming Wellington focus group sessions. As a result of our diligence and determination, and with assistance from the Pacific communities, radio, and social media platforms, we recruited 154 participants from all seven Pacific nations (Niue, Tonga, Tokelau, Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji, and Tuvalu) and some individuals from the smaller islands of Kiribati and Rotuma. The diverse range of Pacific ethnicities as participants alone was a milestone achievement (particularly given COVID-19 constraints) and rare in academic research regarding Pacific people.

**Conduct, Prayers, and Reciprocity.** We infused Pacific cultural values and institutions such as *fa’a aloalo* (respect) and loto fa’a amaualalo (lowering one’s position before others) (Efi, 2007) regarding our conduct in facilitation at the focus group sessions. The emphasis of fa’a aloalo and loto fa’a amaualalo is humility and enacted in the way Pacific people behave towards others, particularly the elderly and leaders in the community (Efi, 2007; Va’a, 2001). Therefore, as researchers of Pacific descent, we were mindful of the way we walked, spoke, our dress code, and eye contact as a mark of respect to the participants and keeping with the *va*. We found that many participants commented on our conduct and were humbled by our cultural approach to conducting the focus group sessions.
As expected, many participants at the focus group sessions enjoyed the lunch offering and commented on the delicious assortment of Pacific cuisine. Several participants reminisced on family dinners and events in New Zealand and the Pacific islands. Furthermore, we found that numerous participants enjoyed eating their meals while forming new relationships with other participants in the room and tended to share more stories regarding their experiences of literacy and numeracy. The vibe of the feast was one of love and community in that we all shared the same meal and the goal of contributing to research that draws on Pacific values and institutions to find solutions.

**Online Distraction and Interruptions**

We found that at the beginning of the online interviews’ ‘distraction’ was noticeable. For example, children and other family members tended to ‘pop’ into the background of the Zoom or Microsoft Teams sessions. Rather than seem bothered about this disruption, we encouraged the participants to allow curious children to sit with their parents during the conversation and advised other family members to consider having an interview (with consent) given their interest in Pacific issues. Interestingly, a few participants appeared to ‘notice’ themselves and started rearranging their clothes and hair, tidying their desk area, and changing their desktop background screen. Furthermore, mobile phones or email notifications were heard where some participants would ‘disappear’ to respond to these calls. Upon their return, exchanges were shared about the interruptions where some participants thanked the researchers for ‘listening’ and ‘being there.’

**Digital Skills**

Given the ‘Pacific people Digital Divide’ (Department of Internal Affairs, 2020) and initiatives targeting the inequity that Pacific people experience, another unexpected finding concerned the number of participants that had access to and knew how to use digital apps such as WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom and Microsoft Teams for online interviews, scheduling interview meetings and sending messages. All participants used laptops and mobiles for their online interviews with the help of younger family members. Furthermore, we received mobile texts from interested participants who responded to our online advertisements. This finding indicates that some Pacific people have access to digital technologies, particularly in Auckland.

**Letter Writing and Telephone Calls**

Surprisingly, two other methods were used to conduct interviews during the lockdowns and initiated by the older Pacific participants (aged 70–92 years) who lived in rural Auckland and Wellington. These participants preferred letter writing and telephone calls rather than meeting in-person or online. Here, we discovered that the older generation tended to converse at length either on the phone or penned on paper in both English and Samoan languages. One of the phone participants had not realised that their conversation lasted two hours. We anticipated formally meeting these individuals in-person once New Zealand was out of lockdown to acknowledge their valuable contributions as aligned to the va and respect in the Pacific hierarchy.

**Discussion**

This paper sought to identify the most salient practical and cultural challenges faced when carrying out focus group sessions and online interviews with Pacific people during the COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand. While we had not anticipated conducting many online interviews, COVID-19 restrictions forced us to quickly adapt to Microsoft Teams or Zoom platforms for online data collection. Our experiences indicate that it is possible to continue and complete rigorous and safe qualitative research with flexibility in the research design and cultural sensitivity regarding vulnerable populations. The following discussion will draw attention to these insights and offer recommendations for future research and inform other researchers in similar circumstances.

