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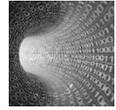
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Abstract

This article aims to explore how using the internet may facilitate coping with the challenges of immigration in later life, based on the case of older Jewish immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel. For that purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with 32 immigrants living in southern Israel. Results indicated that internet usages by the study participants were: (1) Managing health; (2) Nurturing professional interests; (3) Maintaining and extending social networks; (4) Appreciating the past; and (5) Enjoying leisure. Each usage seemed to preserve and even strengthen the participants’ self-worth and improve their quality of life. These findings suggest that older immigrants who use the internet practice, in fact, strategies of successful ageing, which help them to cope not only with the challenges associated with ageing, but also with the tremendous difficulties and losses posed by immigration.

Keywords

ageing, coping, elderly immigrants, FSU, immigration, internet use, Israel

Introduction

Immigration in later life is an extremely stressful life event. While coping with the normative challenges of ageing, older immigrants also have to face the many difficulties of immigration. These may include, among others, social and cultural isolation, language

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constraints and poverty. Current studies suggest that the internet may serve as an adaptive tool that helps immigrants to integrate into the new society, while simplifying contact with their country and culture of origin. There is also a significant amount of research demonstrating that the internet may help older adults cope with stressful life events. Yet, no study so far has examined how using the internet may facilitate coping with the challenges of immigration in later life. Hence, the study reported here aimed at revealing the roles of the internet for elderly immigrants in the case of Jewish immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) in Israel, based on these two growing bodies of literature, each shedding light on the empowering role of the internet for disadvantaged groups.

Immigrants' internet uses

Mass media play a variety of roles in immigrants' lives, in keeping with the diversity and dynamics of the ongoing adjustment to a new society and preservation of their original cultural identity (e.g. Bailey et al., 2007; Elias, 2008; Georgiou, 2006a). Recently, the internet has become a major medium assisting immigrants in these processes, since it provides them with valuable resources for personal and group empowerment that are scarcer or less available via other media. In this respect, the internet offers a space in which immigrant communities, lacking economic or political power, are able to develop efficient channels for spreading information that is vital to their survival in the new society. Moreover, the internet encourages an intra-communal discourse on issues of discrimination and exclusion, which are usually excluded from the mainstream media (e.g. Elias and Lemish, 2009; Elias and Shorer-Zeltser, 2006; Georgiou, 2006b).

Another major consequence of immigrants' internet use is strengthened affiliation with their homeland and with their compatriots in other countries. Hence, the internet facilitates the creation of digital diasporas, who find on the Web rich resources for maintaining an ongoing contact with their country and culture of origin and with people of similar ethnic background dispersed all over the globe, as well as for preserving a distinctive ethnic identity and even for initiating collective political actions (e.g. Ding, 2007; Everett, 2009; Laguerre, 2005; Yang, 2003).

As a result, the proliferation of the internet is also responsible for the expansion of the transnational lifestyle within immigrant populations. If in the past many immigrants could not afford frequent contacts with relatives abroad, homeland visits or overseas business cooperation due to high costs or political constraints, today transnational ties emerge with unprecedented range, depth and significance, due to technological tools available on the Web (e.g. Hafkin, 2006).

Internet uses in later life

Unlike immigration, ageing is not a radical life transition but a gradual process that involves many transitions. Some of them, such as retirement or moving to a seniors' community, are anticipated. Others, such as widowhood, may be unexpected. Some occur suddenly while others, such as health deterioration, may be gradual, and occur over several months or even years. While these changes may be normative for this period in life, they may nevertheless be accompanied by stress and require a long process of acceptance and coping (Kleiber, 1999).

The advancement of computer technologies and the cybernetic revolution have provided older adults with many new opportunities. Unfortunately, most seniors still lack access to the virtual world, and thus do not benefit from it. The percentage of internet users among people who are 60 years old and over is much lower than among younger age groups (20–40% vs. 70–90%), and online seniors tend to have higher education and higher income than offline seniors (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2007; Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010). This digital divide results from a combination of cultural, economic, technological and physical constraints, such as the cost of a computer, fear of technology, lack of available training and technical support, and difficulties with reading onscreen small print (e.g. Kiel, 2005; Xie, 2007).

