



Virtual event

Sustainable Conference Design of the Future

Online, January 26–27, 2023

Organised by the Department of Environmental Psychology, Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg, Germany

Report on the conference team's experiences

sponsored by



Deutsche
Bundesstiftung Umwelt

www.dbu.de



Content

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction..... | 3 |
| Background..... | 3 |
| Planning and preparation..... | 3 |
| Programme and procedure | 5 |
| Day 1: Opening and scientific input in Zoom | 5 |
| Day 1: Break and panel discussion in Gather Town (hosted by Virtual Chair)..... | 6 |
| Day 1: Evening programme with Gather Town, Welo and Cozy Juicy Real..... | 7 |
| Day 2: Exchange on the evening programme and scientific input in Zoom..... | 8 |
| Day 2: Break and exhibition in Sci-an | 8 |
| Day 2: World Café and closing in Zoom and Miro..... | 10 |
| Further thoughts and experiences | 11 |
| Communication via the Slack Workspace | 11 |
| Zoom..... | 12 |
| Support..... | 13 |

Introduction

As part of the project "[TraMocee](#) - Transformation of mobility behavior through corona-related restrictions and new experiences" (funded by the DBU [Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt; German Federal Environmental Foundation]), the Department of Environmental Psychology at Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg, Germany hosted a virtual conference on sustainable conference design of the future on January 26 and 27, 2023.

With this report, we would like to share our experiences and findings and hope to provide guidance for other conference organisers on how to design virtual conferences.

Background

In the TraMocee project, the COVID-19 pandemic is seen as a window of opportunity for changes in conference culture toward more sustainable conferencing. The focus is on gaining knowledge and initiating a transformative process.

Our initial project plan had included the implementation of two backcasting workshops with stakeholders. However, during the project we observed such a strong interest in the topic of sustainable conference design that we decided to organise a conference instead of the workshops and open it to a wider audience.

The goal of the conference was to stimulate an exchange between the relevant actors in the transformation field of conference mobility. Therefore, we wanted to bring together initiatives and researchers in the field of conference mobility, conference organisers and conference service providers and explore the space of opportunities for change. The focus of the event was to gain knowledge and initiate a transformation process towards more sustainable conferences. On the one hand, the conference should present and discuss scientific input, but on the other hand, it should also provide the opportunity to experience new formats and platforms for oneself and to discuss them afterwards.

Planning and preparation

First thoughts on the conference planning started in June 2022 with the discussion of a first concept in our working group. We defined basic aspects, such as holding the conference on two consecutive days (each half-day) in January.

Our decision to hold the conference over two half-day days was based on the fact that virtual events can be more stressful and should be scheduled for a shorter period of time than in-person events. In addition, we scheduled the programme for the afternoon on the first day and for the morning on the second day (Central European Time), so that people from almost all time zones could join in live, at least temporarily, at times that were reasonable for them. In addition, we wanted to give people the opportunity to voluntarily try out different platforms and saw the option of integrating this as an evening programme (from the perspective of the European time zones) and as a transition between the two thematic blocks (on Day 1 and Day 2).

After the dates had been set, more concrete content, structural and technical considerations began from August onwards. One research assistant was mainly responsible for the organisation of the con-

ference. Depending on the planning phase, she spent about 10 - 25 hours a week on conference planning. From October to January, two research assistants supported the organisation with a time frame of about 5 hours per week.

We wanted to include typical conference formats (e.g. scientific lectures or a panel discussion), but also more interactive formats (e.g. an exhibition and a World Café). It was also important for us to leave enough opportunities for exchange between the participants. We aimed to organise the conference as cheaply as possible and to use licences that were already available to us (e.g. Zoom) on the one hand and to win cooperation partners on the other. Since one of our aims was to offer participants an insight into different platforms for holding virtual events, we were also able to present different (and in some cases new, less common) platforms through our cooperation. For example, we cooperated with Virtual Chair, Sci-an and Cozy Juicy Real and were able to use their services.

In September/October, we created the conference homepage to draw attention to the event. On the homepage we explained the background and the aim of the conference, showed the programme and provided information and technical instructions on how to use the different platforms. We created a German and an English version, but since the conference itself was entirely in English, we would only create an English version retrospectively. On the one hand, the German version led some participants to assume that the conference would take place in German, and on the other hand, the double homepage design created additional work.