One of the first barriers we encountered was apprehension, where many Pacific people were reluctant to gather with other Pacific people at churches, halls, and other public venues. These reactions were somewhat unexpected, given that Pacific cultural practices and protocol promote collectivism for support, collegiality and the greater good (Efi, 2003; Ioane et al., 2021). Upon reflection, some insights regarding contextual, historical events might shed some light on understanding the hesitation.

There is an ongoing narrative of mistrust, apprehension, and fear from the Pacific people regarding New Zealand, the New Zealand government, policies, and healthcare. These feelings have manifested due to continuous historical racial oppression where Pacific people have been systematically ‘blamed’ for various health, socio-political and economic situations and then racially ‘shamed’ in the process (Ofe-Grant, in pressOfe-Grant). Having said that, a deeper search into historical events regarding global disease among Pacific and Western communities reveals that the Pacific people are the most vulnerable during a pandemic. As an example, the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918-19 swept into the South Pacific islands such as Samoa, Fiji and Tahiti and killed substantial proportions of the total population (Tomkin, 1992). Samoa’s morbidity rate, for example, was recorded at 22 per cent of the Samoan population within weeks (Rice, 2020), where the source of the disease was traced to the New Zealand colonial administration of Western Samoa and the movements of the New Zealand steamship Talune that docked into the Samoa harbour with infected passengers without quarantine procedures (Tomkin, 1992). Rather than take full
Responsibility for the chaos and death, the New Zealand colonial administrators first sought medical assistance for New Zealand personnel and then blamed Samoans for having ‘native superstition’ and being ‘childlike and immature’ regarding death and curative medical assistance (Hiery, 1995; Tomkin, 1992, p.193, 196).

Furthermore, the infamous era of the Dawn Raids, where more Pacific people (mostly Samoans and Tongans) were deported as ‘overstayers’ exceeding their visa permits (New Zealand Race Relations, 1986; Spoonley, 1988). White overstayers from Britain, North America and Europe made up the bulk of the overstayers, while brown Pacific migrants constituted most of the deportations (de Bres et al., 1974; New Zealand Race Relations, 1986). At the time, the New Zealand government and the media fuelled the stigma that ‘Pacific Islanders’ were responsible for the economic recession (Earle, 1995). Accordingly, the Pacific people lived in fear, knowing that many New Zealanders felt animosity toward them (Field, 2006).

Regarding recent healthcare and treatment, Pacific people comprised more than 60 per cent of the New Zealand measles cases in 2019 that affected more than 2000 children and young people, particularly in Auckland, where over two-thirds came from Counties Manukau, South Auckland (Turner, 2019). Similarly, the COVID-19 outbreak in August 2020, where Auckland became the epicentre, had a higher proportion of cases among Pacific people (Steyn et al., 2021). At the time, misinformation and rumours from social media condemned a Pacific family for spreading the virus, leading to racial hostility, and vitriolising against the Pacific people (Biddle et al., 2020). A year later, during the Delta outbreak in Auckland, Pacific people were again held responsible for new cases where a Pacific church and churchgoers were identified as the outbreak’s centre and the reason for the lockdown (Te Wake, 2021).

This century-long history of socio-political, economic, and healthcare bias against Pacific people led to illness and death such that Pacific people are suspicious, mistrusting, and doubtful regarding how misinformation, policies, and treatment are enacted and disseminated in impoverished areas, communities, and populations. Therefore, meeting with other Pacific people in public settings during a dangerous and life-threatening pandemic, and where there is already a climate of spoken and unspoken animosity towards Pacific people, may explain some hesitation in participating in focus groups at large halls with other Pacific people. Despite the challenges, it is noteworthy to mention that both participants and the research team were committed to resolving these issues due to the importance of enhancing outcomes for Pacific people and low levels of literacy and numeracy, and the valuable insights that this project can offer to practitioners, researchers, and Pacific people.

