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

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Introduction

Emergence of a regional, “Pan-Pacific identity” among younger Pacific Islanders overseas (Bedford, Macpherson and Spoonley 2001).

Diminishing significance of conventional cultural identities?

Research Problem

Role of ICTs (especially the Internet) in (re)construction and negotiation of immigrant cultural identity

Theoretical Context

Online phenomena as a manifestation of the rise of postmodernity

ICTs: potentials both to engender new identities and reconstruct pre-established ones

Key Research 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?

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?
Method

- Semi-structured, qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with 77 indigenous Fijian immigrants
- Snow-balling method (non-representative sample)
- Qualitative coding and interpretive analysis

Distribution of Interviewees by Age Group

Distribution of Interviewees by Level of Educational Attainment

Distribution of Interviewees by Occupation

Distribution of Interviewees by Sex

Distribution of Interviewees by Migrant Status
Distribution of Interviewees by Fluency in Fijian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fluency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little/No Fluency</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Fluency</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>57%</td>
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**Question 1:** “What is the significance for the members of the indigenous Fijian community in Brisbane of their identification as indigenous Fijian?”

- Strong cultural identification across the board
- Fijian identity — meaningful sense of self in globalised society where one’s identity is in a constant flux.
- Authentic “Fijianess” — knowledge of and shared sense of participation in cultural heritage, and consequent emotional connection.

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

**Resources for Identify Construction:**
- Face-to-face interaction with family and other members of the immigrant community
- Sustained contact with and visits to Fiji
- Mass media (including the Internet)
- “Real” experience — primary
- “Virtual” experience — supplementary

**Face-to-face interaction with other Fijians**

Daily contact with immediate family and other Fijians constitutes primary resources for identity (re)construction.

**Sustained contact with and visits to Fiji**

- Telephone calls, cell phone text messages and emails — means of communication
- Visits to Fiji — means of enhancing cultural competence: “Send bad kids to Fiji.”

**The Internet**

- Traditional mass media in Australia — marginal significance
- ICTs play a notable supplementary role in the context of relative lack of media resources for identity construction, especially for younger and second-generation Fijians.
  - ICTs as a means of communication
  - Internet as a source of information and cultural knowledge
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?”

- ICTs as a means of communication
  - Cell phone text messages and emails
- Internet as a source of information and cultural knowledge
  - Immigrants use the Internet in an eclectic manner that creatively combines it with more traditional resources.
  - On-line newspapers
  - Search engines

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?”

- ICTs as a means of communication
  - Problem of access
- Internet as a source of cultural knowledge
  - Problem of access
  - Internet as a permanent and constantly expanding archive of collective knowledge and memory has unexplored potential as a medium of cultural learning.

Conclusion

**Social significance of ICTs**

- ICTs play a supplementary yet growing role in Fijian immigrants’ cultural identity construction.
- Internet serves hand in hand with conventional resources by enhancing their value or providing an additional/alternative resource.
- Potential to foster possibilities of human agency