The ‘inferiority’ of seniors in the digital world has numerous negative consequences. On a personal level, seniors lacking computer skills often feel that they are left behind and no longer part of the modern world. In addition, they are perceived as less desirable employees, which leads to a continuous decline in the number of seniors participating in the workforce. Hence, the digital divide and the relatively poor new media literacy among seniors put them in both social and financial risks (Riggs, 2004).

There is, however, a growing group of seniors that use the internet on a daily basis. Their main uses of the internet are: (1) Communication medium – the internet is used for maintenance of social networks with family and friends, as well as a tool for making new friends, and help removing geographic and transportation limits; (2) Information source – increased access to current affairs, health and medical information, consumer information, online education, etc.; (3) Task-orientated tool (e.g. shopping, financial management and travel planning); and (4) Leisure activity – older adults use many leisure activities offered by the web, such as family trees, photo albums, games and virtual hobbies (e.g. Cody et al., 1999; Nimrod, 2011; Opalinski, 2001; Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2004).

The benefits that older adults gain from using the internet are as diverse as the usages. Previous research suggests that using the internet may help older adults cope with stressful life circumstances. Learning computer and internet skills enhances a sense of independence (Henke, 1999), initiates a process of empowerment (Shapira et al., 2007), and raises seniors’ self-esteem and self-confidence (Furlong, 1989). Using the internet is also associated with higher levels of social connectivity and perceived social support, decreased feelings of loneliness, lower levels of depression, and more positive attitudes toward ageing (e.g. Cody et al., 1999; Dickenson and Hill, 2007; Fokkema and Knipscheer, 2007).

Older immigrants in Israel

About 150,000 Jewish immigrants from the FSU aged 65 years and over currently reside in Israel, comprising about a fifth of Israel’s elderly population (Brodsky et al., 2010). This immigrant population is characterized by an extraordinarily high human capital: about 53 percent hold an academic degree and 79 percent were occupied in the FSU in white-collar professions (Sicron, 1998; Tolts, 1997). Moreover, in the FSU Jews were the most educated ethnic group (with levels of academic education four times higher than in the general population) and were considered the intellectual and cultural elite, also known as intelligentsia (Slezkine, 2004).

Despite the unique cultural resources, most of these immigrants have failed to integrate in the host society and to acquire the Hebrew language. As a result, they have difficulty realizing their rights, feel embarrassment in their contacts with the locals, and suffer from alienation and social isolation (Lowenstein and Katz, 2005). Moreover, the majority of FSU older immigrants (about 80%) have experienced the traumas of the Holocaust or of other atrocities of World War II, and Israel's frequent security crises evoke the trauma repeatedly (May-Ami, 2006). Since they were not able to accumulate retirement pensions in Israel, these immigrants subsist on a social security allowance (worth around \$400 per month for singles, and \$600 for couples), living under or near the poverty line. Most of them reside in public housing in the poorest neighborhoods of peripheral towns, suffering various health problems; some of them forgo medical care due to their economic distress (Brodsky and DellaPergola, 2005).

It is therefore not surprising that much higher levels of depression, despair and suicidal thoughts were found among elderly immigrants than among their local counterparts (Ron, 2007). In parallel, there is difficulty in offering aid to these individuals, since most of them are not familiar with the psychological and social services, which did not exist in the FSU, they do not regard mental support or welfare services as a viable means of improving their ability to cope with their hardships (Aroian et al., 2001; Soskolne et al., 2006).

While many current studies deal with possible ways for improving the life quality of elderly immigrants (Bolzman et al., 2004; Thomas, 2003; Torres, 2006), no attempt has been made to examine what kind of resources are offered by mass media in general and the internet in particular. The present study aims to rectify this. Moreover, the Israeli case provides an especially fertile ground for such research, because unlike other countries, where immigrants' age is relatively young and subject to restrictions, Israel welcomes Jewish immigration non-selectively and is currently home to a large group of elderly immigrants.