The benefits of having a multifaceted approach to recruiting Pacific people or any population during a pandemic support previous reports (Halliday et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021) and should be viewed as an evolving and progressive approach given the volatile state of the world that continues to disrupt our lives with an ever-changing set of challenges. We are still learning what works and does not regarding recruitment strategies during a pandemic. From our experience, we had not anticipated that recruiting participants would be too difficult, given the Pacific diaspora in the main cities of New Zealand (our target locations), our wide networks that include the aigaapotopoto (extended family) (Gershon, 2012) and the collectivist orientation of Pacific people (Anae, 1998). Even so, the nationwide lockdowns forced us to rethink the mode by which our recruitment endeavours were administered. That said, the most successful form of recruitment for the Wellington focus groups was almost entirely digital via emails, social media platforms, texting, and phone calls. Of course, the constant communication between the research team and participants strengthened the recruitment capability.

Our experience confirmed that utilising ‘divine interventions’ and ‘chiefly connections’ such as Pacific reverends and leaders in the community, Matai and Ariki are powerful resources to engage and recruit Pacific participants (Franco, 1991). Pacific cultural and church leaders are well-positioned to identify participants, introduce and support Pacific issues and initiatives and source referrals. Like other significant projects involving Pacific-based themes, working with church and community leaders is instrumental for building culturally appropriate programmes, Pacific engagement and disseminating critical information (Boyd-Ball, 2003; Ministry of Health, 2021). As such, we recommend that Pacific-based research consider approaching and working alongside key Pacific leaders to connect research outcomes and delivery methods for the Pacific people.

One concern with involving key Pacific leaders for recruitment is the possibility of coercion, where some participants might feel that they have no choice but to take part in the study to avoid breaking the va or relationship with their leader. When using this recruitment modality, we recommend careful consideration regarding the design protocol and informed consent to reduce the possibility of coercion. We talked with our participants to ensure that they were fully aware of their responsibilities and participant confidentiality. Furthermore, we reminded them that their decision to participate would not affect their relationship with their pastor or Matai and that they do have the option to pull out of the study.

Our links and connections to ‘closed’ Pacific communities such as Tokelau, Tuvalu, Fiji, and Niue who tend to be excluded in mainstream society and are challenging to identify, let alone recruit as research participants (Ministry of Health, 2021; Ministry of Social Development, 2017) were crucial for recruiting a diverse sample of Pacific participants. This unique cohort of underrepresented minority Pacific people and their experiences may contain additional clues and insights regarding the barriers to accessing and retaining literacy and numeracy skills. Initiating communication with someone they know might encourage participants to feel more comfortable having an interview with another Pacific researcher referred to
them by their contact. Drawing from our experience, we strongly recommend that Pacific research involve researchers of Pacific descent familiar with several Pacific languages, protocols, customs, and networks.

We followed cultural protocol in our focus group sessions by utilising prayers. The cultural practice of prayers at events is commonplace among Pacific people and indigenes (Ioane et al., 2021). About 73 per cent of Pacific people are religious and predominantly Christian (Stats New Zealand, 2018). Therefore, including prayers and other religious and spiritual practices at Pacific events makes sense. Moreover, the inclusion of religiosity and spirituality in the research design contextualises the message that enhanced literacy and numeracy lead to better wellbeing for the Pacific people and draws on a religious context to reinforce this message. Indeed, culturally safe research with Pacific people should consider including religiosity and spirituality to enable full and beneficial participation (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2018b).

We anticipated that our focus group sessions had to incorporate traditional Pacific food as an incentive to engage in the talanoa and add Pacific cultural value to the sessions (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2018b). Food has essential social, spiritual, and cultural roles in all Pacific communities (Rush, 2009) and connects people to their identity and land (Anae et al., 2009). Offering food at special Pacific events symbolises reciprocity and commitment to building, supporting, and nurturing relationships (Barnett, 2007). When presented as a gift, food may be perceived as a token of goodwill (Cowley et al., 2004). We recommend that Pacific-themed research projects include traditional island food as part of their research plan to build rapport with participants and give back to the Pacific communities (Barnett, 2007).

