



# Spinning the web of identity: the roles of the internet in the lives of immigrant adolescents

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## Abstract

This article illuminates the roles of the internet in the unique intersection between adolescence and immigration. The data presented were gathered through in-depth interviews with 70 teenage immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Israel. The analysis suggests that the internet provides valuable resources for personal growth and empowerment, as it helps to develop and strengthen many aspects of young immigrants' evolving identity during a critical period of social and material disadvantage, when they are engaged in settling into and adjusting to a new society. This case study highlights the importance of researching the internet's roles in the lives of disadvantaged populations, and the potential of this medium for closing knowledge and social gaps.

## Key words

adolescents • former Soviet Union • identity • immigration • integration • internet • Israel • safety • social relationships

## INTRODUCTION

Immigration and integration into a new society are among the most dynamic and complex processes in an individual's life. They are characterized by

numerous losses, confusions and challenges that eventually lead to significant personal transformations. Moreover, this experience is especially difficult for immigrant teenagers who are not only detached from their familiar culture as they move to a new country, but in doing so leave behind their status as children. The confluence of these two significant transitions and challenges – migration and adolescence – at one junction in life raises severe cognitive emotional-behavioral social challenges that must be confronted (see e.g. James, 1997; Yeh and Inose, 2002). At the same time, identity crises caused by immigration as well as coming of age have the potential for personal growth, and with the availability of sufficient internal and external resources, this can be accomplished successfully (Mirsky, 2005).

Indeed, the research literature reveals that the mass media do provide young immigrants with various resources needed for adaptation, since they serve as agents of socialization, an emotional shelter, a substitute for communicating with local peers, a tool for inter-generational cultural transmission and a site for exploring various aspects of new identity formation (see e.g. de Block and Buckingham, 2007; Durham, 2004; Elias and Lemish, 2008; Zohoori, 1988). However, while previous studies have focused for the most part on the role of television in young immigrants' lives, the present study explores the various internet resources that assist immigrant adolescents in the complex process of identity construction and adaptation to the new surroundings, in the case of immigrant youth from the former Soviet Union to Israel.

The research literature reveals that these young immigrants are well adjusted and play by local rules in some realms of their lives, while in other aspects they stick to their original cultural background. Thus, young 'Russians' successfully navigate their way through various Israeli institutions and exhibit good adaptive skills necessary for their future upward mobility: command of Hebrew, understanding of local social codes and instrumental contacts with Israeli peers. Yet, in the private sphere of their lives, most stay firmly rooted in their co-ethnic circle, which serves as the key provider of social support and a safety net (Remennick, 2003). Similarly, several studies suggest that Russian-speaking immigrant youngsters are engaged in a selective acculturation process (Portes and Zhou, 1993), in which they negotiate their own distinct pathway between home and host cultures, augmented by new transnational opportunities. While adopting multiple elements of local conduct, lifestyle and fashion options, young immigrants retain the core mindset and outlook shaped during their formative years in the former Soviet Union. As a result, a new hybrid cultural realm is emerging, typified by hyphenated identities (Russian and Israeli), lifestyles (e.g. Russian discos and clubs that feature Russian, Israeli and MTV-style music), mixed lingos and transnational links with friends in the former Soviet Union and other countries (Anteby-Yemini, 2003; Niznik, 2003).

## IMMIGRANTS AND THE INTERNET

Interpersonal and mass communication play decisive roles in immigrants' adaptation and identity construction, as according to Kim's theory of cross-cultural adaptation, in which 'adaptation of an individual to a given cultural environment occurs in and through communication' (2001: 36). Hence, media uses play a variety of roles in the immigrants' lives, in keeping with the diversity and dynamics of the ongoing adjustment to a new society and maintenance of their original cultural identity (see e.g. Bailey et al., 2007; Elias, 2008; Georgiou, 2006a).

Furthermore, the research literature suggests that the internet tends to replace the traditional media in the process of immigrants' cultural adaptation and social integration. Thus, for example, Georgiou (2006b) found that the internet provided a space in which small immigrant communities in the UK which lack economic and political resources could develop efficient communication channels for spreading information that is vital to their survival in the new society. In addition, the internet served as a forum for public discourse on issues related to immigrants' painful experiences, usually excluded from the mainstream British media, thus contributing to the immigrants' empowerment.

