

Negotiating Cultural Identity in the Age of ICT: A Case Study of Fijian Immigrants in Brisbane, Australia

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present study examines the social implications of ICTs and especially the Internet, by investigating their role in the process by which indigenous Fijian immigrants in Brisbane, Australia, construct their cultural identity. Based on the outcome of in-depth interviews with 77 first- and second-generation immigrants, the study finds that the immigrants across age groups and generations share strong cultural identification as indigenous Fijian. Despite some variation in their views on what constitutes such an identity, what underlies their common sense of belonging is the emotional attachment to their island home fostered by perceived shared cultural heritage. The interview results suggest that this identity is constructed primarily through unmediated interaction with family and other members of the immigrant community, sustained contact with those in Fiji, and visits to Fiji – i.e. more or less “conventional” resources for identity construction. ICTs and the Internet, on the other hand, play a supplementary yet growing role as a new means of communication with those in Fiji and source of information and cultural knowledge. In addition to emails and cell phone text messages which enable communication with immediacy and lower costs previously not possible, the Internet, through country-specific websites and search engines, serves as an emerging medium of cultural learning, especially for younger/second generation immigrants who lack the socio-cultural stock of knowledge and pre-established sense of belonging older/first-generation immigrants possess. The capacity of the Internet to facilitate interaction of people and information beyond time and space allows these immigrants immediate access to an unlimited amount of information on aspects of their cultural heritage, and thereby provides them with a valuable alternative or additional resource for identity construction when their primary resources fail or are limited. While there are currently some obstacles to the full realization of such potential, including limited access and lack of specialized websites, the Internet is likely to gain importance for the future generations of Fijian immigrants who will face a greater task of negotiating their “Fijianness” in an increasingly globalized world.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM

The migration of Pacific Island peoples has attracted much scholarly attention in the past. A substantial body of literature is today available on aspects of the internal migration of Pacific Islanders, especially in the context of Melanesian societies (see e.g. Morauta 1982; Chapman and Prothero 1985; Lode 1985; Haberkorn 1989; Jowitt 2001) where urban migration and other types of domestic movement of people have been pronounced. The majority of the previous research on the international migration of Pacific Islanders, on

the other hand, has focused on Polynesian experiences, especially of Samoans and Tongans, amongst whom international migration has historically been more widespread (see e.g. Lewthwaite, Mainzer and Holland 1973; Pitt and Macpherson 1974; De Bres 1974; De Bres and Campbell 1977; Kallen 1982; Tongamoa 1987; Ahlburg and Levin, 1990; Brown and Connell 1993; Va'a 2001).

While, as many have pointed out, Pacific Island peoples have traveled and migrated across oceans for over 1000 years (Bedford, Macpherson and Spoonley 2001) the growth in international migration both within and beyond the region in the last several decades has stimulated renewed academic interest in the phenomenon. Studies have been undertaken to delineate the historical patterns and changes in the international migration of Pacific Islanders especially to the metropolitan societies of Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada. The key issues examined in the past include the demographic characteristics of the migrant populations (including the population size, age, sex, family composition, educational and professional backgrounds) and the socio-economic impacts of the migration on the home and receiving societies (see e.g. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 1982; Connell 1990; Connell and McCall 1989; Barkan 1992; Naidu, Vasta and Hawksley 2001). These studies have derived from the pressing need for empirical information previously unavailable on the international movement of people as well as for assessment of its various possible impacts and effects.

Among the many Pacific Island migrant communities, Samoans in New Zealand have received the greatest research attention, most probably due to their population size. Samoans comprised 50% of the Pacific Islander population in New Zealand in 1996 (Statistics New Zealand 1998) making up by far the most conspicuous Pacific Island immigrant community in the country, which parallels the amount of scholarly attention they have attracted. Studies on the Pacific Island immigrant communities elsewhere, however, have been lacking by comparison. Few studies have examined the experiences and characteristics of the Pacific Islander communities in Australia, the United States or Canada. This suggests that there is a need for further research beyond the previously studied areas of general historical and demographic patterns, socio-economic impacts, and experiences of larger immigrant communities. Empirical inquiry into the experiences and needs of smaller Pacific Islander communities in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere seems especially important for a more comprehensive understanding of Pacific peoples' experience of migration in its various dimensions and aspects.

The formation of cultural identity is one such dimension of migrant experience that may be fruitfully explored. As pointed out by Bedford, Macpherson and Spoonley (2001) the "islandness" – i.e. what it means to be an "islander" – is becoming an increasingly complicated matter for the Pacific Islanders born and raised outside their island homes. A number of factors, such as access to formal education, diversity of social networks,

intermarriage, language loss, social mobility and geographical dispersal, have contributed to the changing values, experiences and identity of the younger Pacific Islanders in metropolitan societies. Based on this observation, Bedford and his co-authors (ibid.) have argued that a new “Pan-Pacific identity” is emerging among young Pacific Islanders in these societies as they become increasingly aware of their commonalities with the children of other Pacific Island immigrants. While the emergence of such a transnational or regional Pacific Island identity appears to presuppose the decline of more conventional cultural identities based on national origins and ethnic descent (such as “Samoan”, “Tongan” and “indigenous Fijian” identities) anecdotal evidence points towards conflicting trends. In parallel with the emergence of a diffuse, “Pan-Pacific” identity, reconstruction (rather than “preservation”) of conventional cultural identities seems to be under way. Being a person of Pacific Island descent does not necessarily preclude or conflict with what is perceived to be a unique and meaningful experience of being a “Samoan” or “indigenous Fijian”. Identity is not a given, fixed entity but a multi-faceted product of social construction. While younger generations certainly do not experience being a Samoan or indigenous Fijian in the same manner as their parents do, they are able to redefine or refashion their cultural identity by a variety of means that are available to them, such as day-to-day interaction with family members and other members of the immigrant community, visits to island homes, and a wide range of print and electronic mass media. Hence cultural identities based on national origins and ethnic descent may continue to possess significance for younger immigrants, even as these are constantly recreated and renewed.

Among these means of contemporary identity (re-)construction, the interactive media, and especially information and communication technologies (ICTs) deserve special attention. In contrast to the predominantly one-way flow of information characteristic of the traditional mass media, ICTs have allowed individuals and groups located in societies geographically remote from the metropolitan centres greater participation in the exchange of ideas and information at the global level. Country-specific websites such as Fijilive, Fijivillage and others are a case in point: these websites vigorously contribute to the dissemination of information from Fiji, a society conventionally situated outside the route of the global information flow. The Internet has superseded the time and space restrictions that previously hindered communication and interaction of people dispersed across the oceans. This provides the younger (as well as other) members of the Pacific Islander immigrant communities a new and significant means of cultural identity construction. In this context, cyberspace may be seen as a place both to maintain and (re-)create identity, an opportunity to (re-)define a sense of place without having to be within territorial boundaries and with anonymity: it is “a new place in which to negotiate our culture” (Dicken, et al. 2002:509). In this, there is an element of continuity and change – the search for belonging remains but the vehicle changes. Individuals who live outside their country of

birth/ancestral connection are able to remain linked through this new space. They in fact form new online communities that share their time, ideas and beliefs about both the countries in which they live and the one to which they have emotional but spatially distant ties (Anderson, 1997). In the sharing they not only maintain their latter identity through representation on the Internet, but they also offer and are encouraged, by the lack of sanction, to take up other affiliations. Thus individuals in the virtual community are better able to manoeuvre themselves through the various groups to which they belong. Such greater fluidity provides a conducive environment for immigrants who have, on the one hand, a point of reference and a cultural anchor for their ancestral identity, and on the other, room for manoeuvre with their transnational identity.

It is this question of contemporary identity construction and the role of ICTs that the present study is concerned with. The study focuses on the experiences of the members of the indigenous Fijian immigrant community in Brisbane. The reason for its focus on indigenous Fijians, despite the fact that the majority of Fiji's emigrants are Indo-Fijians, is two-fold. First, while the previous studies have tended to focus predominantly on Indo-Fijian emigration, especially since the 1987 military coups d'état, and the consequent skill and brain drain (see e.g. Bedford 1989; Connell 1985; Chetty and Prasad 1993; Voigt-Graf 2002) little research attention has been paid to the experiences of indigenous Fijian migrants to date. Although indigenous Fijians make up only a small percentage of the total emigrant population,¹ analysis of their experience of migration and its effects on aspects of their social life is essential if one is to achieve a more holistic picture of the migration of Fiji Islanders. The study aims to provide preliminary analysis as a step towards this goal. Second, focusing on Indo-Fijian migrants inevitably broadens the scope of the study, as it entails careful examination of the "Indian" dimensions of the immigrants' cultural identity – their knowledge of and identification with the cultures and communities of India as well as of Fiji. This, while it is an extremely important task, was not methodologically viable for the present study within its limited time frame.

This study thus aims at providing preliminary information on the ways in which first- and second-generation indigenous Fijian immigrants in Brisbane construct and negotiate their cultural identity and the extent to which ICTs, and especially the Internet, contribute to this process. This is undertaken, as discussed in more detail below, by means of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 77 indigenous Fijians living in Brisbane and the Gold Coast in Australia. While the information thus collected is not sufficient to make any definitive statement on the questions discussed here, the primary aim of the study is to provide exploratory analysis that has been unavailable to date as a way of encouraging increased scholarly attention and debate in the field in the future.

¹ While our attempts to obtain a precise ethnic distribution of the emigrant population from the Bureau of Statistics were unsuccessful, Chandra's (2003:7) unpublished data shows that indigenous Fijians comprise less than 10 per cent of all emigrants from Fiji.

The study is also intended to benefit, albeit in a small way, members of the immigrant community who generously provided assistance at various stages of the research. It aims to provide some useful information on the manner in which the Internet may contribute to their changing yet sustained link with Fiji and point towards the new possibilities and potentials the Internet offers for creative refashioning of their cultural identity. In other words, the study aims not only to describe the current Internet usage by the community but also to suggest socially meaningful, possible usage of the Internet for the community. The outcome of the research is intended to illuminate a dimension of the current and potential social significance of Internet use.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL CONTEXTS

The effects of online phenomena on contemporary identity have been a subject of intense scholarly and general debate in recent years. Online phenomena have been widely seen as a manifestation of the rise of postmodernity (or, as some would call it, late modernity) the ongoing “paradigmatic shift to the post-traditional order of mobility, pluralism, informationalisation, globalisation, diverse social networks, multiple interpellations and a relentless flow of signs, images and identities” (Diamandaki 2001). It has been argued that the erosion of the significance of physical space and boundaries in the postmodern age, of which the growth of ICTs is a part, has resulted in the decline of conventional types of identity based on national origins and ethnic descent. Websites, emails, chat rooms, discussion forums, MUD (multiple use dimensions) and other space/time–contracting online media offer contemporary individuals a means of transcending physical presence and thereby allow them to construct dynamic and multifaceted identity. Contemporary social life, as Giddens (1991:2) explains, “is characterized by profound processes of the reorganization of time and space, coupled to the expansion of disembedding mechanisms – mechanisms which pries social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time–space distances”. It is the realization of the significance of such new mechanisms of social networks that prompted Rheingold (2000) to propose over a decade ago his notion of “virtual community”: computer-mediated communication has generated new types of social groups that are not bound by time/space restrictions. It follows from this observation that modern identity defined by national and ethnic boundaries is today dissolved by “a syntax of identity play: new identities, false identities, multiple identities exploratory identities” (ibid: 152) – The self has been decentred.