In early November, we contacted potential presenters and exhibitors. We had made the selection mainly on the basis of published papers and other engagement (e.g. on Twitter or blogs). In the following weeks, the work mainly consisted of organising the participants and contributions (writing and sending invitations, sending out reminders, answering queries, coordinating free times and availabilities, etc.). The feedback to our enquiries was very positive and most of the people contacted agreed to participate. Despite the many positive responses (there was only one cancellation due to overlapping dates), we would send out the requests a little earlier in the future in order to be able to determine and spread the programme earlier.

At the beginning of December, after the rough programme was set, we opened the registration for the conference. For the registration, we created a form with SoSci Survey (existing university license) and, in addition to the data required for registration (remember to obtain consent for possible recordings at an early stage), also asked (voluntarily) about the level of experience with different conference formats, interest in certain parts of the programme and expectations and fears regarding the conference. We distributed the invitation via the mailing lists of our professional society, sent it to other professional societies as well as sustainability initiatives of various universities with a request for forwarding, posted it on Twitter and asked the conference participants to distribute it as well. As we knew from many experience reports on virtual conferences that often only a fraction of those registered actually attend the conference, we asked people to register as bindingly as possible. We received several messages from people who would like to attend but would not be able to participate in the whole programme and were therefore unsure whether they should register at all. In order to remove this ambiguity, we later removed the note on mandatory participation from the registration form. In order to ensure that we could take good care of all participants and that the capacities of the platforms were sufficient, we limited the maximum number of participants to 100 and programmed the registration so that it would be closed automatically after 120 registrations. In the end, we counted 98 registrations

by the closing date on the evening before the conference. Most of these registrations took place in January, during the last two weeks before the event.

In preparation for the conference, we organised two larger test runs in December and January and also tested individual platforms and functions in smaller rounds, partly with the cooperation partners/developers of the platforms. These test runs were extremely helpful and revealed possible ambiguities, difficulties and problems that we were able to resolve. The rehearsals also helped to plan the technical support in more detail and to rehearse the respective roles. Support was provided by our two assistants through different channels. On the one hand, they could be reached by email and phone, on the other hand, we created a support channel on Slack. We also made sure that one person was permanently present in the Zoom room of the conference, which provided a permanent contact point for participants and from which they could then be referred to the other platforms. While using Gather Town (hosted by Virtual Chair) and Sci-an, we had additional technical support from Virtual Chair and the founders of Sci-an.

In addition to the internal test runs, we offered the participants of the sessions held on platforms beyond Zoom (Gather Town, Sci-an and Miro) the possibility of a test run during the week before the conference. This was gratefully received by some of the participants and ensured that the connection and audio and video settings worked smoothly on the day of the conference.

Two days before the conference (and again on the evening before the conference for participants who registered later), all participants received an email with the most important information about the event. In addition to the access links and short explanations about the platforms, we also sent the participants a two-page info sheet, which made all relevant links, passwords and the programme and schedule accessible all at once. In addition, we encouraged the participants in the email to take a look at the platforms, to get familiar with them and, if necessary, to create a profile.

Programme and procedure

Day 1: Opening and scientific input in Zoom

The conference started on Thursday, January 26, 2023 at 2 p.m. on Zoom with a welcoming speech and some organisational information including an explanation of the process and a first introduction of the different platforms. Afterwards, we used the stamp function in Zoom to get to know the participants a little better and to find out, for example, which actor roles they assigned themselves to or from which country they logged in. In this context, we also briefly presented the results of the voluntary survey during the registration process. At the opening of the conference, about 35 people were online, which is a good third of all registered participants.

Afterwards, there was a short two-minute break with the suggestion to relax the eyes a bit before the first session followed at 2:30 p.m. (still in Zoom) with the presentation of scientific input on conferences, related emissions and virtual conferences. This was scheduled for 90 minutes and we had three presenters who had 25 minutes each and one person who had 15 minutes for the presentation followed by questions and discussion. Due to the experience that there is often too little time for exchange, we had extended the "typical" time frame for a presentation including exchange from 15 minutes to 25 minutes (and for the short presentation of first results of a current survey we had planned 15 minutes). However, we noticed that this schedule was very tight and that it was delayed by a short interruption during a presentation and very lively discussions, so that the last contribution

ran into the break. Here we learned to plan more time for the contributions in the future and, if necessary, to set acoustic signals in advance to announce the approaching end of the time planned per person. The input session was one of the most popular of the event and had about 40 participants in Zoom.

