

# Chapter 16

## Immigrants' Internet Use and Identity from an Intergenerational Perspective: Immigrant Senior Citizens and Youngsters from the Former Soviet Union in Israel

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter analyzes how the need to preserve ethnic identity and affiliation with one's homeland is expressed and fulfilled through Internet use by two distinctive groups of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel: Immigrant youngsters aged 12-18, and immigrant senior citizens aged 65 and above. The aim of such simultaneous examination is not to identify the obvious intergenerational differences in Internet use but rather to increase our understanding of the Internet roles for different groups of immigrant users, irrespective of age. The findings are based on two recent studies: A study conducted in 2006 with 70 immigrant adolescents and a study conducted in 2009 with 32 seniors. Both studies reveal important similarities that shed light on the Internet's role in maintaining connection with one's country and culture of origin and preserving homeland identity among different generations of immigrants.*

### INTRODUCTION

Immigration to and integration in a new society are among the most dynamic and complex processes in an individual's life, characterized by numerous discoveries, confusions and challenges that eventually lead to significant personal changes. According to Maines (1978), one may distinguish

between two different paths of immigrant adaptation, *body* and *self*. The first addresses instrumental aspects, such as finding suitable housing and employment, while the second entails establishment of new social contacts, long-term socialization to new values, norms and codes of behavior and new identity construction alongside preservation of the original one.

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Hence, immigrants' evolving identity necessarily combines identification with one's new home with longing for the old one; looking *around* at the new environment but also looking *back* at life in the faraway homeland (Sreberny, 2000). Moreover, in the era of ethnic renaissance, youngsters with immigrant backgrounds also feel the need to reconfirm and reinforce their ethnic identities. Such youth face a particularly multifaceted and complicated identity task, as they experience cultural adaptation at the same time as preservation and reaffirmation of their homeland identity (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

In this sense, media offer immigrants a variety of resources helping them in their ongoing adjustment to a new society and maintenance of their ethnic identity (see e.g. Bailey, Georgiou, & Harindranth, 2007; Elias, 2008). Recent studies also noted that alongside preservation of certain aspects of the original identity, immigrants renegotiate and modify this identity through interaction with homeland media content perceived and interpreted through the prism of local reality. Furthermore, over the past decade, the Internet became a major medium that provides immigrants with a variety of tools, resources and technological platforms that may be used in their attempts to maintain their original identity and to strengthen their affiliation with homeland and with compatriots in other countries. Hence, the Internet facilitates creation of digital diasporas that share a common cultural background, a common set of symbols and a common history, thus preserving a distinctive ethnic identity (Ding, 2007; Elias and Shorer-Zeltser, 2006; Everett, 2009; Yang, 2003).

Accordingly, this chapter analyzes how the need to preserve ethnic identity and affiliation with one's homeland is expressed and fulfilled through Internet use by two distinctive groups of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) in Israel: Immigrant youngsters aged 12-18 and immigrant senior citizens (hereinafter: "seniors") aged 65 and above. The aim of such simultaneous examination is not to identify the

obvious intergenerational differences in Internet use but rather to increase our understanding of the Internet's potential for preserving original cultural identity among different groups of immigrant users, irrespective of age. The findings are based on two recent studies: A 2006 study of immigrant youth that included in-depth interviews with 70 immigrant adolescents (Elias and Lemish, 2009) and a 2009 study of older immigrants that included 32 in-depth interviews (Khvorostianov, Elias, & Nimrod, in press 2012).

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Immigrant Internet Use**

Most contemporary scholars agree that the Internet has become a major medium in immigrants' lives, providing them with resources for "selective social interaction and symbolic belonging" (Castells, 2001, p. 37) and expanding space for intra-community communication, self-expression and self-representation (Cohen, 1997). One primary Internet function popular among immigrants is correspondence via e-mail and video chat with friends and family all over the world (Georgiou, 2006), facilitating the creation of digital diasporas who find on the Web diverse and inexpensive options for ongoing contact with people who remained in the homeland or immigrated to other countries (Ding, 2007; Everett, 2009; Hafkin, 2006; Yang, 2003).

Besides serving as an efficient tool for interpersonal communication, websites in the mother tongue provide immigrants with updated information about current events in their country of origin and within communities of their co-ethnics in other countries. These new communication patterns expand the volume of the traditional immigrant press, thus strengthening contacts within the diaspora and creating virtual ethnic communities that share not only historical memory but also common experiences in the present (Elias & Shorer-Zeltser,

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