At the same time, commentators have noted a seemingly contradictory trend. It has been observed that, in the face of growing plurality, fluidity and fragmentation of contemporary social life, individuals and groups have sought to reclaim and redefine their local identities in order to gain a sense of belonging and community. While the postmodern condition offers the possibilities of emancipation from tyrannical imposition of conventional identities

and creation of multiple identities and social networks (Gergen 1991; Turkle 1995; Stone 1996) the same process may also result in the renewal of nationalisms and localisms as an attempt by individuals and groups to respond to the growing uncertainty that accompanies this process. As Giddens (1991:183–4) points out,

Processes of change engendered by [post or late] modernity are intrinsically connected to globalizing influences, and the sheer sense of being caught up in massive waves of global transformation is perturbing. More important is the fact that such change is also intensive; increasingly, it reaches through to the very grounds of individual activity and the constitution of the self.

Under the conditions of post/late modernity that thus pose an unsettling threat to one's "ontological security" (ibid:36) reconstructing and redefining more conventional forms of identity and community may be seen as part of the attempt to gain some measure of control in a world that seems increasingly complex and fluid. That is to say, in a somewhat paradoxical manner, "[g]lobalization undermines local/particular identities, but local/particular identities reemerge even more vehemently out of the very conditions of globalization that are responsible for undermining them" (Diamandaki 2001).

Furthermore, it is notably the Internet and related ICTs, the very media to which the decentring of contemporary identity is attributed, that seem to enable such attempts at reconstruction of conventional identities. Diamandaki (ibid.) explains this:

[T]he Internet, a placeless medium, allows for the (re)creation of place. Online communities are actually a human experiment at shrinking back the world and giving immense cyberspace a personalized lifestyle that we can anchor ourselves in... In fact, the same features that seem to undermine national identity also work to serve, reproduce or even strengthen it. The global space, relatively low cost and decentralized openness of the medium allows national identity to use a new, powerful communication space to reconfirm itself, resist homogenizing trends and rework its content under new conditions ... As national boundaries and the function of the nation as a primary source of meaning for people's life shrinks, these net zones of national character become the locus of resistance to homogenization and incorporation.

The Internet is a technology of multiple potentials that may both undermine and reconfirm conventional identities. It may foster new social networks and aggregations whose membership spans across geographical boundaries on a scale never seen before. It may thus create new social groupings and consequent identities whose existence depends on the usage of the Internet. At the same time, the Internet may also be used by other communities, which existed prior to it and can exist without it, as one of the many ways of communication and group identification (Bakker 2004). People bound by the perception of

common national origins, ethnic descent and cultural heritage are one such conventional type of social group that may actively utilize the Internet to sustain and renew their sense of belonging. For such communities, the Internet is not the only, or even the primary, medium of communication; they have access to other mediated and unmediated forms of interaction, ranging from face-to-face interaction to telephone conversations, facsimile, letters and newspapers. What the Internet does for them is to offer extra potentials not available before: online activities for these communities involve “engaging in what they already do in other arenas ... while expanding possibilities for new kinds of thought, interaction, and action” (Katz and Rice 2002: xix). These could have significant implications especially for marginalized or dispersed communities who do not have access to public media or for whom interaction cannot easily or routinely be face-to-face (Mukerji and Simon 1998). As Diamandaki (2001) notes, online networks offer such communities not only possibilities of low-cost dissemination of information on a global scale but also a medium of education and “a permanent archive of collective memory” and history. Da Rosa, Gold and Lamy (2004) illustrate this by discussing the case of Jews for whom online networks have served as an instrument of reaffirming a pre-established identity. Online technologies thus enable existing communities – especially immigrant and other minority communities – to reassert, reconstruct or enrich their national, ethnic or cultural links in new ways. Indeed, commentators have noted instances of the Internet not only linking but mobilizing members of marginalized communities into political action and social movements, thus having significant impact on the “real” life of these individuals (see e.g. De Vaney, Gance and Ma 2000; Delio 2003; Penenburg 2005).

Turning our attention closer home, we find these observations useful in understanding the current and potential usage of the Internet and related ICTs by Pacific Island migrant communities. While relatively little research attention has been paid to the question to date, valuable insights can be derived from Morton Lee’s (2003) pioneering work on the transnational networks of Tongan migrants. Based on extensive interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with second-generation Tongans in Melbourne, Australia, her investigation involves analysis of the dynamics of young Tongan immigrants’ cultural identification and the impact of computer-mediated communication, especially a country-specific website called Kava Bowl, on it. Two points she raises seem particularly relevant to our interest. First, she points out that young, second-generation Tongans actively seek to forge and maintain connection with each other and with other Tongans across the globe in search of a sense of belonging, even as they shift between alternative and multiple identities available to them today. Second, she argues that websites like the Kava Bowl have assisted them in doing so, by facilitating ongoing discussion of what it means to be Tongan and helping revitalize the Tongan language. In her view, the Internet “provides a means for young Tongans, many of whom are feeling alienated from their Tongan ‘heritage’, to feel connected to Tonga. This in turn can strengthen their

identification as Tongan. ... The Internet has the potential to be an important part of such contributions and thus to play a role in retaining Tongans' links to their homeland" (ibid.:241). Hence Morton Lee's findings suggest that Pacific Island immigrants – perhaps especially the youth – may utilize online technologies in a creative fashion to be active in the negotiation and shaping of their sense of self, as observed elsewhere in the world. While the present study is exploratory and the information upon which it is based is far from comprehensive, it hopes to shed some light on similar questions in the context of indigenous Fijian immigrant identity.

The purpose of this study is not to "take sides" in any of the ongoing debates over the impact of Internet use (see Katz and Rice 2002). We do not wish to endorse the view that the Internet as a technology is either inherently destructive or inherently conducive to the sustenance of cultural/ethnic/national identities. However, at the same time, it needs to be noted that we do not attribute to people and their cultures a passive role in the multitudinous ways they constitute themselves; to do so would be to run the risk of reifying people as objects vulnerable to the manipulation of technologies. Accordingly, what we intend to do in this brief study is to illuminate one of the many potential roles the Internet plays by exploring the ways in which individuals and groups may appropriate this technology in negotiating their subjectivity in a world where its organic unity is no longer taken for granted. It is not the intention of this study to refute views on other potentials or impacts of Internet use.

KEY QUESTIONS

The primary objective of the study, as discussed above, is to assess the role of ICTs, especially the Internet, in indigenous Fijian immigrants' construction of their cultural identity. For this purpose, the study examines the following key questions:

1. What is the significance for the members of the indigenous Fijian community in Brisbane of their identification as indigenous Fijian?
2. How is this identity, the sense of "indigenous Fijianness", (re)constructed, and to what extent do ICTs and especially the Internet contribute to the process?
3. In what ways do indigenous Fijian immigrants use the Internet, and does it play any distinctive role, in comparison with other resources for identity construction, such as face-to-face interaction with family and other members of the immigrant community and the traditional mass media?
4. What are the future possibilities that ICTs and especially the Internet offer to the immigrant community in their quest to (re)construct their cultural identity?

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Indigenous Fijian

A rather mechanical definition of an indigenous Fijian would be based on the individual's membership in *Vola ni Kawa Bula* (VKB).² Such a definition would be flawed by the inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in the register system, which are they partly a consequence of the problematic attempt to demarcate a biological "race". Moreover, its reductionistic assumption of biological essence of a person disregards the very foundation of the social group under study: *perception* of shared cultural heritage. We therefore use the term "indigenous Fijian" in a broad sense, to refer to those who consider themselves to share an identity grounded in perceived common ancestry, geographical origins, history and way of life – that is, a perceived common culture that they recognize as indigenous Fijian.³ Accordingly, a few of our interviewees are those who are commonly known as "part-Fijians", such as children one of whose parents is a Caucasian Australian but who nevertheless define themselves as indigenous Fijian. The shortened term "Fijian" is used below for the sake of convenience.

Cultural Identity

Following the example of Morton Lee (2003:5) we use the term "cultural identity" rather than "ethnic identity" to refer to the immigrants' understanding of themselves as Fijian, on the ground that the flexible and inclusive nature of the former makes it more suitable for the type of identity we seek to investigate. Despite their common identification, those who call themselves "Fijian" in Australia today are diverse in their religious affiliations, languages, social networks, life-styles, etc. What it means to be Fijian, for many second-generation immigrants, for instance, has nothing to do with the ability to speak the Fijian language, as discussed below. The notion of cultural identity encompasses such significant diversity of Fijian immigrants while capturing the underlying sense of belonging that connects them.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach of this study is shaped largely by practical considerations: a quantitative research design, which requires a relatively large sample, was avoided due to the limited time frame of the study and size of the research team. The study is accordingly qualitative in nature – a case study whose primary aim is to obtain an in-depth understanding of the role of Internet use in individual experiences of cultural identity

² *Vola ni Kawa Bula* literally means "the book of family lines" and registers members of all *tokatoka* (the smallest official land-owning social units) (Mohamed and Clark 1996:6).

³ It seems worthwhile to note here that what constitutes indigenous Fijian "tradition" or "culture" has been a matter of intense debate (see e.g. France 1969, S. Durutalo 1986, Lawson 1990) although it is beyond the scope of this study to enter into detail.

construction. This, however, is not only a consequence of practical necessity. Commentators agree that the advantage of qualitative research is its capacity to capture the complexity and depth of perceptions and experiences, that is, the life-worlds of research subjects, rather than to measure distributions and correlations of predetermined variables (McCracken 1988; Weiss 1994; Rubin and Rubin 1995). The aim of this study is precisely to achieve such in-depth appreciation of the ways in which the Internet is used by individuals as a tool for construction of their cultural identity. Quantification of their Internet use, though certainly useful, is less likely to be useful in illuminating its dynamics and subtleties. We therefore consider a qualitative approach better suited to our analytical purpose, although it is not without limitations, as discussed below.

METHOD

The study employed as its primary method semi-structured, qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with members of the Fijian community in Brisbane. A total of 77 individuals were interviewed between 26 February and 6 March 2005. The majority of the interviews were conducted in the English language, while two focus group discussions with older members of the community were undertaken in Fijian. The interviewees were identified and recruited by the snow-balling method, which was guided by the principle of maximum variation in terms of age, gender, occupation and educational background (see Figures 1, 2, 8, 6). Probability sampling was not employed in this study, and hence the interview data were examined qualitatively by means of basic coding and interpretive analysis rather than statistical variable analysis. The central objective of this analysis was to capture the role of Internet use in the process of cultural identity construction as experienced by individual research subjects. All data collection and analysis, except data transcription, were undertaken by the research team members.

Figures 1–12: indicate the basic demographic distributions of the interviewees.