Methods

Sample

The study applied convenience and snow-ball sampling methods. In the first stage, we contacted 52 members of a social club targeted at the elderly FSU immigrants. The club is located in a medium-sized city in the south of Israel with a high concentration of older immigrants from the FSU: 40 percent of the senior population of the city are Russian speakers, compared with 20 percent within the total population of Israeli seniors. Sixteen club members who were active internet users were invited to participate in the study. All of them accepted the invitation with great enthusiasm. Furthermore, since it was important to include in the sample seniors who were not affiliated with the club, in the second phase we asked the participants to recommend their friends who were internet users. As a result, another 18 elderly immigrants were contacted.

Although we used non-random sampling techniques, an effort was made to achieve a balanced gender composition of the sample, as well as representation of immigrants with different periods of residence in Israel and of varied ages. The final sample comprised 15 women and 17 men, whose age ranged from 69 to 89 years (Mean=76) and period of residence in Israel ranged from six to 19 years (Mean=14). Most participants (29 out of 32) had an academic degree. The over-representation of educated seniors in the sample

is not surprising given an especially high level of education among the Russian-speaking Jews and a higher rate of people with academic degrees among older internet users. The participants' sole source of income was their social security allowance and all of them lived in poor neighborhoods. Only six participants could speak fluent Hebrew; 18 could speak some Hebrew, and eight had trouble even with basic communication.

Data collection

A series of semi-structured in-depth interviews was conducted in 2009, each interview lasting 90 minutes on average. At the beginning, participants were asked to provide a short description of their personal history. Then, they were asked to describe their internet usage and their expectations of the internet, to evaluate their computer and internet skills, to describe their favourite websites and to illustrate other online activities. Interviews were conducted in Russian by the first author, audio-taped and fully transcribed. The participants' names and personal details have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Data analysis

The data obtained from the interviews were open-coded manually with notes written at the margins of the transcripts. An inductive process of axial coding followed, and analytical categories were identified as they emerged from the interviews. As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), three flows of analysis were applied for summarizing the findings. The first flow involved first and second authors independently analysing the transcripts. Once the key themes were identified, constant comparison techniques were used to refine codes and categories. The second flow of analysis included the development of data summaries on each theme. These summaries were translated into English, presented to the third author and further discussed. The third flow involved verifying major findings and drawing conclusions.

Each of the authors represented a different discipline – sociology of immigration, gerontology and leisure studies – with a shared interest in communication studies. Therefore, in this collaborative attempt, we recognized that each of us authentically voiced different views and approached data in different ways. The differences between us added multiple perspectives when co-constructing the meaning of texts and provided a richer interpretation, but also raised several disputes regarding the framing of data interpretation. The different interpretations were discussed and adjudicated, and in the end there were no cases of data that were omitted due to unbridgeable gaps.

Findings

All participants, regardless of their demographic characteristics, had used the internet for the first time only after immigration to Israel. Even those who immigrated after 2000 had not owned a home computer in the FSU, while those few participants who had used computers at work did not have internet access. Despite being relatively new internet users, participants indicated that they made an intensive and varied use of the internet (two hours of internet surfing per day on average). Five main internet uses emerged from the interviews: (1) Managing health; (2) Nurturing professional interests; (3) Maintaining and extending

social networks; (4) Appreciating the past; and (5) Enjoying leisure. As shown below, each of these uses seemed to preserve and even strengthen the participants' self-worth and improve their quality of life.

Managing health

Like other older adults, participants considered their health a major challenge. Moreover, they felt that this challenge was exacerbated as a result of their immigration to Israel. Due to their very low income, none of them could benefit from complementary health insurance and hence they had a limited choice of medical care. In addition, availability of medical information and contacts with care givers were often hampered by language constraints. Thus, most of the participants used the internet for online medical services and health-related information. For example, Dora (72, immigrated in 1994) told us that she experienced difficulty understanding her physician and she therefore asked him to write down the diagnosis in English, and then searched for the information on Russian websites:

I don't always get full answers from my doctors ... I can never grasp the full meaning of what they say and cannot precisely formulate my questions in Hebrew. I feel embarrassed. That's why I surf the Internet [in Russian] and look for the information over there. Basically I get medical consultation on the Web.

