

RESEARCH ARTICLES

The ICTs Implication on the Construction of Immigrants' Identity: The Case of Women from Former Soviet Union (FSU) in Greek Thrace

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Abstract. In this paper we report on the initial findings from a study on immigrant women from former Soviet Union and their connection to ICTs. In order to evaluate the outcomes of this study we administered an initial questionnaire which explored the nature of access and use of new technologies in the lives of immigrant from FSU settled in Greek Thrace. This research involves women of an age range of 18-60 years old. The initial findings reveal that the women were exposed to new technologies, by which keep their cultural identity and contribute to the construction of a new one in order to adapt to the demands of today's world.

Keywords: *ICT, Immigrants' Identity, Women from Former Soviet Union, Greece*

Introduction

The effects of ICTs on contemporary identity have been a subject of debate during the recent years in many host-countries. Some of them had as specific object the ICTs implication on the construction of immigrants' identity. Remennick (1999) addresses the way the Russian-speaking community in Israel has become a typical cosmopolitan, or transnational, community after its settlement in Israel. Most recent immigrants stay in touch with their families and friends in the FSU and maintain economic (e.g. via joint ventures) or cultural (e.g. by watching Russian television channels) ties with their home country. Da Rosa et al (2000) note that fax, Internet, e-mail, chat, SMS, discussion-forums, electronic conference reduced the importance of physical space and boundaries in everyday communication, giving the possibility for new ways of maintaining ethnic ties. Elias (2003) found out that the Russian immigrants in Germany are characterized by very intensive use of the German mass media while the Russian immigrants in Israel mostly prefer the media in Russian due to the differences in the Russian media map in both

countries, to the differences in the integration policies of Israel and Germany and the cultural capital of Jews and Germans from the FSU. Fialkova (2005) claims that Internet sites form one of many ways of uniting dispersed former Soviets who try to keep “multi-stranded relations” connecting together their societies of origin and settlement. Arthur et al (2004) describe the cultural dimension of the digital divide taking in consideration the connection of ICTs and Brockton’s Cape Verdeans. Patrick et al (2005) examine the social implication that ICTs and especially the Internet have for the Fijian immigrants in Brisbane- Australia.

The region of Greek Thrace is an interesting case for analysis due to the multicultural identity of the communities living in the area as Greek Orthodox Christians, Greek Muslims of Turkish origin, Roma, Pomaks, Armenians and recently, Pontian Greek origin immigrants from FSU. At the 1990s, Greece emerged in the European landscape from an emigrant-sending country, during the past century, to an immigrant-receiving country and thus has de facto become a multiethnic, plural society (Cavounidis, 2002). As we read at Petronoti & Triandafyllidou (2003) the existing bibliography on Pontian Greek immigrants faces subjects such as the means by which they are integrated in or excluded from crucial spheres of social and economic life; the impact of their presence on nationals’ self-perceptions as well as the xenophobic/racist discourse in the media; the concentration of newcomers in specific areas of urban centers; cultural problems associated with their arrival; educational policies regarding immigrant children and, finally, the links established between (undocumented) immigrant work and the domestic labor market. Clear correlations between family income, racial or cultural background, educational levels and ICT use have been generally observed. (Arthur et al, 2004).

Although, many Pontian Greeks arrived in Greece in the 1990s, the decade characterized by a wide range of use of new technologies in Greece, there have been no comprehensive studies of ICT use and access in Greece by women members of socially vulnerable groups and more specifically by Pontian Greek immigrant women.

Research Goals

As Pontian Greek immigrants have experienced “a difficulty in integrating in the Greek society and economy, which partly reproduces experiences of

exclusion and Otherness” (Georgiou, 2002) our aim in this paper will be to explore the relationship between ICT use and cultural background of Pontian Greek immigrant women, how they are using the Internet and what they do when they go on-line.

Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature; a case study survey using an ethnographical approach. More specifically this research, as part of the main project (Georgiadou et al, 2006) seeking the experiences of Pontian Greek immigrant women on ICTs, develops from arguments framed in the context of the main research, and focus on the role of ICTs in the construction of cultural identity for immigrant women from FSU. As for this the following questions will be confronted, such as:

1. How is the identity of Pontian Greek immigrants specified;
2. In what ways do Pontian Greek immigrant women use the ICTs;
3. To what extent do ICTs and especially the Internet contribute to the process of constructing the Pontian Greek immigrants women’s identity;
4. What are the possibilities that the use of ICT offers to the immigrant women and in which way should these be evaluated;

Sample

The research involves a non-probability sample of a total of 35 women, identified according to their relation with ICTs and recruited by the snow-balling method in the area of Komotini (capital of Rodopi, one of the three provinces of Greek Thrace). Their low percentage of the total population (less than 10%) and their initial unwillingness to participate in the survey also contribute to the difficulty of a successful random sampling process. Their age ranges were: 18-29 (11), 30-39 (11), 40-49(11) and 50-59 (2). The women born in FSU and then migrated to Greece are considered as the first-generation immigrant women in our sample. We include in them also, those who migrated to Greece at a young age, had spent much of their life in Greece and share many of the socio-cultural characteristics of second-generation immigrants. Most of them (especially the ones over 30) had migrated to Greece with a pre-established cultural identity. These are

the big majority of the sample, as only one of the interviewees was born in Greece and is considered a second-generation immigrant.

Results

The following discussion examines the interview data in aspect of the key questions listed above.

1) How is the identity of Pontian Greek immigrants specified?

Pontian Greek immigrants belong to a special category of immigrants - Returning Diasporas – immigrants as initially were emigrants from the region of Pontos at the Southern coast and the Black Sea to the ex-Soviet Republics, and who finally returned to Greece, their historic homeland. They were considered and considering themselves to be Greeks in the FSU but this had no relevance with the modern Greek life style. Many of them did not speak the Greek language or spoke the Pontian dialect and most definitely the Russian language. Their cultural identities are shaped by the experiences they had living in the FSU, a strong multiethnic society. Pontian Greeks acquired Greek citizenship upon arrival in Greece. As it was observed during the interviews, many old people, immigrants of first generation, were living with their children. It can be said that immediate communication, with family members of first generation, transmits knowledge, values, history and language of their native country. The younger women born in Greece or with a less experience from FSU possess a cultural identity recreated and renewed by a variety of means that are available to them such as interaction with family members, visits to homeland of grandparents, and a wide range of print and electronic mass media among them ICTs, satellite TV, websites. The coming of this community brought in Greece a different cultural capital, a mixture of Russian and Pontian tradition, which needed another approach for adapting to the multicultural society of Greek Thrace, as was described above. Speaking the Russian language is the key element for their Russian aspect of their identity. All of the interviewees speak Russian even the one born in Greece or have arrived at their early childhood.

At the Democritus University of Thrace, (the local University), a Russian Chair is staffed by immigrants from FSU, who manage to strengthen ties with Russian Universities (recently a conference with the collaboration of the International Centre of Education from the State University of Moscow “M.B. Lomonosof” took place at Komotini in last June). The immigrants' connection with

Russian culture is supported by cooking Russian and Pontian dishes with products imported from FSU, easily found in two supermarkets of the town of Komotini known as the “Russian supermarkets”. One video-club (after the name “The Russian Video”) exists also selling exclusively Russian video tapes (even video tapes for small children), Russian music CDs, books of Russian literature, Russian newspapers (МК АФИНСКИЙ КУРЬЕР-МК Athenian Courier Russian Weekly; in co-operation with the Moscow-based МОСКОВСКИЙ), Russian magazines, Russian phone-cards, programs of Russian satellite-TV. Additionally, the interviews indicated that older interviewees in particular are more accustomed to books, reading and seeking knowledge in a more traditional way, continuing the traditional Russian love of books. At this point it must be mentioned that in the province of Rodopi one of the local daily newspapers (PARATIRITIS) is also published in Russian language. Women in the 40-49 age group were mostly readers of Russian newspapers, and of local newspapers as well. Most of the respondents used to read newspapers in FSU, hence after their migration to Greece they continued this activity. Most of the Pontian Greek houses own a satellite antenna, as most of the immigrants continue to watch Russian television even after many years in Greece. This helps them to keep in touch with their old habits of entertaining and cultural traditions they had in FSU.

Greek-Pontian immigrants’ associations mostly deal with cultural activities and show themselves eager to keep also, their Pontian folklore (Ribas Mateos, 2000). From the interviews related to the research, we can find names of these associations such as: “Kerasounta and Gars-”(Names of cities in the Black Sea region), “The Voice of Pallinostountes- Foni ton Pallinostounton”, “Rainsance-Anagennisi”, women’s association “Unity-Enotita”, the Pontian Youth Association: “Trapezounta”. Old Pontian traditions, cultural heritage, folklore dances, theatre, books writing and editing find shelter under these associations. Their arrival in Greece can be described as the regenerator for many Pontian customs and tradition which were forgotten and put into oblivion.