Figure 1:

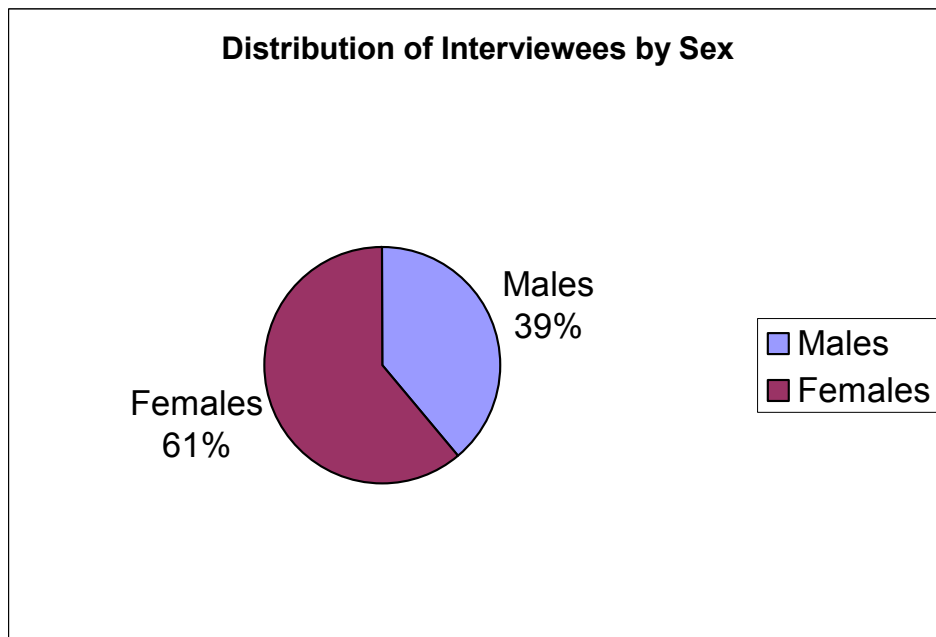


Figure 2

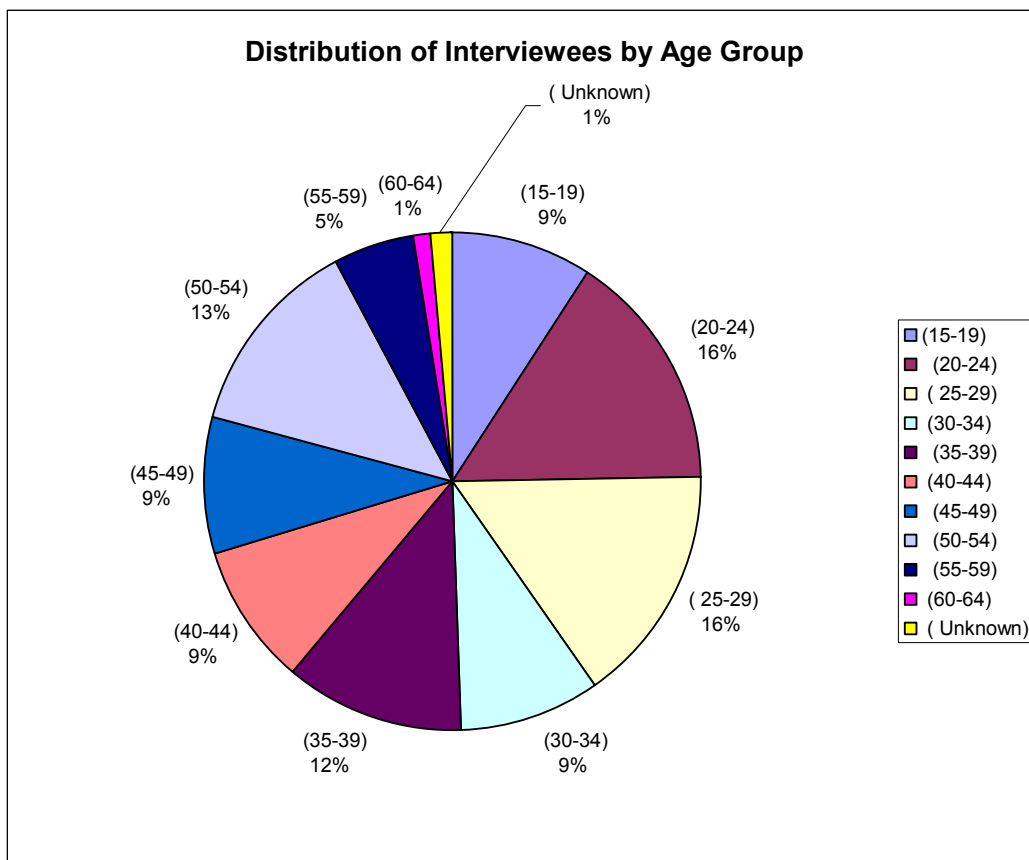


Figure 3

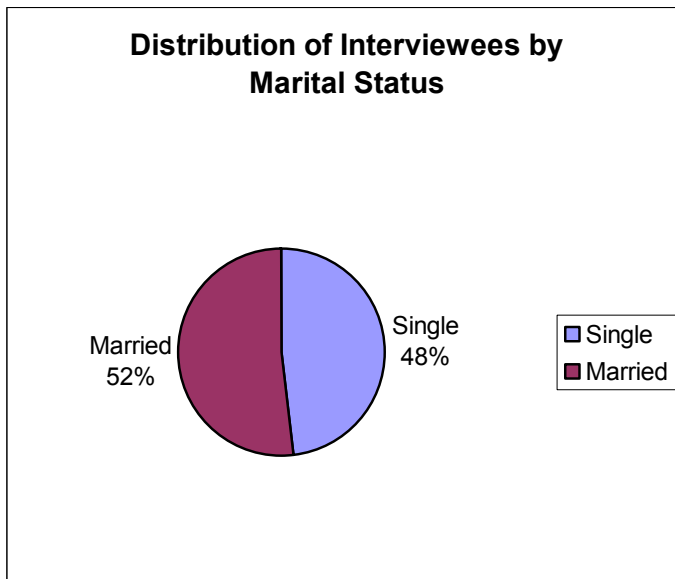
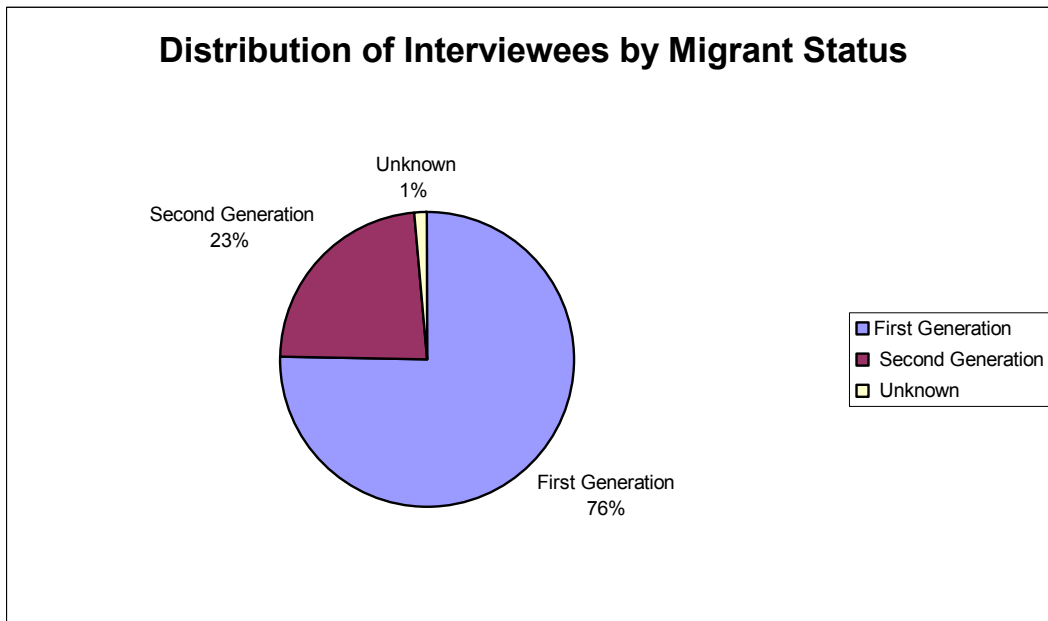


Figure 4



Note: "First generation migrants" refers to those who were born in Fiji and later migrated to Australia.
"Second generation migrants" refers to their children.