While for most participants the Russian-language websites served as an additional source of information on health-related issues, for some they also served as 'supervisors' of the Israeli healthcare officials. For example, Olga (71, 2005) regarded Israeli doctors' recommendations with distrust and was particularly concerned about taking unfamiliar medications. Hence, Olga used to 'google' the English name of the prescribed medication and then searched for information on Russian generic medications with which she was familiar.

Since all participants experienced major difficulties in their interpersonal communication with Hebrew-speaking healthcare providers, they used the websites of Israeli Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) for online scheduling of appointments and receiving medical test results. The participants emphasized that they hesitated to speak with medical care officials due to their fear of not understanding fully what they were told, or not explaining themselves properly. Hence, they felt much more comfortable using the Hebrew-language websites, where they could grasp the information without being embarrassed or misunderstood.

I frequently visit the *Klalit* [HMO] website to check my medical test results ... I also make appointments with doctors through this website. I can read Hebrew a little bit. It is much easier for me than to talk by phone. (Shlomo, 76, 1989)

It appears, therefore, that the internet served as a means for coping with medical issues and for better management of participants' health. Thanks to the internet, they could better understand their health condition and the treatment they got and thus feel more in charge of their health despite their poor economic situation and the language constraints.

Nurturing professional interests

Having left behind a major part of their professional achievements in their 'previous lives' in the FSU, participants felt deprived of an opportunity to enjoy a sense of social significance in Israel. They believed that 'everything they had achieved there does not count here' and that they were 'deadweight' in the eyes of the Israeli society. The internet helped them cope with such negative feelings in two main ways: by helping to maintain their existing professional identity, and by developing new professional interests.

Maintaining existing professional identity. Many participants reported that they used the internet for keeping in touch with their former workplace and colleagues. Thanks to the internet, they were able to re-create a network of former co-workers and their communication became more intensive, diverse and intimate:

I found my former colleagues online. Thanks to the Internet our communication improved, became more frequent and richer ... I had been working in a very good team. Life has scattered us apart, but the Internet reunited us ... In most cases, as former teachers, we end up talking about pedagogy and children's education. (Lidia, 73, 1989)

I have an active e-mail correspondence with my former colleagues. I like to talk to them and learn how our factory is doing. They also have many questions for me. I know our production process very well and can give advice. Even today my experience is in demand. (Zinovi, 86, 1995)

The ongoing contact with the former workplace not only helped the participants to cope with social isolation and loneliness, but also raised their self-worth, since they felt that their professional knowledge was still needed and appreciated. Moreover, for some participants the internet served as a resource for extending their career and acquiring new professional contacts in Russia, Israel and other countries. Mastering their internet skills, these participants gained access to the professional resources they needed, thus continuing their career:

I couldn't find any [professional] understanding in Israel. Hence I had to search for partners for professional discussions and I found them through the Internet. I found a Russian popular science website, they published my article, and I started receiving feedbacks [...] Internet helps me in my work. All the reference materials are from there. For me the Internet is everything. Without it I am nothing. (Haim, 88, 1990)

Developing new professional interests. While some participants used the internet for retaining their original professional career, others developed new professional interests, also using the internet as the main resource for professional fulfillment and inspiration. Dora (72, 1994), for example, a nurse by profession, was looking in Israel for a new occupation or hobby that 'would keep me busy', as she put it. Then she met on the Web young immigrant parents who wanted their children to learn Russian, and so she became a Russian language teacher. This, in turn, had opened for her a new professional horizon as she discovered her passion for teaching. Moreover, while preparing tutorials for the lessons she also started to draw pictures and write children's songs, which she publishes on the Russian website imama.ru (a website with a collection of children's literature and games). Likewise, Irina

(73, 1999) acquired a new profession by using the internet resources and realizing her old-time dream to start sewing:

Since I remember myself, I wanted to sew, but life took me in other professional directions ... Today I learn everything on the Web. I found websites dedicated to sewing and learned it step by step. I also found clients on *Odnoklassniki* [a Russian version of *Facebook*]. I put my ad there and people began to approach me. And it's not just an additional income. Now I have many more acquaintances ... It's really important to me.