In addition, immigrant websites fulfill an important role in their search for the new cultural identity versus preserving the original one. Thus, in examining a portal that provided historical and cultural information about India to immigrants of Indian origin living in the USA, Mitra (1997) found that it not only enabled immigrants to maintain online contact with their homeland, but also redefined Indian identity in the diaspora. Similarly, Kozar (2002) revealed that the Chinese online literary periodicals originating in Canada enriched traditional Chinese cultural symbols by placing them in the new social and cultural surroundings.

Alongside studies examining the content prevalent on immigrant websites, Yelenevskaya's (2005) ethnographic study of a small sample of Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel and Germany provides interesting insights into the social and cultural identity of the diasporic websites' visitors. The participants frequently visited chat and discussion groups in Russian in order to share their immigrant experiences and express feelings of alienation towards the host society. Moreover, the participants emphasized their strong ties with other Russian immigrants, and expressed criticism towards those immigrants who had created friendships with the local residents.

These findings were refuted partially by Elias and Shorer-Zeltser (2006), who conducted an electronic survey of visitors to Russian-language websites in Germany, Israel and the USA. On the one hand, the research found that 'diasporic' features constitute a central part of participants' self-definition. In fact, most of the participants expressed feeling a greater affinity for other

'Russians', wherever they might be, than for the residents of the host country. On the other hand, the findings did not indicate that immigrants' association with the transnational diaspora led to their social alienation, as insinuated by Yelenevskaya (2005), since more than half of the participants declared that they had established friendships with local residents, and most claimed that it was important to keep up-to-date on current events in the host country.

In contrast with the extensive literature on the internet and adult immigrants, there is modest research on adolescent immigrant users. Hence, only two recent studies are directly relevant to the present research. A study by d'Haenens (2003) on second-generation immigrant youth in the Netherlands found a strong link between the higher score of ethnic identification and users' needs, such as looking for news about the country of origin, seeking information on Islam and maintaining contact with co-ethnic peers through the internet. Similarly, Rydin and Sjöberg's (2008) study on internet uses in refugee families in Sweden indicates that migrant children who identified more with their ethnic community used the internet for cultural aims related to their parents' homeland, and participated in intra-communal chat groups.

Furthermore, a growing body of research on internet uses by non-migrant youth suggests that this medium is used not only to support offline relationships (see e.g. Livingstone and Bober, 2005; Mesch and Talmud, 2007), but also to provide young users with valuable resources for identity construction. One reason for the creation of virtual identity is explained by teens' aspiration towards a new self, realized through the trying on of different roles in order to experiment with facets of identities suppressed in offline situations (see e.g. Donath, 1999; Suler, 2002; Turkle, 1996). More specifically, researchers argue that the internet's anonymity and absence of visual and audio cues help adolescents to express their emotional worlds and develop intimate relationships (Holloway and Valentine, 2002; Valkenburg et al., 2005).

Based on this understanding, the present study focuses on the online experiences of immigrant adolescents, who are undergoing an even more complex process of maturation and whose 'virtual' life might compensate them for some of the many difficulties stemming from relocation and resettlement into a new and sometimes hostile environment. Accordingly, in focusing on the case of former Soviet Union youngsters who had arrived in Israel as part of the 1 million immigration wave, this study investigates the roles that the internet is playing in these immigrant adolescents' transition into a new society.

This study assumes that due to the internet's unique characteristics, such as interactivity, anonymity and cultural variety, it might be especially central

in young immigrants' adaptation to a new society and in their search for a new identity, alongside preserving the original one. Thus the present study highlights the intersection between adolescence, relocation and the internet, focusing on five possible recourses provided by the internet for immigrant youth:

- a source of information about the new society;
- a cultural resource for social empowerment;
- a communication platform with native-born peers;
- online contact with the former homeland and friends left behind; and
- the only safe haven for trying on new roles and identities.

## METHOD

The present study is based on in-depth interviews conducted in 2005 with 70 immigrant youth from the former Soviet Union aged 12–18, who had been living in Israel for between six months and five years. The sample consisted of 27 boys and 43 girls, and was solicited using a combination of two non-random sampling methods: snowball and quota. The sample was divided equally between the urban center of Israel and smaller towns in the southern part of the country, and between the more 'veteran' immigrants who had been living in Israel for three to five years and 'newcomers' (between six months and two years).