Figure 5

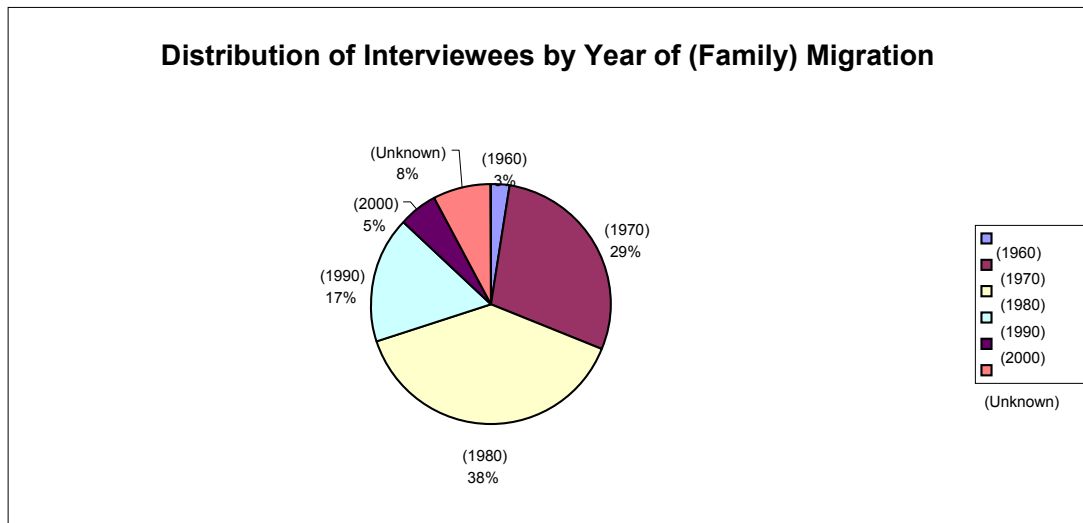


Figure 6

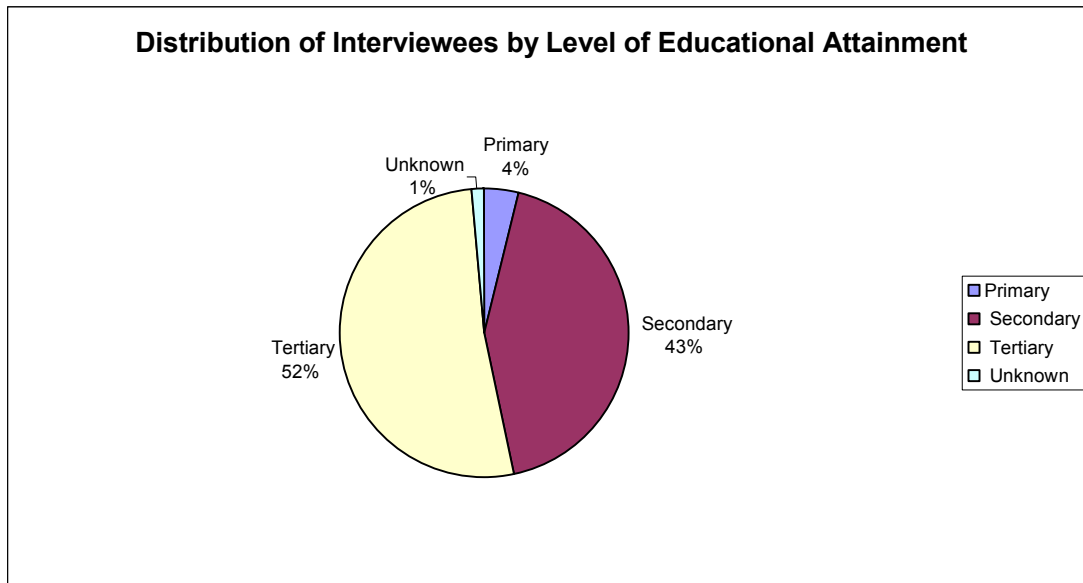


Figure 7

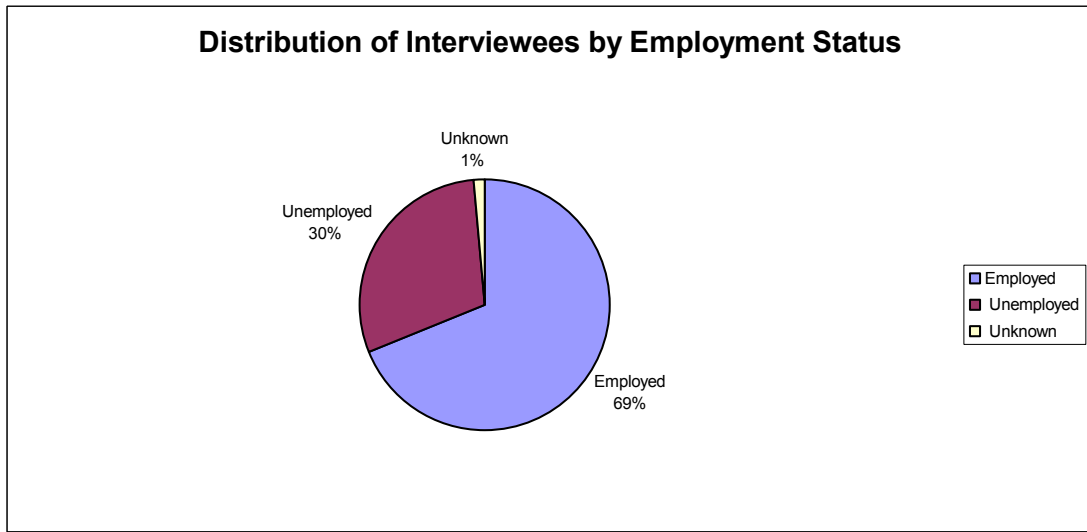


Figure 8

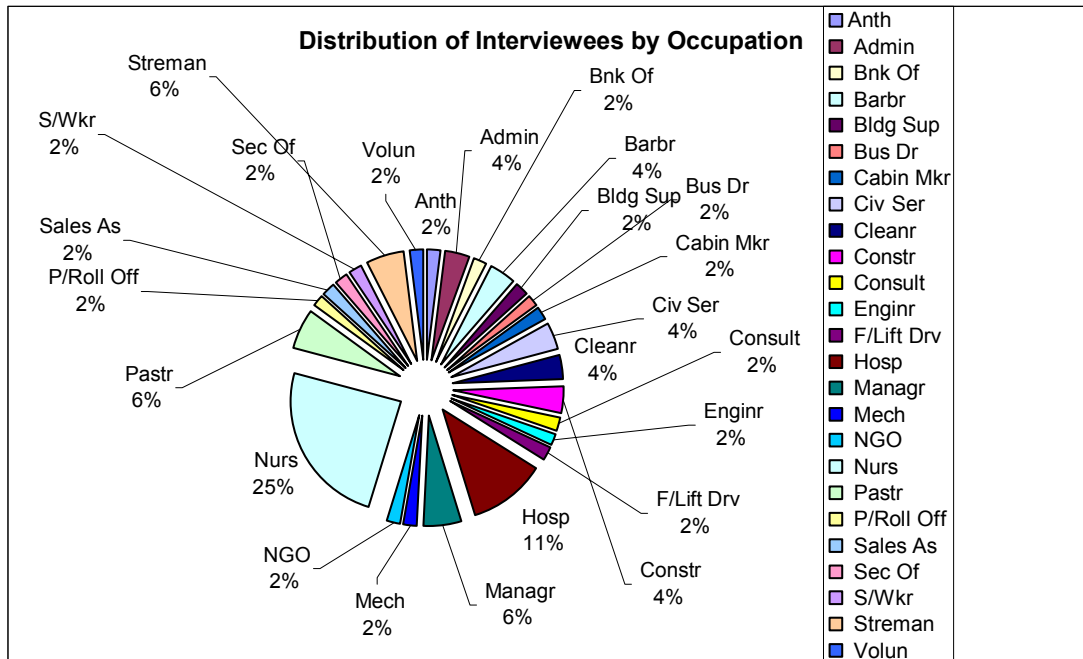


Figure 9

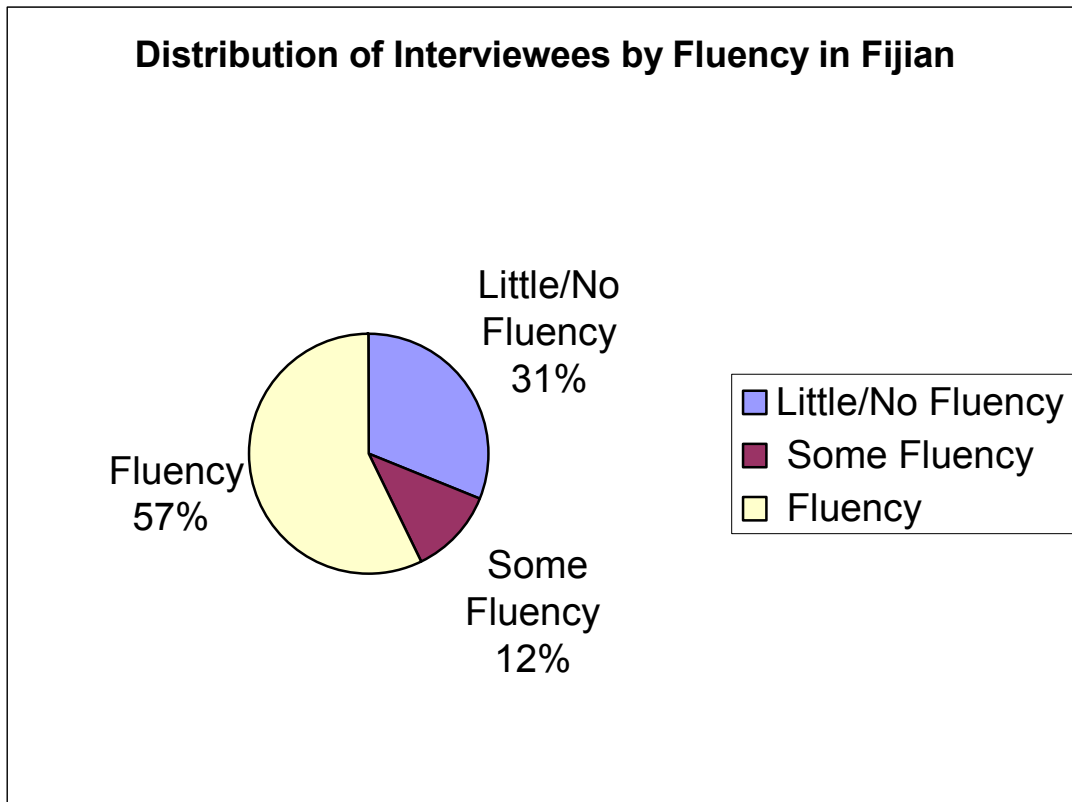
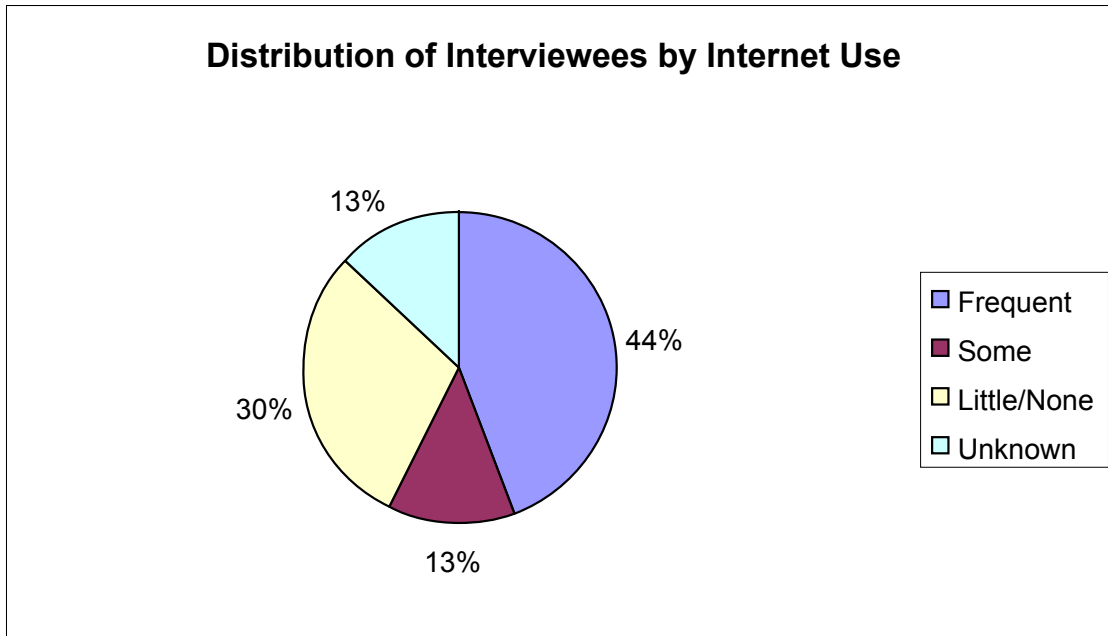


Figure 10



Note: Those classified as "Unknown" are the members of two large focus group discussions who did not clarify their level of their Internet use.