This pattern of developing a new professional interest was characteristic of female participants only, whereas male participants used the internet for preserving their original professional identity. Despite the gender differences, whether the internet was used by elderly immigrants for preserving their existing professional interests or for exploring new ones, it clearly raised their self-esteem as active and vital members of society.

Maintaining and extending social networks

One of the most significant problems for most participants was the problem of communication with family and friends. For many, old friends and relatives remained in the country of origin. Moreover, in several cases, the children of the participants left Israel for Canada, the US and Australia. For them, the possibility of communicating with their children and grandchildren was the main motivation for buying a computer and acquiring the basic skills of using the internet.

I started learning how to use the Internet because of the separation from my son's family. Now *Skype* is opened for hours, and I can watch my grandchildren playing. And if I see they start fighting I yell at them: 'Stop it or I'll tell your daddy'. (Lidia, 73, 1989)

The first years after my son left for Australia were very difficult. He called quite frequently but these were very short calls. It was too expensive. And then he told me about *Skype*, and everything has changed ever since. We talk every single day. I play with my grandchildren; I tell them stories. My son wants me to teach the boys Russian, so we have virtual lessons too. (Sofia, 72, 1994)

Alongside using the internet to communicate with family members and other meaningful people from their current life, participants also utilized internet resources for finding friends from their youth. Virtually every participant performed this kind of search using social network websites such as *Vkontakte.ru* and *Odnoklassniki.ru* (Russian analogies of *Facebook*). In those cases where the participants could not find their friends on the Web, they tried to find these friends' children or grandchildren. The search usually began with a message to people they did not know, saying something like: 'Dear Mr./Mrs., is there any chance that you could be the son/daughter of ...?'. In many cases that message eventually led to re-establishing contact with people whose trace had been lost several decades ago.

Thanks to *Odnoklassniki.ru*. I found my former classmates and neighbors. But none of my classmates knows how to use the Internet; I found them through their kids. Now I am frequently chatting with their kids, write them e-mails [...] I have more in common with them than with their parents. At first the computer united us, then some other things. Sometimes they ask me for advice and it's a nice feeling that my life experience can be of help. (Larissa, 70, 1996)

The situation described by Larissa was typical of other participants as well. Often when they found their old friends on the Web, after a couple of weeks of excitement they realized that there was nothing else to talk about. But the correspondence with their friends' children unexpectedly became very active and sometimes new friendships were established. That said, whether the internet reunited families and old friends or helped creating new ones, all these uses seem to solve one of the major problems encountered by elderly immigrants – that of loneliness and social isolation – since it helped them maintain and expand a circle of friends and acquaintances and enjoy intimate communication despite the physical distance.

Appreciating the past

Memories of the past played an important role in the participants' current lives and were expressed in many of their internet uses. These uses may be divided into two different perspectives of the past: the personal past and the national history.

Appreciating the personal past. This category of internet uses included participants' attempts to reflect on their personal biography as well as to collect pieces of information about their extended family history. Here the virtual visits to beloved places were probably the most common internet use, and it often accompanied a process of life review aimed at integrating different periods of participants' lives:

I surf the websites of Volgograd and Leningrad. Because these are the places I miss the most. I look at the views of the city. I try to find those streets I know, images of houses that I am familiar with. This gives me a feeling of presence and kind of a sad happiness. (Svetlana, 68, 1996)

I installed *Google Earth* on my computer. Now I click the name of a city and pictures of different places appear on the screen. [...] I have my entire life in these photographs. I have collected about 600 pictures, put them in the slide show in chronological order and I play it while drinking tea. (Lev, 72, 1991)

Furthermore, several participants were searching the Web for information about their family's history, and especially about relatives who had perished during the Holocaust. In Boris's case (78, 1992), the internet was even used for commemoration:

My close relative and I built a website where we publish articles, memories and documents telling how our relatives were murdered. My grandchildren browse this website too and learn about their family history.