2) In what ways do Pontian Greek immigrant women use the ICTs?

Most of the immigrant women who were interviewed said that they prefer mostly the Internet, the Microsoft Office applications and communication with friends, followed by email and web surfing. Studies, games and telemarketing were not high-priorities for these women.

Table 1: Reasons for Computer Use

	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59
Internet	10	6	5	
Telemarketing				1
Email	5	1	3	
Microsoft Office applications	6	4	4	
Studies	3	1	1	1
Communication with Friends	5	3	2	
Games	2	1	2	
Web search	4	2	3	
Educational software		1	1	
Nothing from above		3	3	1

It is clear from the data that the younger women are frequent computer users in their everyday lives. The unexpected result of the research was that half of the women over 40 used computers sometimes more than 5 hours per day, as this is necessary in their working area.

Table 2: Frequency of Computer Use (Daily or Weekly).

Frequency of computer use(daily or weekly)	18-29	30-39	40-49	49-50
Never		6	5	2
Every day 1-5 hours	5	1	5	
Every day 5-10 hours	2	1	1	
Every day 10-20 hours	2			
A few times a week	2	3		

At this point, it must be mentioned that women, participants in the research from all age ranges, access web pages containing information on jobs and employment, job announcements, seminars, E.U.-funded projects, programmes targeting women and especially socially excluded women, news, cars, psychology, flowers, greenhouses, search engines, chat, games, tourism, pregnancy, health, fashion, beauty, child and family nutrition, health matters, cooking, medicine, women's magazines, local Greek newspapers, Russian newspapers, online Russian bookstores, Ministries in Greece, Universities and Institutes.

Table 3: Frequently Accessed Web Pages

Pages	18-29	30-39	40-49	
www.eydamth.gr	2		1	Local webpage
www.in.gr	6	3	2	Greek searching machines
www.google.gr	5	3	3	
www.yahoo.gr	3	2	1	
www.oaed.gr	1		2	Web pages providing information on job
www.diorismos.gr		1	5	
www.proslipsis.gr			2	
www.asep.gr	1		5	Greek newspapers
www.ta-nea.dolnet.gr		1		
www.paratiritis.gr	1	1	2	
www.xronos.gr	1	1	2	Russian searching machines
www.mail.ru	1			
www.mel.ru		1		
www.yandex.ru		3		Online book shop
www.rambler.ru	1	2	1	
www.ozon.ru	1	1	3	
www.pravda.ru			4	Russian newspapers
www.usvestye.ru			4	
www.moscow.ru			4	
www.icq.com	3	1	1	Chat

Greek is the most commonly used language for reading web pages by these women in the early ages. Russian is more used by older women to access web pages.

Table 4: Languages Used for Reading Web Pages.

Language	18-29	30-39	40-49
Greek	11	8	9
Russian	4	7	7
English	3		2

Based on the interviews' results, it was found that women in the 30-39 and 40-49 age ranges accessed more Russian web pages than the youngest interviewees. The youngest interviewees used the Internet more creative in seeking employment. The largest obstacle to ICT use for this community and especially for women is money and underemployment. Their time is consumed by working many hours and as for this there is not much time to be dedicated to computer use. According to the elders' sayings, most of them own a computer at home because of their children. All of them have mobile phones, but don't have

land line phones and consequently Internet connections or email accounts. Only one of the interviewees said she had an ADSL connection. Additionally the Internet high financial cost in Greece is prohibitive for immigrant women to afford such a cost, as they usually do not own permanent jobs and have other priorities in their lives.

Table 5: Possession of PC at Home or at Work, Internet Connection, Email, Telecommuting, Long Hours Work, on Line Studies, Mobility, Mixed Groups

	PC		Internet		Email	
Age	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
18-29	10	1	1	10	9	2
30-39	7	4	1	10	2	9
40-49	9	2	2	9	4	7
50-59	2		1	1		
	Internet Café Use		Telecommuting		Long hours work	
Age	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
18-29	5	6	10	1	11	
30-39	4	7	10		7	3
40-49		11	7	3	10	
50-59			2		1	1
	On line studies		Geographical mobility		Mixed groups	
Age	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
18-29	8	3	5	6	11	
30-39	8	3	5	6	7	4
40-49	6	5	8	3	8	3
50-59	2		2		2	

It can be said that, access to ICTs is critical for the inclusion of marginalized immigrants to information society and consequently to labor market, and also for the creation of worldwide ties for the members of this community, not only in Greece, but all over the world.