Figure 11

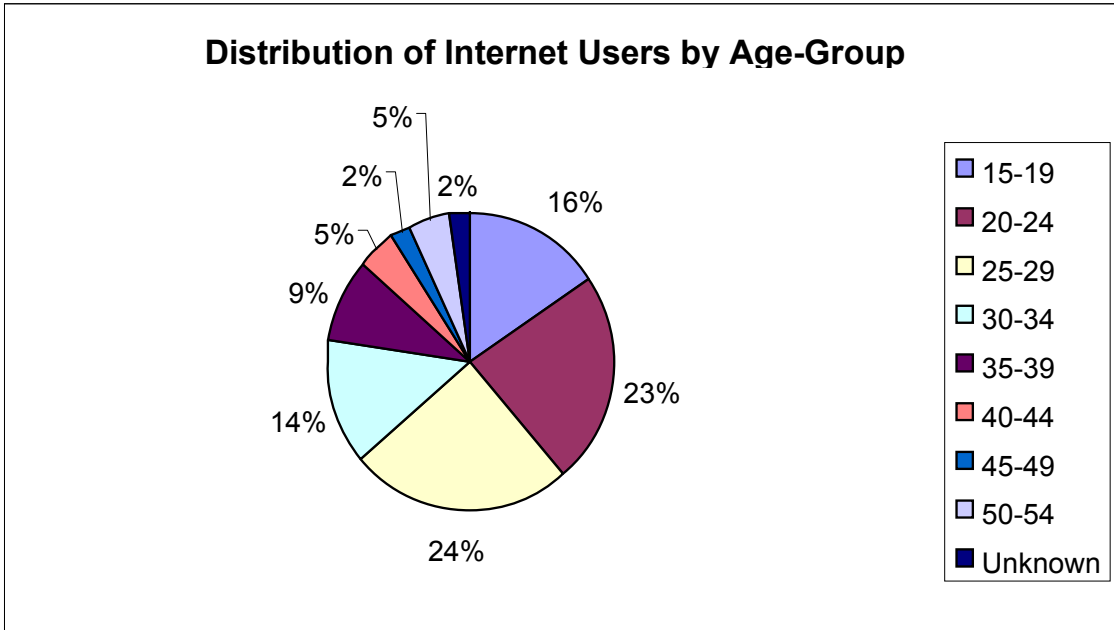
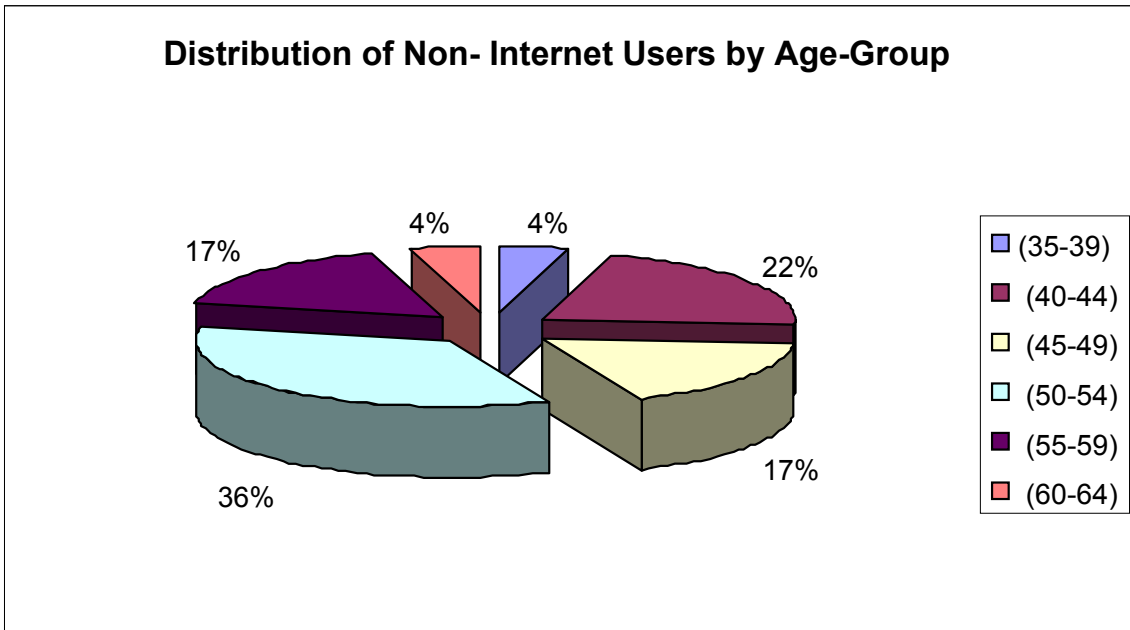


Figure 12



A few characteristics of the sample seem worthy of mention. Despite efforts for equal representation, men are underrepresented significantly – by almost 20 % (see Figure 1) although no significant gender difference was detected in the interviewees’ responses. The interviewees came from diverse backgrounds in other respects, as illustrated by the age/educational/occupational distributions (see Figures 2, 6, 8). While first-generation

immigrants dominate the sample (see Figure 4) it should be noted that these include those who had migrated to Australia at a young age, had spent much of their life in Australia and spoke English as their first language – in other words, those who shared many of the socio-cultural characteristics of second-generation immigrants. This is illustrated by the age distribution which shows that 50% of the interviewees were under the age of 35 (see Figure 2) and also by the fact that for 43% of the interviewees Fijian was not their first language (see Figure 9). Hence in the following discussions, the term “younger/second-generation immigrants” is often used to refer to those who had forged much of their cultural identity as immigrants in Australia, as against “older/first-generation immigrants”, who had migrated to Australia with relatively pre-established cultural identification. The majority of the interviewees had had at least some experience of Internet use, while a vast majority of these Internet users (77%) are under the age of 35 (Figures 10, 11).

The interviews utilized an “interview guide”, which served as a kind of checklist indicating areas to be covered while leaving the exact wording and order of the questions to the interviewer, as against an “interview schedule” of set questions in a predetermined order adhered to in each interview. The interview guide for the present study included the following major topics. These were prepared, tested and refined by means of pilot interviews undertaken on 16 and 17 December 2005 in Fiji:

1. Significance of Internet use in the interviewee’s everyday life
2. Cultural identity or the sense of “Fijianness”, as experienced by the interviewee, especially in comparison with other dimensions of his/her identity (as an “Australian”, “Pacific islander”, etc.)
3. The process whereby the above identity is formed – especially the sources of information on, and the medium of linkage with, the island home (e.g. face-to-face interaction with family and other members of the Fijian community, sustained contact with and trips to Fiji, traditional mass media, etc.)
4. The ways in which the interviewee uses ICTs as a means of sustained contact with those in Fiji and the extent to which this contributes to the above process
5. The ways in which the interviewee uses the Internet as a source of information on Fiji and the extent to which this contributes to the above process
6. The specificity (or otherwise) of the role of ICTs and the Internet in the above process
7. The future significance of the roles of ICTs and the Internet in the above process

It needs to be noted that, given the flexible nature of qualitative interviewing, the conversations with interviewees often merged two or more of the topics or included new ones. While these adjustments may be considered problematic from the positivist point of view, this study was guided by the view that a major strength of qualitative interviewing is its flexibility that allows the improvement of questioning and accommodates new lines of inquiry as the research progresses (Weiss 1994; Rubin and Rubin 1995). These topics hence served as a “guide” rather than a list of questions to be answered in a mechanical manner.

Following the interviews in Brisbane, communication with key informants continued by means of email and telephone. This served to mitigate the limitations of the relatively short face-to-face contact and ensure that additional information was obtained as the data analysis progressed.

LIMITATIONS OF THE METHOD

One of the obvious limitations of this method is its lack of probability sampling and limited sample size – that is, the lack of representativeness of its data and generalisability of its findings. However, in addition to the fact that probability sampling of this population would have been practically difficult even if it had been desired, it may be pointed out that the purpose of the interviews was not to make statistical inferences but to illuminate the possible range and complexities of the role of Internet use in individual experiences of cultural identity construction. The study therefore sought to obtain in-depth information from a diversity of interviewees by a flexible, snow-balling method rather than to obtain a statistically representative sample of the population. As for the limited size of the sample, the distinctive emphasis of qualitative research on in-depth analysis dictates a different principle of determining the sample size. Attention to meanings, contexts and details renders a large sample impossible (or even undesirable) and moreover, the sample size in many qualitative studies is determined not on the basis of statistical considerations but by what qualitative researchers refer to as the “saturation point” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:61–2; Lincoln and Guba 1985:234; Strauss and Corbin 1998:143). The sample size in this study was also determined according to this principle.

Secondly, some consider the validity of the application of interpretive analysis to qualitative interview data open to question, especially because qualitative interviewing is not an unobtrusive method: the rigour of data collection as well as analysis in qualitative interview research may be questioned on the ground of researcher bias and reactivity. While these two problems require close attention, they are not unique to qualitative interview research. Indeed, as Emerson (1983:181) points out, “there is no totally free, transcendent way to study natural events in social life: any and all methods are constrained by the inevitable social character of the relations they rely upon”. In view of

this, instead of assuming in the positivist fashion that the adherence to standard procedures solves the problem, the study sought to address its limitations with pursuit of reflexivity (Sabia and Wallulis 1983; Fonow and Cook 1991; Morrow 1994; Altheide and Johnson 1994; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

For instance, the interviews were conducted in an informal manner that allowed greater freedom and initiative on the part of the interviewees, which was deemed both ethically desirable and methodologically suitable for establishing what little rapport could be developed within a short space of time and thereby obtaining more detailed and reliable information. In addition, the study sought to draw on the basic strategy advocated by various methodological schools: the researchers' self-awareness of their positionality and its possible effects on interpretation. Researchers across various perspectives agree that the inquirer should make explicit his/her personal, cultural, theoretical and other values and interests that may shape his/her inquiry (Stanley and Wise 1983; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Harding 1987; Denzin 1989; Lather 1991; Reinharz 1992; Hammersley 1992:25, 28). By doing so, the inquirer acknowledges and clarifies "the researcher's voice", which frames the inquiry and provides the reader with a perspective from which to judge it. Equally important, it also assists the inquirer to monitor and minimize the distorting effects of those values and interests (Habermas 1987:313–4). A brief attempt is therefore made below at such reflection as part of our effort to enhance the trustworthiness of this study.

This study was undertaken by a team of three researchers, all graduates of the University of the South Pacific and currently assistant lecturers in sociology at the same university. The principal researcher, Yoko Patrick, is Japanese who has studied and worked in Fiji since 1992. The two co-researchers, Tui Rakuita and Vivian Koster, are Fiji citizens of indigenous Fijian and "part European" (*kailoma*) descent respectively. Rakuita identified most closely with the research subjects due to his own self-definition as indigenous Fijian. Koster, and particularly Patrick, on the other hand, faced greater socio-cultural distance in their interview relationship with older and first-generation immigrants, although this did not seem to have significant effect on their interaction with younger and second-generation Fijians, possibly due to their comfort with communicating in English and greater experience in interacting with and forging personal relationships with people of diverse backgrounds. In view of this, Rakuita was largely responsible for interviewing older and first-generation Fijians, while Patrick and Koster interviewed mostly younger, second-generation Fijians. Nevertheless, a mention must be made of the cooperation, warm enough to be called almost enthusiastic; we received from all our interviewees. Members of the Fijian community in Brisbane seemed to define us primarily as "guests from home" who deserved their immediate friendship and assistance, regardless of our individual backgrounds, which seemed to greatly mitigate the negative effects of the fact that the two research members did not share their cultural identity. On a different dimension, however, it must be noted that our interview relationship with the community

was necessarily framed by the inequity of power deriving from our status as university academics that were there to do research “on” them. This was aggravated by the exclusion of the research subjects in the processes of collection, representation and interpretation of the data. The findings of the study were not negotiated with the research subjects and are therefore framed by the “researchers’ voice”, despite our effort to represent their views and experiences in a faithful manner. Our personal experiences with the Internet, for instance, are likely to have exercised some influence on our data collection and analysis. All three of us use the Internet for work and personal purposes. Patrick, in particular, daily uses email to communicate with her friends and family in Japan and various Japanese websites to stay informed of current news from Japan, which has led her to feel that Internet access has facilitated and indeed greatly encouraged her sustained contact with home. This and other personal experiences we have had with the Internet necessarily shaped our interview questions and line of analysis. In terms of our personal theoretical orientation, all of us incline towards what may be broadly termed critical social theory, which partly shapes our approach to the research problem, especially our choice to focus on the agency of the research subjects, namely, how they actively appropriate the online technology as a tool for constructing their subjectivity, rather than on the determining effects of the technology, that is, how such subjectivity is passively produced by the technology.