It appears from the quote that the internet helped Boris not only to establish connection with his family's past, but also to bring his grandchildren closer to their family roots. In this sense, the internet simultaneously serves as a resource for commemorating the past and for connecting it to the participants' current life.

Appreciating the national history. This category reflects two major and inseparable aspects of the participants' identity: the Jewishness and the Russianness (see, e.g., Elias, 2011), which were equally expressed in their search for materials related to the history of Jews in the USSR, as well as to the history of the prominent carriers of the Russian-Soviet culture.

Since the Holocaust is a central component in Jewish identity in general, it was also valid for our participants, who had a special interest in the tragic fate of Jews in the USSR during World War II. Mikhail (76, 2001), for example, created an archive of testimonials found on the Web of Russian-speaking Jews who survived the Holocaust:

I have a folder named 'The Holocaust' where I keep all related materials I find on the Web. There are some historical facts but also the testimonies of Jewish people telling their stories. It touches me deeply as a human being, and especially as a Jew.

Another use which was connected to the history of Russian Jewry was searching and collecting biographies and pieces of information about famous Jews who took a major part in the building of Soviet culture. Felix (71, 1999) explains:

I created a library about famous [Russian] Jews. For me it is interesting to find their biographies: did they study in a Jewish school, did they help other Jews. For example, I found [on the Web] that Raikin [famous satiric actor] was fluent in Yiddish and that Zahader [famous poet] visited Israel in the 1960's and even wrote a poem about Jerusalem.

Finally, using the internet for appreciating the past was related to the Soviet culture in general and its prominent representatives. Larissa (70, 1996) tells:

I frequently participate in Russian forums, particularly those related to Russian culture. For example, I've read that Ludmila Zikina [a famous folk singer] has died, and it is important for me to write about her life, that she was a symbol of the Russian folklore music and the Soviet Union. [...] These are our artists, because our youth is intertwined with their youth; we grew up on their work.

The theme of virtual connection to the homeland culture was common among the internet uses of other participants too. The participants followed the reports in the Russian online newspapers about old movie stars of the Soviet period; watched episodes from old Soviet films on *YouTube*; and visited the websites of Russian museums. They were not interested in the current Russian culture but in the culture of a specific period in the history of the FSU. Hence, the internet's cultural resources allowed participants to achieve continuity in their life narrative which had been interrupted by immigration, to consume cultural goods of the Soviet period and thus to reaffirm their belonging to the Soviet cultural elite. In doing so, they created a strong and coherent connection between their past and their current life in a new country, and gave it meaning.

Enjoying leisure

Normative later life losses (e.g. widowhood, health decline, etc.) combined with the trauma of immigration made anxiety and bad mood frequent guests in our participants' lives. Under these circumstances, they searched for e-leisure activities, namely enjoyable online activities, which could help them to get distracted from the hard feelings. These internet uses were divided into two main categories: 'Entertainment' and 'Fostering intellectual interests and hobbies'.

Entertainment. Entertainment was one of the main needs fulfilled by the internet, as most of the participants employed internet resources in search of jokes, songs and comedies. The following quote by Leonid (76, 1993) is characteristic of this category:

Sometimes I am in such a terrible mood, that I'd rather lay myself into the coffin. In this situation I go to the 'Russian Israel' website. There you can find everything you want: anecdotes, aphorisms. This is how I begin to contain my grief. Sometimes I might listen to a song, or watch a video. That's how I calm myself down.

While Leonid's quote demonstrates finding virtual refuge in familiar entertainment formats, several participants had developed completely new types of leisure activities, and especially online games:

I didn't enjoy gaming before ... But now I play on the Internet. I like the *Meijin* game most of all. I almost always finish first. Other gamers are younger, but I finish before them. It means that I am still in pretty good shape. I like the feeling of excitement, cheerfulness ... I don't need soap operas and books anymore. Internet allows me to do what I like. (Elena, 70, 1993)

As can be seen from the quote, the new leisure activity not only improved Elena's mood but also made her feel better about herself and raised her self-confidence as she was able to defeat younger players. Apparently, acquiring internet skills brought significant change in the participants' media preferences. If in the past television was the main medium to satisfy the participants' need for entertainment and relaxation, today they search *YouTube* for films, clips and series, or are engaged in online games. To an extent, e-leisure has replaced the participants' traditional offline leisure.