Two trained research assistants of Russian origin conducted the all interviews in Russian. The interviews took place in the youth's room at home and lasted on an average for one hour. The interviews focused on the main patterns of media usage, while distinguishing between different print and electronic media in the Russian, Hebrew and English languages; the gratifications sought and acquired from these media; and the roles of different media in the participants' social and family lives. In addition, a series of open-ended questions were asked about various aspects of the participants' social and cultural integration, such as the use of the Russian and Hebrew languages in everyday life; friendships with Israeli-born children; and the sense of belonging to the host society and to the homeland.

Although the interviews did not focus solely on the internet, this medium emerged as the most central theme. As a result, a significant part of the interviews was directed to questions regarding the participants' access to the internet; how much time was spent surfing the internet; favorite websites, their main characteristics and the reasons for surfing m; other internet-related activities; patterns of internet surfing before immigration; the attitudes and meanings associated with internet-related activities, and so forth.

The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and submitted to a grounded analysis, as is customary in qualitative studies (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Each transcript was read and reread and coded for emerging categories.

For example, a quote by a female teenager referring to a desire to compare her appearance with standards of beauty appearing on the internet and another one dealing with body image were grouped into a category labeled 'feminine identity'. This category, in turn, became a sub-category in the more general theme of using the internet to experiment with new identities. These themes are illustrated by several quotes as 'exemplars' that serve not only as evidence of themselves, but stand for other similar quotes representing the more general theme under discussion.

## **RESULTS**

Overall, the findings revealed that the internet was the most favorite medium for immigrant teenagers, although most of them began to use it only after immigration to Israel. Before immigration, only 15 of the 70 participants had any access to the internet, whereas in Israel 62 participants used the internet regularly, at least once a week. The average amount of time spent surfing the internet was two hours per day. Of the participants, 52 had an internet connection at home and 38 had one in their bedroom; 10 stated that they surfed regularly but did not have a computer at home – they usually had access at school and more rarely at their friends' houses.

### **Learning about the new society**

One of the most vital tasks related to relocation into a new society is the need to learn everything from scratch, meeting the challenges posed by the need to learn norms of behavior, lifestyle, customs and so forth. In this regard, the findings suggest that most of the participants used the websites established by former Soviet Union immigrants in Israel that offer information about Israeli society and its various institutions. Moreover, of all the media available to the participants, including television channels, radio stations and newspapers in their mother tongue, the Russian-language internet was the one cited more often and elaborated upon as the major source of much valued information and learning in their ongoing process of cultural and social integration. For example, Ania explained how the internet helped her to reduce the knowledge gap and therefore some of her anxieties and insecurities:

First of all, when I came here, I entered Google and read the news about Israel. Through the news I discovered that in Israel there are sports, concerts. I discovered that Israel is not a completely different world. It gave me a sense of security that I am not in a totally foreign world. I thought that I will need to learn everything anew, but it turned out that the difference is only in the language. (Ania, 12, 1.5 years in Israel)

The information sought after in the internet extends along a continuum: from macro-issues of learning about current events and politics, to the micro-level of practical information related to everyday life and recent trends of

local youth culture. Moreover, it was evident in many of the interviews that the immigrant teenagers were aware of their parents' incompetence regarding various aspects of life in Israel. Hence, instead of consulting with them, they surfed the internet both for practical information and prospects for a better future:

There is this website that translates things from Russian to Hebrew. That's important. There are news sites about the political and economic situation in Israel. They explain the world we live [in] today. And besides this, I enter a chat, choose a topic and correspond. I can ask all kinds of questions and receive all kinds of answers; for example, about life in a different city. Let's say, Herzelia [a largely well-to-do town in the center of Israel]. Is it good or bad there? What's interesting there? How is the weather? We don't plan to live in Beer-Sheva [a peripheral city in the south] forever. Later we will decide where we wish to live. (Jenia, 16, one year in Israel)

I search for everything on the internet. A vacation in Eilat [a resort town on the Red Sea], for example. I look at pictures about Haifa [a port city in the north of Israel] or the Mediterranean Sea. And I registered on a portal that has all kinds of important and interesting things: jokes, stories, technology, trips, and vacations. In technology, I am interested in information about popular cars [in Israel], in trips – where is a good place to travel. (Niya, 15, 1.5 years in Israel)

In contrast with participants such as Niya and Jenia, who were searching for practical information, other participants were looking at Russian-language websites for information aimed at familiarizing themselves with the local youth culture. This role of the internet was especially important, given the fact that due to language and cultural barriers, most of the participants did not have friends among local peers who could serve as their guides into the local cultural labyrinth:

When I arrived in the country, I found Israeli music on my own on the internet. When surfing at Zvuki.ru [a Russian musical website], I found that they had a category called 'Israeli Music'. I entered, listened, and loved it. I was particularly interested in what they wrote there about Israeli music and since then I download Israeli songs from this site. (Arcadia, 16, two years in Israel)

Thus, the data suggest that the internet joins more traditional media which serve as socializing agents in immigrants' first steps towards adjustment to the host society (see e.g. Durham, 2004; Elias, 2008; Kim, 2001; Zohoori, 1988). Moreover, the findings demonstrate that in comparison to other media, the internet has even stronger potential to assist immigrants' integration, due primarily to the enormous diversity of websites in their mother tongue which provide useful information about the many facets of life in the host country. That is, the linguistic diversity offered by the internet releases the pressure associated with acquisition of the host language for the sake of

cultural learning, as it provides young immigrants with a non-threatening linguistic environment within which they can explore their new home. Furthermore, the internet offers immigrant adolescents not only the formal and unidirectional information published by online newspapers, but also information provided by the more 'veteran' immigrants participating in the chat and discussion groups, thus facilitating a transfer of valuable knowledge from more experienced to less experienced immigrants.

### **Social empowerment**

The findings reveal that a typical feeling shared by the participants in their initial stages of settling down was that of helplessness and disorientation due to insufficient language knowledge and misunderstanding of local codes of behavior. This sense of psychological insecurity is accompanied often by a long-term shortage of economic resources, which places significant limits on young immigrants' ability to satisfy their various needs and desires. As a result, during their first years in a new country, the participants felt a deep sense of inferiority towards the local residents, whom they perceived as much more self-confident, successful and powerful.

Hence, in parallel with surfing the various websites oriented towards the new society, its customs and culture, the internet was exploited to reinforce original cultural identity, and so to gain better status in the new social environment. This was especially important due to the fact that the participants' self-esteem and confidence had been damaged, among other factors, by an offensive reaction to, and even rejection by, local peers and adults. In response, most of the participants wished to emphasize their cultural superiority over local Israelis, often with the help of websites originating in the homeland:

I don't like Israeli boys. They walk around in dirty and torn clothes. In my hometown everybody was clean, dressed nicely. When I am sad, I surf the internet. I can find pictures there, interesting stories about Russia, even to remind myself what a man should look like ... I wish I could show this to my classmates at school, so they would see how everything there is so beautiful ... I want so very much for Israelis to understand how they should dress. This is very important if we are to raise Russian immigrants' status. (Anastasia, 13, two years in Israel)

Through Google I can find pictures of Minsk [the city he came from]. I have visited these websites many times in order to look at pictures of Minsk ... it's the homeland. I download these pictures so that later I can show them to my Israeli friends: 'Look where I lived! It is not Beer-Sheva.' (Kiril, 16, three years in Israel)

According to Kiril, Beer-Sheva, where he currently lives, is 'a small town, dirty and crowded, in comparison to Minsk'.



In addition, this need to show off Russian cultural attributes was particularly evident in the pictures chosen by the participants for their desktop background: usually pictures of their favorite Russian pop stars, Russian landscapes or pictures of the participants' hometown downloaded from the internet. The internet, in this case, served as a testimonial as well as a source of legitimization for maintaining the Russian identity in Israel.

Alongside recruiting homeland websites in order to resist local assimilative forces, the participants used the internet to reinforce their personal capabilities, such as intellectual, athletic or technical abilities and hobbies perceived to be superior to those of local teens:

Sometimes I feel worthless, as if Russians are not as good as Israelis. So I try to be better than them in school, in general knowledge. I am proud of the fact that I am a good student, that I know lots of things ... Thanks to the internet, I always have something to say. (Anna, 12, five years in Israel)

I prefer professional websites that explain how to build internet sites. I also like to redesign computer games. I even changed my cellphone. I've downloaded a program from the internet and put it into my phone. As a result I don't have the Hebrew and the Arabic languages in my cellphone, but only the Russian and the Ukrainian. What does it give me? A feeling of power! (Andrei, 15, 1.5 years in Israel)

We can see from the quotes that the internet helps immigrant teenagers to change the balance of power between what could be weak and dependent immigrants and powerful hosts. This role is particularly evident in Andrei's quote, as the internet provides him with a means to declare his resistance to local identities, as they appear in Hebrew and Arabic menus in his mobile phone. Here, there is evidence of internet use as a central tool in immigrants' social empowerment as well as in their struggle to legitimize their original identity, as suggested by Georgiou (2006b). Such internet roles are especially important, given the fact that the living conditions of most of the participants were characterized by a high shortage of material resources, which placed an additional obstacle in the way of their efforts to improve their social position.