Day 1: Break and panel discussion in Gather Town (hosted by Virtual Chair)

With some delay we started into the break, which was originally scheduled for 30 minutes and was shortened a bit due to the delay of the previous session. For the break we switched to Gather Town (hosted by Virtual Chair). This platform for virtual encounters offers the possibility to create an avatar and walk around in the environment, meet other people with their avatars and talk or interact with different objects. Originally, we had planned to do a short introduction as soon as all the people had switched to the platform. However, some people had problems switching to the site, but this was quickly resolved after an exchange with the support team or a re-launch of the site. However, since it took a few minutes for everyone to switch, other participants were already exploring the various rooms and functions during this time, so that a new introduction did not seem appropriate. Here it could have been helpful to explain the most important functions in Zoom and then switch to Gather Town. At Gather Town itself, there was always a support person available and it was possible to access a video with tips on how to use the platform. In the context of our conference, we had modelled the environment on a garden with a small lake and various seating options. During the break we could observe that some people gathered with their avatars and used the opportunity to further exchange about the presentations in the previous session.

At 4.30 p.m., the panel discussion began in Gather Town on the question "Is a change in conference culture necessary and how can it be achieved?" For this part of the programme, a separate room was set up in Gather Town, which was designed like a plenary hall with a stage and comfortable chairs. The panellists gathered 10 minutes before the start of the discussion to test the audio connection and make final arrangements. As soon as the panellists were seated in the chairs, their webcam was released and they were visible to everyone in the room. The audience, on the other hand, could sit down on chairs provided in the auditorium and thus entered a private area where they could only follow what was happening on stage and were thus cut off from possible side conversations or conversations between other participants. If they wanted to ask a question to the audience, they could stand up from their seat and move to a microphone in the middle of the room, from where their video and audio connection was broadcasted to all participants. About 30-35 people were present for the panel discussion. After a welcome and introductory words about the panel discussion, the virtual microphone was passed to the panelists, who gave a short statement on the initial question as previously set. Here, too, we noticed that this took more time than expected and that some of the opening statements clearly went beyond the set framework. In future, we would point out the time limit even more clearly when making arrangements with the participants and, if necessary, also give an acoustic signal to announce that the time limit is about to expire. After about 60 minutes of discussion on the podium, we opened the discussion to the audience, some of whom made their way to the microphone and participated with questions or statements. At the same time, however, we noticed that the format of the panel discussion was not very open and inclusive and partly hindered the flow of conversation (especially in direct comparison with the lively discussions following the presentations in the previous session in Zoom). As a result, the exchange took place almost exclusively via the podium or between one person from the audience and the podium, but did not allow any exchange within the audience. For a future

event, we would critically rethink whether a panel discussion is a suitable format or whether we should rather use a more interactive format.