Fostering intellectual interests and hobbies. Along with internet uses aimed at entertainment, the internet also helped participants enjoy their leisure by pursuing old and new hobbies and intellectual interests:

I always loved history. Now I read about everything I ever wanted to read: Ancient Egypt, China ... Since I've got a computer, I almost never watch TV. The computer took all my spare time, but I don't think I'm wasting it. On the contrary, I benefit from it. (Shlomo, 76, 1989)

Furthermore, similar to the pattern described above of new forms of entrainment on the Web, several participants had developed new 'online hobbies', such as making collages and albums with pictures found on the Web or creating catalogs on various subjects, such as music, poems and paintings:

Now I have a new hobby. I collect beautiful things through the Web. This how I've created folders with a common topic 'Beauties of the world' [...] I like to read about them, to search for, and also to give as a present to friends [sent as an e-mail attachment]. This is what makes me happy. (Boris, 78, 1992)

Some of these new e-leisure activities corresponded with participants' offline leisure. Svetlana (68, 1996), for example, described how both realities mix in her new hobby – photography, which was originally developed through the internet:

On the Web I always find what interests me. Once it was knitting and I used to search the Internet for new models. But then I quit it and was carried away by photography. I learned a lot about it through the Internet. I take pictures well now and upload them on the website so other people can see them.

The findings thus suggest that the internet is a powerful tool that allows the participants to better spend their leisure time, expand their interests and explore new forms of entertainment and hobbies. In this way, it helps them cope with negative feelings, enables them to experience continuous growth and enhances their sense of wellbeing and life satisfaction.

Discussion and conclusions

The internet uses identified in this study are similar to the main functions found among this age group of the non-migrant population, such as using the internet as a communication medium, information source, task-orientated tool and leisure resource (e.g. Opalinski, 2001; Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2004). All of these uses are, however, coloured by the participants' immigration experience, and seem to be especially characteristic of elderly immigrants. Concurrently with the normative challenges of gradual ageing, these seniors face the trauma of immigration, which often involves unwelcomed retirement (Foster, 2001; Lerner et al., 2005). Surfing the internet thus serves as a means for coping with these simultaneous life transitions.

Managing health through the internet helps participants to cope with ageing despite lacking the host language skills. The literature on chronic disease self-management suggests that when individuals take an active role in managing their health, they adhere to treatment, and thus minimize their condition's effects on everyday life (e.g. Lorig, 1996). Being able to understand and monitor their conditions and the treatment they receive turned the participants from helpless patients into their own health managers. Moreover, being able to receive online services in Hebrew helped them to cope effectively with language constraints. This internet usage was not only vital for the participants' health, but also provided significant personal empowerment.

Using the internet for nurturing professional interests helped the study participants to cope with unwelcomed retirement and the loss of social status caused by immigration. While being deprived of an opportunity to enjoy their past professional achievements, participants gained recognition through online communication with their former co-workers. This communication even facilitated participation in current projects of their former workplace, thus preserving their existing professional identity. In addition, developing new professional interests through the internet compensated for the loss of professional roles, and even led to self-exploration and growth.

The literature on social networks suggests that good social relationships are a prerequisite for quality of life and psychological wellbeing in old age (e.g. Gabriel and Bowling, 2004). Accordingly, our findings show that using the internet for maintaining social networks helped participants cope with the distance from loved ones, thus improving their psychological wellbeing. Likewise, the internet was used for reviving relationships from the past and for creating new friendships. Reconnecting with people from the past is also a part of life review, which is one of the developmental tasks in later life

(Butler, 1963). This is consistent with the fourth internet usage identified in this study. But using the internet for an appreciation of the past was more than just a tool for ordinary life review. It was a strategy that helped participants to weave their interrupted life story into the culture in which they are rooted. Moreover, for many the internet became a means for 'Generativity' – another developmental task introduced by Erikson (1963) that is expressed through 'working for the wellbeing of future generations through various kinds of activities and enterprises' (McAdams and Logan, 2004: 16). Activities such as maintaining a family website, teaching the Russian language, or giving advice to a younger generation, all reflect that motivation.