### **Preserving connection with the homeland and co-ethnic peers**

The findings suggest that most of the participants longed for the people and places they had left behind, and they constantly looked back at their very recent past, from which they had been cut off so abruptly. In the following quote, Jenia expresses the frustration of a crisis experienced with the loss of significant parts of her previous identity, including friends and a part of herself as an athlete. Serving as a lifeline to a past life, she reattaches herself to it with the aid of the internet:

I want to find a chat related to my city. It's a pity that I haven't found it yet. I have been looking for it since I arrived in Israel. I found my school website.

There've been a lot of changes there. I've visited my sport center's website. I read news about last [sports] competitions, saw pictures ... faces of people that I know. I want so badly to find some people to correspond with ... My whole life was spent there. (Jenia, 15, one year in Israel)

It appears that the internet helps Jenia to continue her ruptured life story, providing her with an opportunity to follow recent events in her previous school and sports center. Other participants also used the internet in order to maintain ongoing contact with the former homeland, such as following recent trends in popular music, political events and even the weather in their hometown. Hence, in the situation of relocation and resettlement, when the old links have been torn asunder and the new ones have yet to be established, the internet is used by immigrant adolescents for virtual reconnecting to the homeland, thus preserving some continuity between the past and the present, keeping alive their original life story. These findings are much in line with an extensive discourse on 'diasporic identity', conceptualized by Safran (1991) and further developed by Clifford, who stated that:

diaspora culture ... mediates, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place. (1994: 311)

Furthermore, most scholars agree today that the internet offers a new context for thinking about diaspora, as it becomes a main medium of 'selective social interaction and symbolic belonging' (Castells, 2001: 37). Accordingly, the present study suggests that immigration can induce nostalgic emotions typical of the diasporic condition, even among very young immigrants who use the internet to reconstruct the link with their homeland.

In addition, a considerable part of the participants' internet use was dedicated to interpersonal communication with Russian-speaking teenagers in Israel and other countries, as well as with the friends left behind. These contacts with co-ethnic youngsters were stable and very intensive. Many exchanges evolved around issues of romantic nature, while others were based on mutual interests typical to young immigrants who were making their first steps into new surroundings:

I don't feel safe either at school or on the street. I feel safe only when I participate in the [Russian] chats. I start asking questions and people ask me. People from different countries, from Ukraine, Israel, Germany ... All speak Russian ... I just need a person who understands me. (Aljona, 13, two years in Israel)

I correspond regularly with some guy. I know him from Russia. I write him letters several times a month since I've arrived here. Don't think that there aren't boys here for me. it's just because I need somebody who understands me. I need to talk with a person heart to heart. About what? About new experiences, about feelings. (Alina, 16, 1.5 years in Israel)

Both Aljona and Alina express a longing for an internet soulmate with whom they can share their experiences as new immigrants and confide their feelings. Thus the internet is perceived by them as an aid in this complicated process of immigration, a way to maintain contact with soulmates who must be Russian speakers like themselves, and who can understand the ‘real me’, even if this ‘me’ is being modified to something new throughout the initial years of settling down in Israel.

This ‘real me’ can be understood in terms of the conceptualization of a ‘true self’ on the internet (see Bargh et al., 2002), which consists of ‘those identity-important and phenomenally real aspects of self not often or easily expressed to others’ (2002: 34). The participants believed that the internet facilitates expression of their ‘true self’, but only in interactions with fellow Russians. It would seem that the immigrant ‘real me’ can emerge and flourish in the safe environment of the internet, but mostly when it meets another ‘true self’ that shares a similar cultural background.