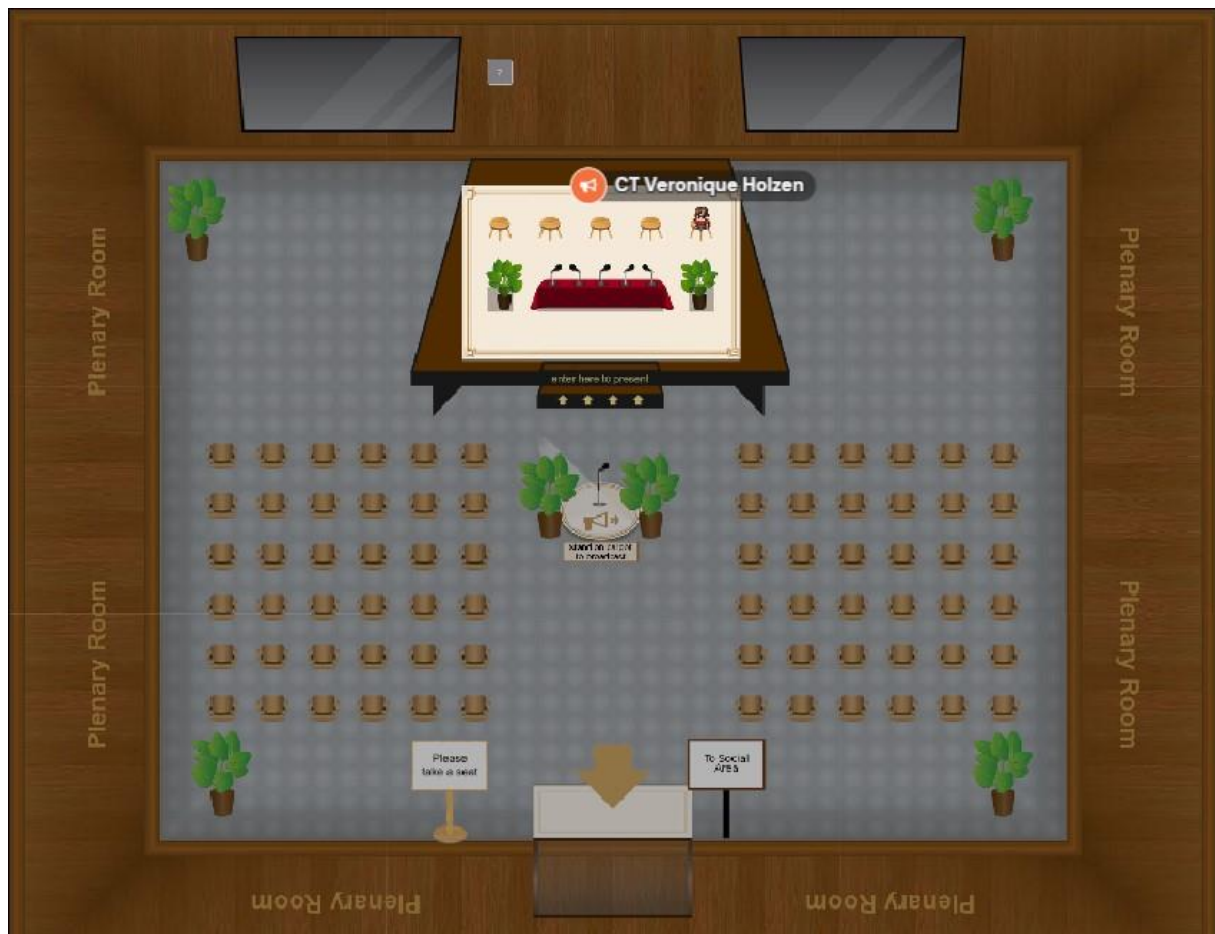


Figure 1. Plenary Room in Gather Town (hosted by Virtual Chair), where the panel discussion took place.

The end of the panel discussion at 6 p.m. was followed by a 30-minute break, after which the optional evening programme began. During the break, there was the possibility to stay in Gather Town and talk to the other participants or watch videos about the city of Magdeburg. Participants could also leave the room or set their status to "absent" and use the break for other purposes.

Day 1: Evening programme with Gather Town, Welo and Cozy Juicy Real

At 6:30 p.m., the evening programme began, with all participants coming together again at Gather Town. With about 12 participants, the evening programme was the least attended programme point, which could also be due to the late (after-work) time. At the beginning of the session, we gave an overview of the three different offers. Firstly, we had placed signs in Gather Town with possible conversation starters and there was the possibility to rotate between different tables in order to get into conversation with different people. The second offer was to visit the "Welo Reconnect & Play" room, another platform for virtual encounters with built-in games like pictionary, trivia or city guesser. The third offer was to play the online board game "Cozy Juicy Real" together, which aims to spark fun, authentic and connecting interactions. Originally, we had planned that the participants would choose one or more of the offers in a relatively balanced way. Instead, the few participants all spread out between offerings 1 and 3 and either stayed and chatted at Gather Town or played Cozy Juicy Real together. No one switched to Welo, as there was a lack of further information about the platform and

its functions beforehand. In addition, the participants were afraid to switch to the platform alone, and at least two people would have been needed in Welo to be able to try out the implemented games.

After the end of the evening programme, the conference organising team met again for a short debriefing in Gather Town and uploaded the recordings of the presentations to Slack so that people from other time zones or those who were not present during the presentation could look them up without much delay.



Figure 2. Evening programme options (Social area in Gather Town, Welo Reconnect & Play and Cozy Juicy Real)

Day 2: Exchange on the evening programme and scientific input in Zoom

Day 2 of the conference started at 8:30 a.m. again with a gathering in Zoom and the exchange and discussion on the evening programme. At the beginning, about 10 people came together, but as time went on, the number increased. The feedback on Gather Town was that the functioning of the private discussion rooms with a predefined limit on the number of possible participants was not clear to everyone and that this could have been communicated more clearly in advance. The feedback on Cozy Juicy Real was very positive. Everyone said they felt more energised and in a better mood, even after the long and tiring day afterwards, and that they felt they now knew each other better. The game was seen as a great way to offer a virtual group activity, both for groups that don't know each other yet and to learn more about colleagues. In the session we also discussed other ways of getting to know other conference participants and networking. It was suggested that in the future a session similar to the evening programme should be held before the start of the conference programme in order to get to know the other participants, to explore common interests or research interests and to get to know the different platforms in advance and to become familiar with them.