We offered online interviews via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. However, the home (and sometimes work) location mitigates many factors such as stressful environments, cost of travel and conflicting family and time schedules (Archibald et al., 2019). The advantages of being interviewed at home were evident through the participants’ open and free-flowing talanoa, where some expressed that talking felt like a ‘cathartic’ experience. Other studies suggest that sometimes research participants report a sense of catharsis in the interviewing process due to releasing thoughts, reflections, and perspectives that might have been ‘hidden away’ or unimportant at the time (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006). Others remarked that they were surprised at the length of their talanoa and thanked us for the opportunity. These feelings could suggest that the participants experienced comfort and a sense of empowerment (Darra, 2008) in that they were expressing their views and the beneficial, valuable input for others (Rowling, 1999; Simmons, 2007); in this case, the next Pacific generation. That said, we did experience several issues related to conducting online interviews with participants and the research team working from home, which we will discuss next.

Distraction during online interviews is a reminder that Zoom and Team interviews can be fraught with interruptions, disturbances and disruptions that are sometimes beyond our control and yet, helpful in building rapport (Lobe et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2021). We noticed that some participants would apologise profusely for these interruptions and comment about the therapeutic value of being interviewed. Although we were not there to impose on participants’ personal lives, these sentiments may result from social isolation and working from home, where conversations with others face-to-face are restricted (Muller et al., 2021).

Participants seeing themselves on screen and feeling disoriented is a phenomenon found in other qualitative research that uses online interviews (Oates, 2015; Oliffe et al., 2019). Additionally, we had to reconcile being seen and exposing our family and home environments to ‘strangers’ as part of the interview process (Mirick & Wladowski, 2019). For example, a rooster that belonged to one of the researchers would suddenly start and continue to crow loudly during a Zoom session upon hearing its owner’s voice in the call. Although distracting, it did provide some lively and humorous conversations that seemed to strengthen rapport-building in sharing the ambiguities and unexpected during a lockdown.

One of the more interesting insights about the online interviews concerns ongoing studies regarding the ‘Pacific people digital divide’ (Department of Internal Affairs, 2020; Grimes & White, 2019; Moana Research, 2021). The term digital divide metaphorically describes the perceived disadvantage of individuals who are either unable or choose not to use digital technologies in their daily lives (O’Connor et al., 2008). Beneficiaries and low-income earners, people with limited skills, disabled persons, sole parents, older people, migrants, women, and Pacific people, are included in this category (Cullen, 2002; Stats New Zealand, 2018). According to a recent survey, one in five Pacific people aged 16–65 had limited to no computer experience, could not pass a simple computer assessment, or declined the use of digital devices (Department of Internal Affairs, 2020). Digital communication tends to conflict with traditional Pacific cultural protocols, given the oral and dialogic nature of interactions with family, kin, and communities (Cullen, 2002).

COVID-19 further exacerbated the digital divide, where the closing of public libraries during lockdowns hampered digital access to free Wi-Fi for some Pacific families who relied on this service (Ioane et al., 2021). Similarly, all government support and assistance transferred to online communication, where Pacific people were inconveniently ‘shut out.’ Consequently, the lack of access to digital devices and the internet hampered Pacific communities’ understanding of the COVID-19 risks, health and safety protocols, and information regarding treatment and vaccinations (Forbes, 2020). As such, initiatives and programmes targeting Pacific people and reducing the digital gap are ongoing (Department of Internal Affairs, 2020).
We were pleasantly surprised to find that more Pacific people had access to and knew how to use digital devices for communication, particularly during extenuating circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding confirms the results of a recent study about internet connectivity, access, usage, and ethnicity, where Pacific people tend to have the highest percentage of users in New Zealand (Díaz Andrade et al., 2021, p.7). We reflected on this result and discerned that COVID-19 necessitated innovation and resilience for Pacific people’s lives and cultural practices regarding collectivism and families (Ministry of Social Development, 2021). Due to lockdown, social distancing, and ‘remaining within your bubble,’ Pacific people’s contact with their extended families was limited (Ioane et al., 2021). As a result, more Pacific people appeared to embrace digital technology for social cohesion and maintain relationships beyond their reach while conforming to social constraints (Díaz Andrade et al., 2021). Thereby demonstrating the resilience of Pacific people, conforming to New Zealand’s ‘all in this together’ mandate and adapting to the precarious and volatile circumstances of COVID-19.