### **Practising social interaction with local peers**

The findings reveal that the social circle of most of the participants consisted of other immigrants of the same cultural background. Offline relationships with local teenagers were described in terms of antagonism and mutual distrust. As a result, friendships and romantic relationships with local teenagers were extremely uncommon in the sample. In these circumstances the internet provided the immigrant teenagers with a relatively safe environment in which they could initiate contact with local peers without fear of being mistreated or ridiculed, and so negotiate and clarify those issues necessary for their personal development:

I like to chat with people through the internet. It should be a girl, of course. So it would be interesting to talk to her. Usually I correspond in Russian, but once I wrote to an Israeli girl, too. Now I want to correspond with an Ethiopian [immigrant] girl. At my school there are a lot of Ethiopian girls, they are beautiful, but it is not acceptable for Russians to date Ethiopians. (Kiril, 17, four years in Israel)

Once my friend and I organized a chat with 10 people from Jerusalem, Haifa, Rishon Lezion ... The important thing was that different people took part in this chat. There were immigrants from different countries, from Argentina, from France and local Israelis. Boys and girls. We met each other in this forum ... One particular time we picked a subject – it was about love – and we discussed it for several hours. (Andrei, 17, five years in Israel)

Here, the internet serves as a central social resource for one of the most crucial challenges of adolescence – the exploration and realization of the growing need for friendship, love and intimacy. These virtual contacts help to break significant social, cultural and linguistic barriers between the immigrant

teenagers and their local counterparts, thus contributing to mutual trust and understanding. Moreover, the findings show that a real meeting with local youth could be very traumatic for immigrant youngsters due to the lack of cultural knowledge and the differences in dress, dancing style or musical taste from those of local peers. Such apprehension is especially prominent in the following statements by Alina and Masha, who prepare for meaningful contact with local teens by surfing the internet:

I visit an Israeli site devoted to discos. There you can see what discos look like, what Israelis do there. It is interesting to see how they have fun, what they wear, how they behave. I would like to go myself, but it's possible that I could come to a disco and wouldn't know how to act. But this is important. I just arrived. There are many problems. So, in the meantime, I only watch on the internet. (Alina, 15, 1.5 years in Israel)

My favorite site is one that a girl from my class built about our school: what happens during the day, who fought with whom, who made friends with whom. I don't like to hang around and ask about things, and this way I can read other opinions, just to be in. I mean that, if someone asks me about something, at least I can respond. When I come to school I know what's going on. It is quite understandable, since in school I am not at the center of things. (Masha, 13, three years in Israel)

While this practice differs from virtual role-playing and identity experimentation on the web, it seems to fulfill quite a similar role: exploration of new social skills under conditions that minimize the danger of social sanctions, risks and alienation. Furthermore, these findings support previous studies of the compensating function of host television in its role as 'surrogate friend', filling the void of face-to-face communication with local peers, especially during the first years in the host country (see e.g. Elias and Lemish, 2008; Zohoori, 1988).

### **Experimenting with new identities**

Despite the intensive and diverse use of the internet by most of the participants, not one of them mentioned situations where they wished to adopt an invented identity, such as one of a local teenager, in order to be able to experiment with role-playing. It is possible that such absence reveals the depth of identity crisis that is a result of migration, as well as the intensity of the young immigrants' involvement in negotiations between their original identity and the new identity options available to them:

Here [in Israel] I don't know anything. I don't even know who I am. The only thing I definitely know is that I am a human being, a biological unit, who needs food, water and security. I am not even sure that I am a thinking creature when I meet native Israelis. Because every time I try to express my thoughts in

Hebrew, people look at me as if I was crazy, and I feel myself the same way. Here I feel as somebody took off my skin or, at least, my clothes ... I feel as if I was a fly in the spider's web. I make some moves, but they are all wrong and I get more and more confused. (Elena, 16, six months in Israel)

I don't feel at home here. I feel like I was a guest. What do I do about it? Try to find a balance. When I hear how the Russians, let's say my parents, criticize Israelis – it pisses me off. I think that they simply don't know Israelis and then can't judge them ... Every day [at school] I represent Russians to the Israelis and at home I represent Israelis to the Russians. Actually I am alone. (Andrei, 16, five years in Israel)

For recent immigrants such as Elena, this was an especially hard process, as they found it difficult to understand the local norms and codes of behavior in parallel with managing the loss of their original symbols of status and markers of identity. Although the more 'veteran' immigrants such as Andrei manage to gather sufficient knowledge about the host culture and local residents, nevertheless they found themselves in a daily struggle over identity, which was accompanied often by a deep sense of loneliness.