At 9:00 a.m. the second input session started, in which ideas for an alternative conference organisation were presented. By now, about 35 people were online. In total, there were three presenters or presentation teams, each with 20 minutes to present. One presentation consisted of a prepared video, which was played and to which questions were answered live afterwards. This offered the opportunity to show the use of different platforms in the video and to take the participants on a journey through different virtual worlds.

Day 2: Break and exhibition in Sci-an

After the last presentation and some introductory words, we moved to Sci-an at 10 a.m., where there was an exhibition of different conference service providers and a poster exhibition. Sci-an is a virtual platform for networking researchers that allows you to create an avatar and profile and move freely in the space with the possibility of exchanging with others, uploading your own work and commenting on the work of others. In this virtual world, we had prepared boxes for the four exhibitors where they

could display posters or presentations and engage in conversation with interested people. In addition, we had placed posters with links to interesting projects (e.g. podcasts or blogs) or interesting papers around the room, which the participants could view as they liked. When switching to the platform and using the platform itself, there were some problems, especially with the audio connection. These could be solved in most cases, but in some constellations of avatars standing together it was not possible to hear all the other people or to be heard by all the others. These problems will certainly disappear with the further development of the (still quite new) platform. In the context of our conference, only very few people had set up a profile, but we would highly recommend this for other conferences, which will mostly take place in Sci-an, as this will provide much more background information on the people and the people can then also be contacted concretely. In addition, the platform will in future offer the possibility of matching participants on the basis of their stated interests, for which the creation of a profile is also necessary. Not all exhibitors had prepared information about their platform, service, etc. as agreed and some were not to be found as contact persons in the boxes at the beginning of the exhibition. In future, we would check the exhibition boxes again the day before the conference and ask specifically whether there were any problems with the provision of information. During the session in Sci-an, we observed that a few people approached the exhibitors directly, but most of them talked to the other participants or looked at the posters. In the meantime, a short introduction of the exhibitors would be a first ice-breaker and would encourage the exchange. The number of participants on the platform decreased steadily over time and many left before the end of the scheduled 60 minutes. We had scheduled the first break of the day after the exhibition, perhaps it would have been good to have a short break before the exhibition and then go into the exhibition rested. At the same time, however, an exhibition is also a very open format with content that appeals to some people more than others, so it is not surprising that some stayed longer than others.

The hour-long exhibition was followed smoothly by a 15-minute break, during which participants could stay in the Sci-an room if they were interested, or spend the time away from the screen in other ways.