On the basis of these considerations, we acknowledge that the generalisability of our findings is limited by the size and specific nature of our sample, as well as by the personal, socio-cultural, methodological and theoretical specificity of our perspective. It is hoped that our findings will inspire and be usefully complemented in the future by other researchers from a diversity of perspectives.

4.0 RESULTS

The following discussion examines the interview data in light of the four key questions listed earlier. It should be noted that statistical measurement and analysis are not attempted here, since the lack of probability sampling does not warrant such treatment of the data. Furthermore, as noted earlier, our objective is not to make statistical inferences but to explore, in an in-depth manner, the range of the interviewees’ Internet use in the process of their identity construction. The study, nevertheless, makes references to some basic distributions of the interviewees’ responses – especially age differences – because of their possible implications for the empirical and theoretical questions under discussion, even if their generalisability cannot be statistically specified. Quotations from the interviewees’ accounts are marked with brackets. They are exact reproductions of the words tape-recorded or recorded in interview notes, except for minor alterations made for

editing purposes. The names and other personal details of the interviewees are altered in order to ensure confidentiality.

4.1 Question 1: “What is the significance for the members of the indigenous Fijian community in Brisbane of their identification as indigenous Fijian?”

The interview results indicate that an overwhelming majority of the interviewees – both younger and older, first- and second-generation immigrants – strongly identify themselves as Fijians. This response is hardly surprising for the older, first-generation Fijians, most of whom were born and raised in Fiji and therefore formed a strong sense of cultural identification prior to their migration to Australia. These interviewees often made comments such as: “My body is here but my soul is somewhere else – in Fiji”; “Fiji can’t go away from me. It’s still with me”; “It doesn’t matter whether we’re in Britain or Australia. No one can take Fiji away from us.” Most of these first-generation immigrants speak Fijian as their first language, some after decades of residence in Australia, and try to maintain a lifestyle that is as close to what they consider to be the “Fijian way of life” as possible in their adopted country, by routinely cooking Fijian dishes, regularly congregating at Fijian churches, organizing bible study groups, community activities, etc. What is more significant is that this strong cultural identification was shared by younger and second-generation Fijians, most of whom speak little or no Fijian and are seemingly more “Australian” in their lifestyle and behaviour. Except for just three second-generation Fijian women⁴ – two of whom had a Caucasian Australian parent – these interviewees emphatically endorsed their Fijian identity. Many considered themselves “Fijian first, Pacific Islander second, and Australian last”. Some stated that when people asked them where they were from, they would answer, “From Fiji”, or “I’m a Fijian but live in Australia”. Many of these interviewees were Australian citizens, which suggests that citizenship or place of birth does not in any significant way undermine their emotional connection with their island “home” – a place some of them have visited only once or twice in their life. Others offered to explain in a playful manner that in rugby matches between Fiji and Australia; they would not hesitate to support Fiji rather than Australia. Another colourful illustration was offered by older Fijians who described youths in their community with words such as “*Tabu Soro*” (“never give up”) and “Fiji” proudly tattooed on their arms. In short, our interviewees, across genders, age groups and educational/occupational backgrounds, expressed strong, and indeed enthusiastic, cultural identification as Fijians.

This seems to support the argument that, despite the postmodernist claim to the contrary, identity based on common cultural heritage is not necessarily dissolved by the forces of globalization and the diminishing importance of spatial boundaries. This is not to deny the

⁴ Two of these interviewees defined themselves as “half Fijian, half Australian” and found it difficult to prioritize the two dimensions of their cultural identity. One felt that she was half Fijian and half Australian, but that she was beginning to feel more closely attached to her Fijian heritage.

increasing multiplicity of contemporary identity. There is evidence that especially young Fijian immigrants adopt the emerging “Pan-Pacific identity” that Bedford et al (2001) have observed. Some of our young interviewees called themselves “FOBs (Fresh off the Boat)”, though they rated it as a secondary or even marginal dimension of their selfhood. Many young interviewees were also aware of their “Australianness”, which distinguishes them when they visit Fiji and become conscious of the fact that “We’ve been educated here in Australia. It’s easy to see our mannerism is different, our way of speaking is different, and we dress different.” Our limited data therefore support the plurality of contemporary Fijian immigrant identity. However, the data also show that this multiplicity does not presuppose the weakening of the more conventional dimensions of their identity. Indeed, it may be argued, following the commentators discussed above, that it is precisely such fluidity of contemporary subjecthood that contributes to the renewed significance of identities based on national origins, cultural heritage and ethnic descent. In a postmodern (or late modern) world where meaning is perpetually absent, self is constantly fragmented, and all boundaries are increasingly dissolved, these identities give individuals something to anchor themselves in, and allow them to define themselves in a meaningful manner as well as to resist what they see as detrimental consequences of globalizing forces. The words of one of our interviewees, a first-generation Fijian who had lived in Australia for nearly 20 years, seem an apt illustration of this point:

“We try to maintain the culture because we know our culture is something that protects us. We might be in Australia, Britain or the U.S, but we’ll always be Fijians. Because if you don’t maintain the true nature of Fijian culture, you can be drifting away and left with no form of identity. At some stage in your life you will have no cultural essence at all. I’m not saying I don’t like Australia. Australia is our second home, our adopted home. It gives us the opportunity to live in this wonderful country. But the true nature of a Fijian will be in us until we die.”

Many Fijian immigrants are conscious that they live in a globalised society where one’s identity is in a constant flux, and feel that their identification as Fijian gives them “anchoring reference points” (Giddens 1991:185) – a coherent and rewarding (if continuously revised) sense of self. In the words of a young interviewee with Australian citizenship, cultural identity securely defines “where you belong. If you’re an Australian, what culture do you have?”

At the same time, beyond this strong sense of belonging that they share, what it exactly means to be Fijian may be slightly different for older/first-generation and younger/second-generation Fijians. While identity is a matter of ongoing social construction in itself, younger/second-generation Fijians, who were born in Australia or spent little time in Fiji as infants prior to their migration, seem to face a greater task of negotiating their “Fijianness”, since they lack the socio-cultural stock of knowledge and

sustained contact with the island home that older/first-generation Fijians have recourse to because of the substantial duration of their former residence in Fiji. Younger/second-generation Fijians need to construct their cultural identity out of comparatively limited resources available to them.

For instance, our results point to age/generation difference in relation to the interviewees' perception of the significance of the ability to speak Fijian. Most of the older interviewees whose first language was Fijian considered linguistic competence a key element of authentic Fijian identity. The language was for them an important cultural marker: "English is spoken by everyone. The Fijian language is what distinguishes a Fijian"; "You have to at least speak your dialect. Otherwise you just look physically Fijian"; "If you don't speak the language, you are alienated from your own community". Some parents regretted not having taught their children the language. For the younger/second-generation Fijians, on the other hand, the linguistic ability was of secondary importance. Some expressed regret about their lack of it and their wish to acquire it. Those who did speak the language felt privileged in comparison to those that did not. However, none of the interviewees for whom English was the first language felt that the ability to speak Fijian was essential for them to qualify as a Fijian: "You can be a Fijian even if you don't speak a word of Fijian". While a few considered their ancestry ("blood") or physical appearance ("the dark skin") to be the central marker of "Fijianness", for the vast majority, it was emotional connection that was the core of authentic Fijian identity. This was indeed shared by the interviewees across all age groups: despite their differences on the significance of linguistic competence, the interviewees consistently agreed that what bound them together as a community was primarily their emotional, rather than strictly linguistic or biological, ties to the island home – "the way we connect with one another". Such connection, for most interviewees, was established and sustained through acquisition of, and a sense of pride in, cultural knowledge – upholding what they consider to be Fijian norms and values (such as family-orientation, respect for elders, attachment to the church and involvement in its activities, community orientation as embodied in compassion for each other) as well as more specific rituals, practices (such as the *yaqona*⁵ ceremony, preparation of *lovo*⁶) and etiquettes (such as saying "*tilou*" ("excuse me") and clapping hands when greeting chiefs and persons of authority). Notably, it is "not just understanding the culture", as a young woman put it, "but the ability to follow the culture, to participate in the culture, and to have appreciation of the culture". Authentic "Fijianness", for these interviewees, then, is fostered by a sense of belonging created by shared cultural heritage. While there are differences, especially between older/first-generation and younger/second-generation

⁵ *Yaqona* refers to both the plant *piper methysticum* and the drink "which is made from it by steeping the pulped fresh root or its powdered and dried equivalent in an appropriate amount of water" (Ravuvu 1987:25). The drink, which has much ceremonial and spiritual significance, is customarily served in bowls made of coconut shells.

⁶ *Lovo* signifies an underground oven and the indigenous feast prepared in it.

Fijians, in the extent of the knowledge of this cultural heritage, what connects them is the shared sense of participation: some may not possess as extensive knowledge of the language, traditions or customs as others do, but the emotional attachment they form through this participation warrants their membership. It is such an intangible yet crucial sense of “connectedness” that allows young/second-generation Fijians to declare with conviction: “I don’t speak Fijian, but I still feel like a Fijian”.

4.2 Question 2: “How is this identity, the sense of ‘indigenous Fijianness’ (re)constructed, and to what extent do ICTs and especially the Internet contribute to the process?”

Having noted that Fijian immigrants regardless of age groups or generations share strong cultural identification, we now intend to outline the process whereby such an identity is constructed. For older/first-generation immigrants, it is more or less a matter of sustaining and renewing a pre-established identity; for younger/second-generation immigrants, as noted above, it is more a matter of creatively negotiating and fashioning their Fijian self. In doing so, the immigrants have access to a range of means by which they can acquire knowledge on Fijian tradition, history, current social/economic/political developments, etc. and sustain their ties with their family and friends in Fiji. These include regular face-to-face interaction with family and other members of the immigrant community, sustained contact with and visits to the island home, and the mass media including the Internet. While all these provide the resources with which the immigrants (re)shape their sense of “Fijianness”, most of the interviewees felt that “real” experience facilitated by unmediated interaction was of primary importance and that “virtual” experience provided by the Internet played a supplementary role in the process. The following discussion examines the significance of each of these major resources for identity construction.

4.2.1 *Face-to-face interaction with family and other members of the immigrant community*

Both older/first-generation and younger/second-generation interviewees agreed that their identity as Fijian was (re-)constructed primarily through unmediated communication with other Fijians. The significance of such communication, especially for younger/second-generation Fijians, is noteworthy. Most of the young interviewees identified their immediate family, especially parents, as the primary source of their knowledge of Fijian norms, values, customs, history, and language. Similarly, older/first-generation Fijians noted that they made a point of transmitting knowledge of these to their children and thereby encouraged them to acquire a cultural identity similar to their own. For those who were born in Australia or have little memory of their former residence in Fiji, day-to-day interaction within family households thus offers the immediate resources out of which they construct their self-understanding as Fijian: growing up in households where older members make conscious efforts to maintain a lifestyle close to

the one they were formerly accustomed to in Fiji and to ensure that younger members share at least some of their cultural knowledge has a crucial impact on the construction of their sense of self.