Among the Pacific participants who took part in the study, older individuals preferred letter writing and telephone calls. Letter writing, or written accounts produced using pen and paper from willing participants, is not a method commonly used or promoted in qualitative research (Burtt, 2020). While letter writing is not the sole consideration, it is crucial because interviews via letters have many benefits and advantages, such as extending the reach to closed communities, geographically dispersed participants (Binnie, 2019), and from our experience: the elderly Pacific people.

Letter writing can be a source of comfort during transitional and difficult periods (Plummer et al., 1993; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012), of which COVID-19 is no exception. Unlike face-to-face interviews, participants have more time to reflect, amend, and add what they want to write in their style without the pressures of being time-bound and in the presence of others (Burtt, 2020). The few letters we received were insightful and full of rich narratives that were incredibly crafted in the English and Samoan languages and included ancient Samoan proverbs. The same can be said with the telephone interviews that were long and yet fruitful. Participants felt a sense of relief that they were given opportunities to share their perspectives on a valuable topic (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006). However, we wondered whether the detailed information from telephone calls and letter writing would have been the same quality and quantity had we interviewed them in-person.

Accessing their stories and utilising these methods encouraged us to think more carefully about inclusivity and allow participants to voice their opinions and feel validated (Clingerman, 2006). Furthermore, we feel that the nationwide lockdowns may have resulted in participants from different age demographics participating using alternative methods. Ultimately, we felt privileged that we included this exclusive older group of Pacific people that may have been omitted from other potential research avenues. In any case, these narratives present a compelling and intimate glimpse of their lives and experiences regarding literacy and numeracy as Pacific people.

Concluding thoughts
This study draws on our experiences of the challenges and opportunities we encountered doing data collection for a literacy and numeracy project during a pandemic. We provide the broader research context for this study regarding low literacy and numeracy skills. We present early insights regarding the historical background of apprehension that might explain why Pacific people tend to be cautious regarding gatherings and research linked to government initiatives. As such, we encourage researchers studying Pacific people to consider and reflect on cultural, historical, and socio-political contexts as part of their research framework.

We applied a multifaceted approach for recruiting participants that included Pacific networks, radio and social media platforms and enlisted the help from Pacific Chiefs and community leaders to advance our efforts in continuing the project and gather information to enhance Pacific outcomes. However, we are not advocating that our multifaceted approach would be appropriate for all studies. Instead, we propose that these methods are a helpful addition to a researcher’s repertoire in studying Pacific people in pandemic situations. Future work that looks at other online qualitative indigenous approaches in a post-COVID-19 environment is recommended.

We share our methods regarding focus groups guided by Teu le va methodology and Talanoa enacted in spiritual blessings, traditional food, and our conduct as Pacific facilitators. Digital online interviews, letter writing, and telephone calls were exceptionally helpful tools regarding research continuity and participant engagement, notably reaching the elderly Pacific cohort who contributed rich insights to the data collection. An unexpected positive insight is the increased digital upskilling of Pacific people, as found in this study. COVID-19 lockdowns and border closures motivated many Pacific people to adapt and seek alternative methods of reconnecting and maintaining connections with their loved ones.

Our experiences highlight some of the challenges of conducting qualitative research in the field and the realities of working from home during a pandemic. Being adaptable and flexible enabled us (and the participants to some extent) to facilitate interviews and build rapport in that we shared the challenges and difficulties that COVID-19 presents to us as a global community. We hope that our experiences can help inform other researchers who might be grappling with similar challenges in their respective countries and populations. Future research is encouraged to consider how these methods might benefit other marginalised communities.
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