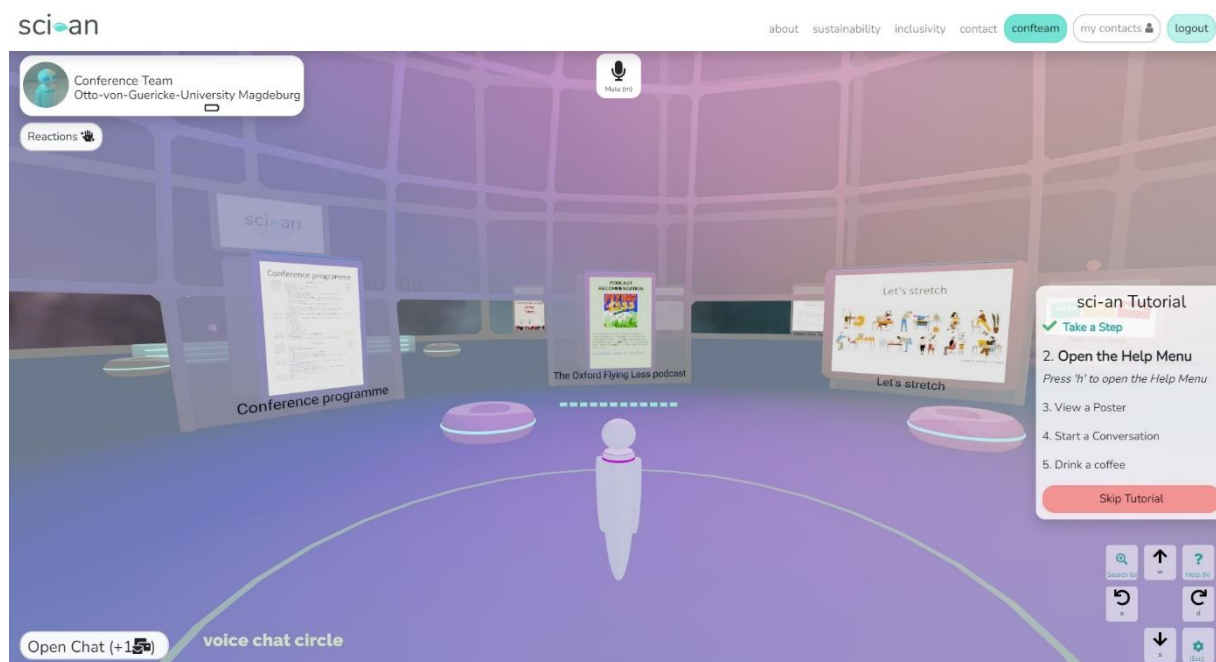


Figure 3. Sci-an room where the exhibition and poster display took place.

Day 2: World Café and closing in Zoom and Miro

The last big event of the conference was the World Café at 11:15 a.m. in Zoom. Beforehand, we had set up a board at Miro with five discussion tables and questions and appointed hosts for each of the tables. These were partly people from the organising team, but also participants of the conference who had been contacted in advance and asked for their willingness to help. During the World Café, there were about 20 participants online who were free to choose a table in each of the three discussion rounds to contribute to the discussion question. For this purpose, we created five breakout rooms (one room for each table) to which the participants could assign themselves. As a result, the groups were sometimes very different in size. An option implemented in Zoom to limit the size of groups in breakout rooms would be a helpful extension to avoid groups that are too large. After each round, the participants returned to the main session and chose a room again. In each room, the host was present, introduced the discussion question and, from the second round onwards, presented the results of the previous rounds. Each discussion round was scheduled for 20 minutes. While the hosts had editing rights for the Miroboard and wrote down all discussion points, the other participants only received a guest link to view the Miroboard and follow the changes. In the free version with Miro, this was the only option so that not all participants had to register with Miro, which could have been a barrier to participation. However, not all participants were able to view the Miroboard at all, so in some cases it was necessary to improvise spontaneously by having the table hosts in the respective breakout room share their screen in Zoom and thus allow the others to view the Miroboard. This improvised solution worked, but for future events we would consider using a paid version with a wider range of functions so that all participants can work on the Miroboard without logging in and the interactive character of a World Café is better emphasised. In addition, the paid version offers the possibility of setting a timer, which enables better time management than the Zoom timer. This would also relieve the hosts, who were very busy with the introduction to the discussion, summarising the results so far, moderating, writing down and sorting the ideas and time management (especially with large discussion groups). In addition, we would adapt the discussion time to the respective discussion round in the future and start with a longer discussion time at the beginning and shorten it somewhat per round, as it became apparent at most tables in our version of the World Café that the number of new discussion points decreased somewhat with each round and the discussion lasted shorter than in the previous round. After the third round of discussion, the respective table hosts presented their most important results to the entire group in two to three minutes. All in all, there were many fruitful discussions and a variety of ideas. Many participants were enthusiastic about the interactivity and remarked that they had really had the feeling of having worked together on something, even virtually. The presentation of the results also marked the end of the conference and we referred to further planned steps (conference report, experience report, etc.) and asked the participants to write a short feedback on the event in the chat. As the participants left the Zoom room one after another, there were a few short conversations before the last participants said goodbye.