Using the internet as a leisure resource also helped in coping with the vacuum created by the combination of retirement and the distance from the culture of origin and a former social network. The internet helped participants to expand existing interests and explore new ones, thus facilitating self-expansion and self-reinvention. In addition, it also provided immediate distraction in times of bad mood, thus contributing to their sense of wellbeing. This finding is consistent with previous studies of older immigrants' self-care practices (e.g. Acharya and Northcott, 2007), as well as with the extensive body of research demonstrating that involvement in leisure activities is a key factor in older adults' wellbeing (e.g. Dupuis, 2008).

All five internet uses identified in this study may be placed in the context of several prominent theories of successful ageing. Firstly, the Selective Optimization with Compensation model (Baltes and Baltes, 1990) suggests that older adults use both technological and human resources to compensate for changes in order to continue participation in meaningful activities. Such adaptations were evident in all the internet uses pointed out by the study participants. Furthermore, the Continuity Theory (Atchley, 1999) postulates that in later life people try to maintain life patterns developed in earlier life. That was reflected in uses aimed at preserving continuity, such as using the internet for maintaining existing professional identity and affiliation with the culture of origin. Finally, according to the Innovation Theory of Successful Aging (Nimrod and Kleiber, 2007), new activities in later life may both preserve a sense of self or reinvent it. In this respect, the study shows that the internet provided an opportunity for innovation reflected in those uses aimed at developing participants' new professional or leisure interests, as well as new relationships. Moreover, using the internet was in itself a new activity that had both preserving and reinventing effects.

To conclude, thanks to their internet skills acquisition, most of the participants practiced strategies of successful ageing, thus coping not only with the challenges associated with ageing, but also with the tremendous difficulties and losses entailed by immigration. Similar to younger immigrants, who were the first to discover the benefits of affiliation with 'digital diasporas' (e.g. Everett, 2009), they created such a diaspora for themselves. However, some of their internet uses, especially those aimed at appreciating the past, seemed to be more characteristic of older immigrants.

While younger immigrants utilize the internet to keep abreast of the current events from the homeland and to follow its contemporary culture (e.g. Hafkin, 2006), participants in our study did not show any interest in Russia's present. Their digital diaspora cherishes the memory of a Soviet culture that no longer exists and is mostly accessible through the internet. On the other hand, many of their other internet uses are similar to those found in previous studies on digital diasporas, such as online contacts with family and friends and

virtual visits to significant places in their home country. Finally, the present study shows that older immigrants too can benefit from the variety of transnational professional opportunities that the internet provides, along with a host of potential financial, social and psychological consequences. While in the past only younger and better established immigrants could afford to enjoy a transnational lifestyle (e.g. Remennick, 2002), our findings show that transnational connections created through the Web lead to empowerment and better integration of one of the weakest groups in the immigrant population.

Limitations and directions for future research

As is usually true for any qualitative research, the present study was not free of sampling limitations, such as the convenience sampling method, relatively small sample size and lack of geographic diversity in the sample composition. These limitations preclude proposing generalizations regarding a wider population of older immigrants. That said, we believe that the findings do provide some preliminary indications that internet use may facilitate coping with the challenges of immigration in later life. This claim should be examined among larger and more heterogeneous populations of senior immigrants from the FSU, including individuals with lower levels of education as well as immigrants who reside in other geographical locations. Obviously, the investigation could be extended to older Jewish immigrants of different ethnic origins, such as the Ethiopian immigrants in Israel, as well as elderly immigrants living in other countries. Alongside suggestions aimed at improving sampling methodology and strengthening the comparative potential of the study, it may be worthwhile to explore possible gender differences that find expression in internet uses among older immigrants and to study the process of new technology adoption and its impact on the adopters' family relations, social capital and health.

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