As a result, the central role that the internet plays for the identity formation of these adolescents is expressed in the negotiation with their real-life identities. An important aspect of forming a new identity which was of interest to the participants was a Jewish identity: that is, seeking to understand what it means to be Jewish in Israel. In this regard, the findings show that the participants were confronted frequently with host residents' hostile attitudes that questioned the former Soviet Union immigrants' affiliation with Judaism. In these circumstances, the internet became the main source of information on Jewish holidays and religious rituals – knowledge which further helped the immigrant teenagers to cope with the hosts' biased attitudes to decide which aspects of Jewish identity they wished to adopt:

The Israelis don't like Russian immigrants ... My teacher only gives us books to read by Jewish writers. I think that by Jews she means only Israelis, only those who were born here ... I use the internet a lot. You can learn on the internet about [Jewish] customs, holidays, kosher laws and tradition ... In my opinion our teacher doesn't even know what *Tu-Beshvat* is [Jewish holiday celebrating the spring renewal of trees and nature]. Once she told us something, and I remembered it very well, because my grandma explained it to me almost the opposite way. So I checked on a website called 'Rabbis' and found out that my grandma was right. I didn't argue with the teacher. There is no point. I just know that I am right. (Misha, 13, 1.5 years in Israel)

Sometimes I go to [istoki.ru](http://istoki.ru) – it's a Russian-language website about Judaism. I like to read there about the Jewish family, about the roles of the woman in the family, about [Jewish] lifestyle. It is interesting to me. But once I read an interview with an important religious person in Israel. He said that the

immigrants from Russia are not real Jews; that we should not be accepted here. Why does he get to determine who is a real Jew and who is not? My mother is converting to Judaism. If she completes it, then I'll become a Jew too. But how does it make me be any better? (Masha, 11, 1.5 years in Israel)

A second central theme related to identity construction emerges from the interviews with female teenagers who were involved in an intensive search for renewed feminine identity, one aspect of which was related to their need to reconstruct a self-image based on new standards of beauty. A typical question asked by many female adolescents – ‘Am I attractive?’ – was transformed into a more confusing one: ‘Am I perceived as attractive in my new country?’ Such questions suggest that female teenagers felt a need to reconstruct their feminine self-image – a task that turned out to be especially difficult, given the immigrants’ lack of social experience with local residents. Due to this sense of ambiguity, which often was combined with fear of direct contact with local men, some participants were looking for answers on the internet, as can be seen in this quote from Olga:

Israeli men embarrass me. I don't understand how they react to me. Sometimes they look like they are interested, but then it turns out that they didn't really mean it ... I like to enter [Israeli] websites to meet someone. There are pictures of women who want to meet men ... who want to get married ... I look there and compare – am I pretty enough? (Olga, 17, 1.5 years in Israel)

The importance of appearance that fits into the local youth culture is typical for this age group, as various forms of consumer culture, such as clothes, hairstyles, accessories and the like have become central signifiers of an in-group, disassociating the adolescent from younger children on the one hand, and adults on the other, and marking a growing sense of independence of taste and personality. This is clearly more so for girls, who are socialized from birth to evaluate their self-worth as based primarily on their attractiveness and individuality as related to sexuality and consumerism (see discussion in *Mazzarella and Pecora, 2007*).

Finally, these findings demonstrate that use of the internet for role-playing and identity experimentation, which it was expected to find on the basis of some previous studies of non-migrant adolescents cited above, was not evident in the data. Thus, the findings reinforce the suggestion that the internet is used more commonly for strengthening real-life relationships than for inventing virtual ones. It could be even more prominent in the case of immigrant youngsters, who are involved in a demanding process of new identity construction in the offline reality, and who hold on to those identity components that are most important to them, while searching the web for answers to real existential problems rather than experimenting with invented ones.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the existing literature on the roles fulfilled by the media for migrant populations (see e.g. Elias, 2008; Georgiou, 2006a; Kim, 2001) by highlighting the dominance of the internet in the lives of immigrant adolescents. The study found that due to its unique characteristics, such as cultural and linguistic diversity, accessibility, interactivity and anonymity, the internet provides young immigrants with valuable cultural, social and emotional resources for personal growth and empowerment, and develops and strengthens many aspects of their evolving identity in a critical period of initial settling down, when their life circumstances place them at the major material and social disadvantages typical of immigration.