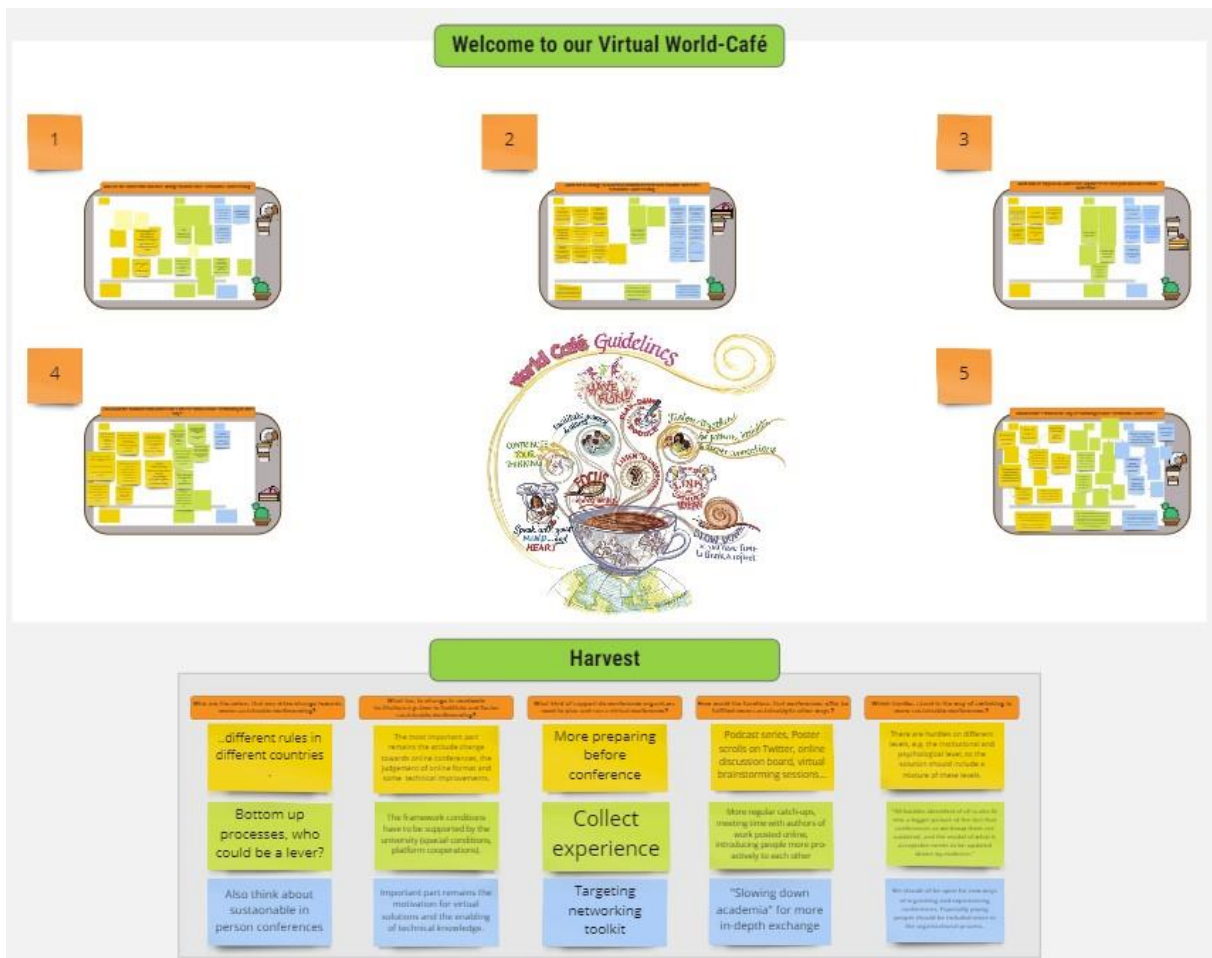


Figure 4. Set-up of the virtual world café in Miro.

Further thoughts and experiences

Communication via the Slack Workspace

To communicate with the participants, we decided to use Slack and created a workspace before the conference. The intention behind this was to be able to reach all participants in a more direct way than by email, to make materials and recordings available, to give participants a way to get in touch with other participants and to be able to hold discussions beyond the actual sessions.

When registering for the Slack workspace for the first time, participants were directed to the channel "announcements", which served as a welcome and introduced all other channels. In the channel "sessions_and_discussions" we created a post for each session or presentation and posted slides, recordings or relevant papers as a response under this post. Possible questions or discussions regarding the session could also be posted as a reply. In the channel "intros" we motivated people to briefly introduce themselves and their thematic background and in the channel "informal_exchange" we gave them the opportunity for further exchange. The channel "resource_sharing" could be used to share useful resources with the other participants. In the channel "support", questions or problems were answered.