In addition to the day-to-day interaction with immediate family, regular interaction with other members of the local Fijian community seems to be of great importance. Fijian immigrants in Brisbane meet regularly on a range of social occasions, from weekly church services, bible study/prayer meetings and “*kava*⁷ nights” to occasional weddings, funerals, 21st birthdays. This can be said not only of older generations but also of young/second-generation Fijians, who almost invariably said that they had more Fijian than non-Fijian friends and that they met these friends regularly, often weekly. Beyond these personal networks, the immigrants are connected through a number of community-level activities. The Brisbane Fijian Community Association organizes the Fiji Day celebration which is the highlight of the year for many Fijians in the area, and periodically issues newsletters to the members. Other groups, such as alumni of Fiji’s secondary school, organize smaller functions and activities. Community activities for the youths include weekly Fijian language classes provided by a Fijian church and a Brisbane Fijian youth rugby team. In addition, two Fijian-language radio programmes, organized and presented by volunteers including second-generation youths, are aired weekly to provide community news, news from Fiji, Fijian music, and stories on Fijian legends and myths. These networks and the enduring (largely face-to-face) contact they facilitate seem to be highly instrumental in renewing pre-established ties for older/first-generation immigrants and enhancing emerging ties for the younger ones. Again, the importance of such for the youths is noteworthy. They acquire further cultural knowledge by participating and interacting with fellow Fijians in these activities, which serves to engender a sense of belonging to the local Fijian community, and more broadly, to their island home. The shaping of the Fijian self thus continues through ongoing processes of (largely) unmediated communication with fellow members of the community, which serves to “cement” their emotional connection and cultural identification.

4.2.2 Sustained contact with and visits to Fiji

Fijian immigrants in Brisbane actively seek to maintain their link with those they have left behind in Fiji. Older/first-generation immigrants routinely rely on telephone calls to do so. Calling family and friends in Fiji a few times a week is not uncommon among them. While younger/second-generation immigrants tend to rely relatively less on the telephone and utilize other means of communication, such as cell phone text messages and emails, these are dependent on those in Fiji having the same access. Overall, telephone seems to be the primary means of communication. Visits to Fiji are equally important, although their frequency varies between individuals/households due to their substantial financial costs.

⁷ *Kava* is a synonym for *yaqona* (see footnote 5).

The impact of these visits, especially on younger/second-generation immigrants, are worthy of note. Although most youths had visited Fiji no more than a few times in their life, many described the joy they derived from spending weeks or even months at their parents' villages during the visits. Learning first-hand how to plant, fish, collect shellfish or kill a chicken, using and improving Fijian language skills, participating in community events like Christmas feasts, etc. seems to embody for them the conceptual understanding of "Fijianness" they acquired from the limited resources available in their country of adoption. The effects of sending children to Fiji were also discussed with approval by a number of older/first-generation Fijians. In their view, children and youths who spend a substantial period of time in Fijian villages demonstrate marked improvement in their cultural competence and a stronger sense of identity, as illustrated by the case of an interviewee's son who spent three years at his village in Kadavu and "came back a changed boy". Hence "Send bad kids to Fiji" is a remark commonly and often playfully made by older Fijians. Similar observations are made by Morton Lee (2003) in her study of the Tongan immigrant community in Melbourne, which suggests that the practice of sending children to the island home for the purpose of cultural learning is not uncommon among Pacific Island immigrants in Australia.

4.2.3 The Internet

While unmediated, face-to-face communication provides the crucial foundation of their cultural identity, Fijian immigrants also engage in a range of mediated communication in order to sustain their link with the island home. Traditional mass media, such as television, (national) radio, newspapers and magazines daily available in Australia, however, are of marginal importance here, as they normally offer little information on Fiji and thus do not cater for the specific needs of Fijian immigrants. Hence many turn instead to newspapers from Fiji, in particular the *Fiji Times*. A person traveling to Fiji sometimes takes back to Brisbane a boxful of newspapers, which are read many times and by everyone in the family: "When we go to Fiji we come back with old newspapers. We read them today, tomorrow, next week...We throw out the Australian newspapers after one day, but we keep the Fiji newspapers." The same can be said of Fijian music CDs and tapes brought from Fiji, which are often circulated among friends and families. Given the relative absence of traditional mass media in Australia that are of value as resources for cultural identity construction, Fijian immigrants seek out every opportunity to stay connected to Fiji's media content.

It is our argument that ICTs and especially the Internet assume supplementary yet emerging significance in this context of relative lack of media resources for identity construction. This is particularly so in the case of younger/second-generation Fijians for two major reasons. First, Internet use is more prevalent among Fijians in their teens, 20s and 30s in comparison with those in higher age groups. Younger Fijians routinely use computers and the Internet at school, at work, and for personal purposes, while many

older Fijians have little or no experience of Internet use and tend to be reluctant to acquire necessary skills. Secondly, and more importantly, the Internet plays a notable role in enhancing the resources for identity construction that have been rather limited for younger/second-generation immigrants in the past. As noted earlier, the experience of fashioning one's Fijian identity in Australia varies between individuals but particularly between older/first-generation and younger/second-generation Fijians. While much of the "Fijianness" for older Fijians is simply taken for granted (though nevertheless in the process of constant reconstruction) young/second-generation Fijians face greater time/spatial separation from their island home as they shape their emotional connection to it: they are not only separated from Fiji here and now but lack the past immediate connection that the older/first-generation Fijians who spent their formative years in Fiji have access to. Accordingly, younger Fijians need to turn to a relatively limited range of resources in negotiating their Fijianness. This is illustrated, for instance, by their perception of the Fijian language radio programmes. While the significance of these programmes is mixed for older immigrants, some of whom commented with amusement on the lack of language proficiency of second-generation presenters, many young Fijians found them an important "way of staying connected", a useful source of information and knowledge that contributes to the sustenance of their identification as Fijian. It is in the context of such conventionally limited resources of identity construction for young Fijians that ICTs and especially Internet play an important role.

As a means of sustaining contact with those in Fiji, ICTs are fast gaining importance among young Fijians, who, as mentioned earlier, are increasingly turning to cell phone text messages and emails in place of telephone calls, faxes or letters. Furthermore, the Internet warrants special attention as a source of information and cultural knowledge for younger Fijians. Most of our young interviewees who routinely used the Internet listed country-specific websites such as Fijilive, Fijivillage, Fijivoices, Teivovo and the Fiji Times as useful sources of current news from Fiji, especially on the latest social/political/economic developments, sports and pictures. A few interviewees used other websites that suited their specific interests, such as Fiji Museum and Suva Grammar School websites. It needs to be noted that the interview results do not indicate significant reliance on particular websites. Indeed, only a few interviewees visited any of these websites on a regular basis. Most visited them from time to time "to catch up" rather than used them as the primary source of information. Similarly, few regularly used the interactive functions of these sites such as chat rooms and discussion forums. In light of Morton Lee's (2003) findings that the Kava Bowl, the website predominantly used by overseas Tongans, facilitates active communication between Tongans around the world by connecting families and friends, disseminating information, and providing a forum for long discussions and debates over various issues of importance to them, we must note that the significance of country-specific websites for Fijian immigrants in Brisbane is yet to

reach such a level, and at this stage, remains rather secondary. However, if the use of particular websites is not as prevalent or extensive among Fijian immigrants as among their Tongan counterparts, many young Fijians in Brisbane use search engines to enhance their cultural knowledge, as discussed in more detail in the next section. A young Australian-born woman, for instance, said that she had looked up the meaning of *cibi*, the war dance performed by the Fiji rugby team before a match; so that when people asked her questions she would be able to answer them. Under the conditions where sources of information and cultural knowledge are limited, where unmediated connection with the island home is often difficult, the Internet can be a valuable alternative or additional resource.

4.3 Question 3: “In what ways do Fijian immigrants use the Internet, and does it play any distinctive role, in comparison with other resources for identity construction, such as face-to-face interaction with family and other members of the immigrant community and the traditional mass media?”

Our data thus point to the emerging importance of ICTs and the Internet as a resource for identity construction especially for younger/second-generation Fijians – both as a means of sustaining contact with those in Fiji and as a source of information and cultural knowledge. Supplementary it may be, but it is a resource of growing importance for the immigrants who use it in a creative manner to suit their needs. It is to this dynamic of Internet usage by Fijian immigrants that our analysis now turns in the following discussion.

4.3.1 ICTs as a means of communication

ICTs and the Internet offer obvious benefits as a means of communication, and (especially younger) Fijians in Brisbane are discovering them like many other people across the world. Young Fijians are starting to use more emails and cell phone text messages, “which is great. We used to use ‘snail mail’ – writing to PO Box such and such in Nabua. We don’t have to do that anymore. That’s fantastic.” In addition to the speed and convenience of emails and text messages, many mentioned their lower cost in comparison with telephone calls as a major advantage. One person added the capacity of emails to transmit more than text messages, such as visual images and video messages. These technologies, for those who have access to them, make sustained communication with their family and friends easier and thereby reinforce their sense of “connectedness”. According to one interviewee:

“My sister’s daughter is at the USP [University of the South Pacific] at the moment. We gave our email address to her, and just recently she has started emailing us – To me it’s like a breath of fresh air. When I receive her email, I can picture my whole family and my house, and I can tell everything in the house when I read it. My body is here but my soul is somewhere else – in Fiji.”

The effects of the contact may not be new; but the medium is. The medium is notably new in its capacity to facilitate the sustenance of personal networks of geographically separated people in a more economical and speedy manner. This evidently serves to renew the emotional ties of such people.

4.3.2 Internet as a source of information and cultural knowledge

Beyond this, more significantly, our interview results suggest that Fijians in Brisbane use the Internet as a source of information and cultural knowledge in an eclectic manner, in a manner that creatively combines it with more traditional resources for identity formation. First, it is not only the youths but also the older generations that use the Internet as a source of information, albeit largely in an indirect manner. Older/first-generation Fijians are often aware of the potential benefits of the Internet, especially as they witness their own children daily explore them, which prompts some to seek indirect access to such benefits through their children's assistance. A university student, for instance, explained that she accessed Internet news not only for herself but "also [because] my dad gets me to check it. He's not really computer literate, you know. So I have to go in there and then he can read it. He's kind of scared of computer activity." Moreover, not all older Fijians are "scared of computer activity". There are a number of first-generation Fijians who are familiar with Internet use, and some of these individuals routinely download and print out current news from the Fiji Times and other relevant sites, and distribute the material to others. According to one such first-generation Internet user:

"I use the Internet to catch up on what's going on in Fiji nearly every day. I download and print out the stuff for other people when we drink kava. They really appreciate it. It's not only me but a few other people doing that – sharing information around the kava bowl. It is useful to share information. We're far away from home but still want to know what's happening. ... I distribute it, we talk about it ... It makes us feel connected."

