



Exploring the Potential Contributions of Virtual Academic Conferences in Global and Environmental Public Health

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To the Editor,

As countries gradually enter the post-COVID 19 era with the removal of pandemic time restrictions, international research conferences are returning to full in-person operations as well. These global academic conventions are commonly attended by thousands of participants from various parts of the world, with each individual delegate possibly travelling more thousands of miles taking intercontinental flights ¹. For example, the centralized 2019 ASTMH conference resulted to 8,646 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions from travel of 4,832 participants ². This contributes to poor air quality that worsens environmental public health ³.

Considering that there are hundreds of academic organizations holding academic conferences with the relatively same number of participants annually, global academia's contribution to the worsening situation of climate change and global public health should be a matter of grave concern. Authors of the previously cited work on the ASTMH conference proposed a decentralization of the conference in major international travel hubs per continent (Washington DC, Lima, Amsterdam, Nairobi, and

Bangkok) to reduce the travelling distance of participants, which will also result to a 58% reduction in carbon dioxide emissions.

A study conducted by researchers from the University of Bristol reported that in the two-day virtual conference which had attendees from across the globe, only 20 kilograms of carbon dioxide was emitted from the use of essential information technology equipment. This is a stark difference compared to 1,130 kilograms emitted by one passenger who is travelling from New York to London to participate in an international conference ⁴.

Although the decentralization proposal could indeed result in the significant decrease in gas emissions affecting climate change, this does not resolve the issue of cultural and social equity which is essential in decolonizing global discourses. It is possible that the academic gatekeeping of the Global North will continue to persist in dialogues that require diverse and inclusive perspectives.

Therefore, it is imperative for international academic organizations to hold virtual and hybrid research conferences to resolve the matter of contention mentioned. A recent study has shown

that online academic conferences during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a substantial increase in equity, inclusivity, and environmental sustainability⁵. For academics and researchers from the Global South, in addition to travelling longer distances compared to their counterparts in the Global North, they experience the personal burden of applying for visas that require them to provide proof of financial capacity for their planned travels. This factor alone is a major obstacle in the decolonization of global discourses.

There are several challenges in achieving this proposition. First, audience engagement is limited in virtual and hybrid academic conferences due to the physical limitations of online platforms in ensuring the presence of panel participants. It is possible that participants are multitasking while the discussant is presenting their paper. In recorded presentations, there are cases in which some paper presenters fail to answer questions from audiences⁶. Professional networking and social interactions needed to establish international linkages are almost non-existent in virtual academic conference programs⁷.

To counter the mentioned drawbacks, virtual conference organizers must provide guidelines and protocols ensuring that online live and recorded paper presenters will give feedback regarding inquiries about their work. There are also platforms such as Gather Town and Kumospace where organizers can design open online areas where people can virtually gather and socialize to establish professional networks.

It is established in existing global and environmental health literature that virtual academic conferences enable sustainable practices in academic discourses. It is due to the fact that it substantially decreases the carbon footprint of global academic activities, mitigates the effects of climate change, ensures the inclusivity of participants from the Global South, and addresses the issue of equity in academic dialogues. It is a decolonizing intervention to the domination of the Global North in the global academic discourses.

Abbreviations

COVID-19: 2019 Coronavirus Disease

ASTMH: American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene

Washington DC: Washington District of Columbia (United States of America)

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