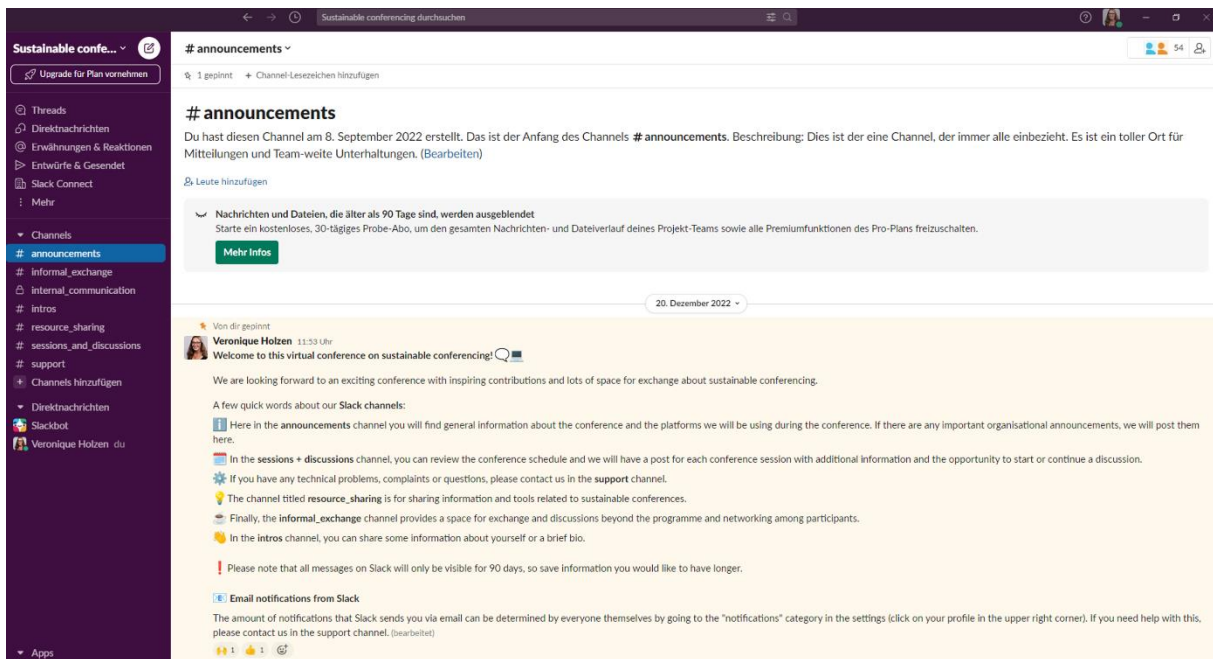


Figure 5. Announcements channel in Slack.

A total of 54 participants registered in the Slack workspace, but it was used less than expected. There were some introductions from participants and questions in the support channel, but the discussions on the presentations took place directly at Zoom instead of in Slack. So, unfortunately, the discussions beyond the sessions were hardly accessible and could not be continued. We tried to buffer this by saving the Zoom chats and posting them on Slack for reference, but these are not very clear and difficult to follow away from the presentation. Although we had tried to make Slack as clear as possible and to make the structure understandable through additional explanations, we received a few messages from people who could not find the materials. Here we could have referred more clearly to the location of the collection of materials. Another problem with using Slack is that the posts and documents in the free version are deleted after three months and are therefore no longer accessible. Slack therefore only provides temporary access to the materials.

Zoom

Zoom, as an established video conferencing platform, proved to be a good entry platform for the conference. We started the Zoom session 15 minutes before each of the actual sessions and had set up that participants could enter the room before the host. This enabled first informal conversations before the actual programme and led to a nice exchange with each other. We also made sure to deactivate the acoustic signal when entering the room so that presentations would not be disturbed. In addition to the possibility of exchanging and sharing the presentation slides, various interactive impulses can also be incorporated through surveys or by using the stamp function. Originally, we had considered conducting the World Café entirely in Zoom, but we encountered some problems in the test runs. One of these was that the range of functions varied depending on the Zoom version (staff or students), use (web client or desktop client) or update status. Some people could use the specific whiteboard function, others could only create a whiteboard via "Share screen". In addition, not all participants could see the notes on the specific whiteboard. Even when using established tools such as Zoom, different scenarios should therefore be tested in advance, especially when using additional functions.

Support

We tried to provide the widest possible range of support and, retrospectively, we are very satisfied with how it went. Overall, there were very few support requests, all of which could be answered well. However, it was sometimes difficult and exhausting for the support team to be available on different platforms at the same time. This was especially the case when only one person was available for support due to a spontaneous competing appointment. This person could only serve one platform at a time and had to switch back and forth for several requests. This meant that participants sometimes had to wait a little longer for their requests to be dealt with, and the support person's computer was sometimes overloaded with the many programmes that were open at the same time. It is definitely advisable to have a support team of at least two people. At the same time, we noticed that the length and intensive timing of the event was also exhausting for the support team. They had to be available for the entire afternoon and evening as well as the following morning (including immediate preparation and follow-up). For this, it would be good to have another support person so that the team can rotate and individuals can also have longer breaks away from the screen.