First, the findings demonstrate that most of the participants shared a deep sense of loss and expressed intense feelings of longing for Russia. The internet allows them to find and to reinvent their own 'Russia', since they can preserve those parts of their homeland that they miss most while being in full control of the frequency and intensity of their relationships with its virtual forms (e.g. youth portals, institutional websites, photography collections, etc.).

Moreover, it should be emphasized that immigration and the initial stages of cultural adaptation are among the most vulnerable of human situations that may provoke a deep sense of insecurity. In contrast, local residents are perceived by the immigrants to be more successful and powerful. The findings suggest that the internet serves as a cultural resource that facilitates 'pro-Russian' pride (be it a nostalgic view of the hometown or a desire for a more elegant style of dress), thus raising the immigrant teenagers' self-esteem. This pride is reinforced also through use of Russian-language websites that provide the young immigrants with valuable resources for maintaining and cultivating their personal abilities and hobbies.

These findings are much in line with contemporary discourse on the diasporic identity cited above. While this discourse has emphasized the sense of loss and separation from home and original identity typical of the diasporic condition, it has come to recognize also that there is a celebration of the loss of such fixed concepts. Explained in terms of a postmodern experience of diaspora in which homeland and identity have become fluid, this shift is indicative of the new possibilities of identity formation and notions of belonging that emerge in this process today.

Furthermore, the study shows that the internet offers accessible opportunities for interpersonal interactions with co-ethnic peers, many of whom are going through the same problems of adjustment to a new culture. As a result, the internet not only helps them to cope with the loneliness typical of the first period following immigration, but also contributes to the development of virtual support networks of immigrant youngsters that assist them to confront the two major challenges in their lives – adolescence and relocation.

Alongside establishing meaningful contact with their homeland and co-ethnics, the internet was used in order to learn about the host society and to create friendships with local peers. Here it should be emphasized that the participants distinguished between two kinds of Israel: the real and the virtual. While 'real' Israel was perceived as hostile and frightening, virtual Israel (e.g. forums, online newspapers, official websites for immigrants, portals of popular culture, etc.) was perceived as an attractive and safe place with which the newcomers could identify more easily. Thus, virtual Israel served the immigrant teens as a kind of 'peephole' as well as 'fitting room'. It allowed them to examine life in Israel safely, unnoticed as 'a fly on the wall', and to try on new roles and identities while preparing for and reflecting on direct encounters with offline Israeli reality.

Moreover, the participants had much more trust in Israeli websites and were more willing to adopt the new values and codes of behavior suggested there than by Israeli peers or teachers. Therefore, it appears that in comparison with local residents, the internet was much more efficient in providing immigrant youngsters with a positive referent group. In so doing, the internet facilitated their initial socialization, helping them find their own distinct way into a labyrinth of local culture and lifestyle and so to construct their new cultural identity. Similarly, it is not surprising that participants' first meaningful contact with the local teenagers took place in chat and discussion groups, and these experiences were described in much more positive terms than their communication with 'flesh and blood' Israeli youngsters. This finding is in line with the growing research literature on the social and psychological implications of web-based communication, suggesting that often the internet is used as a forum for expanding social networks and consequently enhancing the chance for self-confidence, social abilities and emotional support by people who are socially anxious (see e.g. Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham, 2007; Campbell et al., 2006; McKenna and Bargh, 2000).

In summary, the internet seems to be playing a central role in the hybrid identity construction of immigrant youth, since it is able to support several identities at once: it allows the concrete body to live in multiple cultures at the same time, to balance them one against the other, and to create individual combinations of their competing and complementary Russian–Israeli ingredients. Moreover, 'safety' is a key concept in this analysis, since the internet offers the safe and trustworthy information so crucial for cultural integration, a safe means to interact with local peers, a safe network of transnational social support and a safe arena for practising the newly-acquired identities.

In contrast to popular discourse suggesting that the internet serves adolescents mainly as a 'playground' for adventures, pleasurable experimentation and risk-taking (see for example critical discussion by



Livingstone, 2007), it would seem that the internet serves as a ‘safe ground’ for immigrant youth. Perhaps in a life so shuttered by uncertainties, the internet becomes an anchor of stability. As Bharat et al. (2004) have suggested, the internet has the potential to advance empowerment, especially for those on the margins of society. Thus, the present study has relevance for many other cultural contexts where there is a need for the less privileged members of society to overcome social, cultural, economic and digital divides. In the words of 16-year old Jenia: ‘It is outstanding that we have the internet. Thanks to whoever created it – it helps me survive.’

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