3) To what extent do ICTs and especially the Internet contribute to the process of constructing the Pontian Greek immigrants' identity?

Radio, newspapers, magazines as mentioned before contribute to maintain a part of their cultural identity but Internet, cell phones text, messages, e-mails offer speed, instant connection and remarkable quantity. Our data thus point to the emerging importance of ICTs and the Internet as a means of sustaining contact with relatives in the FSU, of adaptation to life in Greece, and as a source of

information and cultural knowledge. As many of the older women were familiar with Internet use, they accessed more the Russian web pages than the youngest interviewees did, not on a regular basis, but that kept them informed with news from FSU or other relevant sites. Internet can be described as a portal to FSU and the Russian cultural capital which signs their cultural identity. Most of Russian websites are used to access information on Russian daily routine, for chat/ICQ or “virtual match making”. These websites are like a portal to FSU countries and all that were left back. It also can be said that the Internet offers the possibility for immigrant women to find a Russian speaking friend or partner all over the world. Examples of pages used for “virtual matchmaking” are the <http://www.datingnow.ru> (Fialkova, 2005), <http://greece.russiansabroad.com>.

4) What are the possibilities that the use of ICTs offer to the immigrants and in which ways should these be evaluated?

According to the interviewees for a better settlement in Greek society and support of their cultural identity the inclusion of immigrants to information society should be ensured by a continuous process of education, support and consideration on behalf of the state. Immigrants should be subsidized in order to buy computers and get connected to the Internet and simultaneously educated on their personal benefits of inclusion in the information society. Research and official statistics concerning digital inclusion of immigrants of FSU and preservation of their culture in heritage should be funded. In addition, description and analysis of this particular community can hopefully offer new ideas which can be applied for solving problems that other marginalized communities have. Online connection of the Municipal Library of Komotini with Russian libraries should be planned in order to support their interest for reading and seeking knowledge in a more traditional way, continuing the traditional Russian love of books as was mentioned above. The subjects taught in seminars, provided by private Institutions and funded by the E.U., should be more specific and connected to the labor market, so that immigrants would become more specialized and qualified. They should be informed on how technology can enhance their lives, how it can be integrated into all aspects of life, and on the personal benefits of digital inclusion. Information on computer usage should be provided through channels that interact with their way of living and more specifically through persons of their own culture sharing the same problems with them. ICT plan should identify and match needs and resources

and assess training needs of the group. Web-pages containing, e-learning lessons on language, computer use, vocational counseling, culture matters, or other information on health matters, settlement matters, and Greek-Pontian Associations all over Greece, should be constructed and supported by the General Secretariat of Repatriated Greeks or by the organizations implementing policies for immigrants.

Discussion

In a globalized world the four main models of the social and cultural adjustment such as Assimilation (“The melting pot” approach), Integration (becoming an integral part of the host society), Segregation (retaining original values) and Marginalization (no conduct with both origin and host society) cannot be finally adopted for the social and cultural adjustment of the “Returning Diaspora” of Pontian Greeks. The Dialogue Model presented by Kuinan & Auiram (1994), a model that allows the immigrants not only to maintain their cultural heritage but also to engraft the host society with it, seems more appropriate to the conditions of today’s world. As Ess (2005) argues, in the literature on globalization it is commonly observed that in a context of increasing cultural intermixing, individuals and cultures tend to hybridize. That is both individuals and larger cultural groups, in the face of increasing influence and presence of another culture, neither abandon their own cultural backgrounds, traditions, histories customs, language(s), etc.- nor do they absolutely resist any contact with the “outside” culture.

The Pontian Greek “Returning Diaspora” plays a vital role in the society of Thrace as it contributes to the work force of the area and it also provides it with a Russian cultural capital and Pontian tradition. It doesn’t only faces the challenge of maintaining a strong cultural identity and of keeping their ties with FSU but also integrating socially, politically, and economically in their new country their “homeland”. It can be said that becoming familiar with ICTs can also provide useful insight into this challenge.

Many questions erased after the research still need to be explored in the future. Similar studies on cultural identity, ICTs and Pontian Greek immigrants have not been mentioned in Greece. The subject needs a more complex approach by collecting a bigger sample of women, for confirming the initial findings, by

approaching other members of the Pontian Greek immigrant community like men, secondary education pupils, and immigrants with no experience on computers or second generation immigrants with no experience carried from FSU.

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