This is done both informally among personal friends as in the case quoted above, and more regularly and formally by community leaders such as a church pastor who distributes Internet news to all church members after every Sunday service "so that everyone is updated on the news from Fiji". While the Internet may not be of particular significance as a source of cultural knowledge for older Fijians who seldom feel the need to find the meaning of Fijian words or customs as youths do, they are aware of its potential as an effective means of obtaining the latest information and thereby sustaining their link with the island home. The time/space contracting capacity of the Internet contributes to such a potential: the Internet allows immediate access to information that is "changing every day – Usually, we have to wait for someone to bring the [printed] paper from home." As mentioned earlier, printed versions of the *Fiji Times* brought from Fiji are kept, circulated and read over and over again. The immigrants have begun to explore the use of the

Internet to maximize the value of such conventional media by transcending the time/space limitations that they previously faced.

Furthermore, many young Fijians often use search engines, as mentioned above, for detailed information on Fijian words, customs, historical figures, etc. to “back up” the knowledge they obtain from their parents and other primary sources. As a young university student explained, she normally turned to her parents for information on Fiji, “but things they don’t know about, I check on the Internet”, or, in another student’s words, “most of the time I go to the library and look up books or ask my parents to tell me what they know ... [But] if I want to know specific details then I look it up on the Internet.” While unmediated interaction remains their primary resource, the Internet not only complements it but plays a unique role with the density of information it offers and, again, with its capacity for time/space contraction: it allows young Fijians immediate and unrestricted access to an unlimited amount of web information on various aspects of their island home: “If I want to learn about something, I can just look it up on the Internet. I don’t have to ring up my mum.” In other words, the Internet provides young Fijians with relevant cultural knowledge when their primary resources fail, and moreover, does so immediately and in remarkable quantity. A first-generation Internet user indeed felt that this was the crucial benefit of online technologies for young immigrants: “As my children grow older and ask me questions, I cannot answer some of them. ‘Daddy, how do I do that?’ That’s when I can say, ‘Hang on, and let me check on the Internet’.”

In this context, an observation made by a young first-generation interviewee who had spent much of her adolescence in Australia seems to offer a useful insight. She felt that there were some Fijian youths in her community who did not want to know much about their cultural heritage. For these youths, the Internet would be almost useless as a medium of identity construction, since they needed to be motivated to access cultural knowledge online in the first place. Hence, she noted, the Internet could be an importance source of knowledge, yet an interest needed to be generated first, at the level of unmediated experience – “only then you can go on the Net to find out more”. Similarly, our contention is not that the Internet replaces or undermines more conventional, (largely) unmediated resources for cultural identity construction, but that it has the potential to supplement, enhance and enrich them when users choose to explore ways to pursue such a potential. To borrow another interviewee’s expression, the Internet may be “a [post]modern substitute for real experience”, yet it is a unique substitute that is possibly meaningful and even empowering. This, as discussed in the following section, is likely to be even more important in the future as Fijians of the next generation set about their own task of cultural identity construction.

In summary, ICTs and the Internet play a number of supplementary yet distinctive roles in Fijian immigrants’ quest to (re)construct their cultural identity. ICTs open up new

possibilities of communication with those in the island home and thereby contribute to the sustenance of the sense of “community”. The Internet serves as a source of latest news from home that benefits not only young computer users but also older generations in indirect ways. Perhaps most significantly, the Internet serves as a unique medium of cultural learning and, to quote Diamandaki’s (2001) expression again, as “a permanent archive of collective memory” that is accessible beyond time/space separation that has thus far limited the young/second-generation Fijians’ experience of negotiating and fashioning their Fijian self.

4.4 Question 4: “What are the future possibilities that ICTs and especially the Internet offer to the immigrant community in their quest to (re)construct their cultural identity?”

Our interviews with first- and second-generation Fijians in Brisbane indicate that ICTs and especially the Internet today play a number of important, if supplementary, roles in the process of their cultural identity construction. The interviewees’ comments also suggest that their importance will further increase in the future on a few conditions. It seems worthwhile to make brief observations here on these future prospects.

4.4.1 *ICTs as a means of communication: problems of access*

First, the majority of the interviewees expected ICTs to greatly increase their significance as a medium of communication with those in Fiji on the condition that their availability improves in Fiji, especially in villages and rural areas. A focus group consisting of largely first-generation immigrants agreed that telephone calls to villages were time-consuming and expensive, since those who answered the phone had to fetch the person they wished to speak to. They, as well as a number of other interviewees, expressed a desire to see email access made available in villages: “We tend to underestimate the mental capacity of the villagers. We think that villagers cannot use the Internet. Think again! If only every government station can have Internet connection.” The obvious benefits of ICTs as well as the infrastructural obstacles to accessing such benefits were thus the major concerns of many interviewees as they reflected on the future role of ICTs as a means of communication.

4.4.2 *Internet as source of cultural knowledge: problems of access and lack of specialised websites*

Second, the majority of the interviewees felt that the Internet as a source of information and cultural knowledge would also gain further importance, albeit on a few conditions. In their view, the Internet is currently yet to realize its full potential as a resource for cultural identity construction for them due to its limited availability, its financial cost and the absence of websites that specifically cater for cultural interests. While Internet access in Australia is rapidly growing, many families and individuals we interviewed did not have computer access at home, which limited Internet users to mostly students and office

workers. In addition, the costs of subscription to some of the Fiji-oriented websites were noted by many (especially younger) interviewees as a major obstacle to their access. Above all, many interviewees noted the lack of websites specializing in the exchange of cultural and historical knowledge. They felt that the major Fiji-oriented websites currently available were useful as a source of current news yet lacked a strong emphasis on traditions, customs and history. Related to this are concerns over the quality of web information: a few Internet users pointed out that the anonymity of the Internet raises doubts about the authenticity of the information it provides and that many Fiji-oriented sites are left without updates for many months. Hence in their view, (infrastructural and financial) obstacles to access and lack of specialized websites need to be addressed if they were to maximize the value of the Internet as a means of their identity construction.

Provided that these conditions are met, the Internet, in these interviewees' view, can serve as unlimited and valuable cultural resources for the future generations of Fijian immigrants. The Internet as a permanent and constantly expanding archive of collective knowledge and memory has much unexplored potential as a medium of cultural learning, especially for the children of Australian-born Fijian or "part-Fijian" parents, when their immediate day-to-day environment may fail to provide such resources. This was discussed by a number of parents. According to a first-generation mother: "When we are all gone, there'll be no one to teach the kids about our culture, but the Internet will be there to teach them", or, as a second-generation "part-Fijian" mother explained: "If my son is to learn the language or custom, he'll have to learn it from the Internet." Some indeed envisaged a future where websites dedicated to their cultural heritage and history will be there for their children to freely explore:

"I would like to see when you open an Internet site – if your children need to be updated on their cultural background, if your children and older people really want to see Fiji in pictures – there will be warriors, islands, blue crystal waters, and some people telling stories that'll bring Fiji right to your home. I'll be glad to see that – websites on Fijian culture, ceremonies, and big chiefs sitting up there and everyone doing the meke, the kava, and the spear dance."

Another interviewee playfully commented that such websites may even substitute for sending children to Fiji: instead of sending them across to Fiji, parents may send them to cyberspace for cultural learning. These interviewees were aware of the possibilities of the Internet as a social space where geographically dispersed individuals and groups may engage in collective activities that are "virtual" yet nevertheless "real" in their effects. It is in this sense that one interviewee described the Internet as "a portal for those Fijians that cannot go back". The Internet, itself a part of the growing forces of globalization that threaten spatially defined identities, allows individuals and groups to participate in collective (re)definition of their shared cultural heritage. The Internet, then, holds out a

powerful potential to foster the possibilities of human agency that at times seems threatened by the very forces of which it is a part.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The foregoing has been an attempt to examine a dimension of the process of cultural identity construction as experienced by members of the Fijian immigrant community in Brisbane. Our findings suggest that:

1. The Fijian immigrants, across age groups and generations, share strong cultural identification. Despite some differences in their conceptions of “Fijianness” (for instance, in their views of the significance of language skills) for most immigrants, emotional attachment to their island home grounded in shared cultural knowledge is the foundation of their sense of belonging.
2. This cultural identity is constructed primarily out of the resources that are conventionally available to the immigrants, namely, unmediated interaction such as everyday face-to-face interaction with family and other members of the immigrant community, sustained contact with those in Fiji, and visits to Fiji. ICTs and the Internet currently play a supplementary yet growing role in this process.
3. Younger/second-generation immigrants have begun to use ICTs, especially emails and cell phone text messages, as valuable means of sustained contact with those in Fiji, with distinctive advantages such as low costs and immediacy of connection. More importantly, the Internet plays an emerging role as a source of information and cultural knowledge that fosters a sense of “connectedness”. It is often used by the immigrants in a manner that combines the advantages of its unique time/space contracting capacity with the continuing value of the more conventional resources. Two instances of such use have been discussed. First, online newspapers greatly improve the immigrants’ access to the traditional media in Fiji, which has previously been restricted by spatial separation. Secondly, and more significantly, the Internet serves as a medium of cultural learning, by offering immediate access to unlimited web information on aspects of Fijian cultural heritage. Such usage of the Internet plays a notable role in the immigrants’ experience of identity construction, especially when their primary resources fail or are limited.
4. On the basis of the immigrants’ views, ICTs and the Internet are expected to gain further importance as resources for cultural identity construction in the future, provided that their present limitations are addressed. The problems of access – limited access to emails and cell phones in Fiji and limited Internet access in

immigrant households – affect the utility of ICTs both as a means of communication with those in Fiji and as a source of information and cultural knowledge. Furthermore, the absence of websites that specifically cater for cultural interests somewhat restricts the immigrants' use of the Internet as a medium of cultural learning. However, when these limitations are addressed, ICTs and the Internet are likely to play an increasingly important role, especially for the future generations of Fijian immigrants. The Internet in particular may serve as a valuable social space for sustained interaction, exchange and learning at both individual and collective levels, enabled by its capacity to facilitate “connection” between people beyond time and space.

Hence it is our view that ICTs and especially the Internet have significant social implications for the Fijian immigrants. While the Internet, through its capacity to transcend time/space restriction, may free them from the imposition of conventionally-defined identities and offer opportunities to forge new and multiple affiliations and identities, by the same token, it also allows them to negotiate, construct and reconstruct such conventional identities in a more creative manner previously not possible. It is a resource of multiple potentials that could both engender new identities and reconstruct pre-established ones.

It should be noted that this emerging importance of ICTs does not presuppose the decline of the role of the more “conventional” resources. Indeed, our findings suggest that the Internet is likely to serve hand in hand with such conventional resources, by supplementing/enhancing their values or serving as an additional or alternative resource when they fail to cater for the immigrants' needs. In this regard, Turkle's (1995) argument that cyber and everyday realities are merged to create an indistinguishable field of contact seems appropriate. ICTs and online phenomena are part of the contemporary social realities that encompass both mediated and unmediated human contact. Individuals and groups may appropriate such technologies in their attempt to shape their existence and subjectivity in a manner that is meaningful to them – that is, to explore their agency in the postmodern age. It is hoped that the present study has been able to shed some light on a dimension of this complex phenomenon.

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