

**The Internet, Empowerment, and Identity: An Exploration of  
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(CIP) in the United Kingdom (UK).**

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers the relationship between the Internet, empowerment, identity, and participation; and focuses on refugee women in the United Kingdom (UK) participating in a Community Internet Project (CIP) to learn Internet skills. Semi-structured interviews and a non-participant observation were conducted with 6 refugee women and the course tutor participating in the final session of the CIP. Thematic analysis of the interviews supplemented with findings from the observation, revealed outcomes associated with technological engagement and participation. Technological engagement outcomes included intermediate outcomes of maintaining links and re-building networks, and facilitating resettlement and integration; and empowerment and identity outcomes facilitating the maintenance and development of personal identities, and fostering psychological empowerment. Participation outcomes included the development of social identity and community narratives, and collective consciousness-raising. These findings are used to reflect on the theory of the social psychology of participation (Cambell and Jovchelovitch, 2000), by contextualising technological engagement within participatory processes. The article concludes by discussing individual agency within participation; and calls for further research into the utility of digital technologies in community participatory processes.

*Key words:* refugee women; the Internet; empowerment; identity; participation.

## INTRODUCTION

This article considers the relationship between the Internet<sup>1</sup>, empowerment, identity, and participation; and focuses on refugee women in the United Kingdom (UK) participating in a Community Internet Project (CIP). Recognised as multiply marginalised (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004), this group of women are subjected to a number of experiences in the UK with debilitating affects to their empowerment and identity. Entering a new social system, they experience greater levels of dependency on their husbands (in some cases propagated by an asylum status dependent on their husband's application); a loss of social support networks; increased loneliness and isolation; and increased childcare concerns and responsibilities (Bloch, Galvin, & Harrell-Bond, 2000). In comparison to male counterparts, females suffer greater language and communication barriers (due to past cultural restraints on education); increased levels of fear from abuse within their locality; and due to multi-racial mixed-sex accommodation, fear and abuse within their housing (Dumper, 2002a). The boundaries of past identities are skewed in novel socio-cultural settings, and women often take the role of maintaining cultural identity, the challenge of finding employment, or the possibility of unemployment (Bloch et al., 2000). Thus, throughout the process of adjustment and resettlement, refugee women endure disempowering circumstances and experience radical transformations to their identity and sense of self.

### *The Internet, Empowerment, Identity, & Marginalised Communities*

Empowerment and identity are important facets within social and community psychology, though little is known about the role of the Internet in their maintenance,

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<sup>1</sup> The term Internet will be used to refer to the information component known as the Web, as well as computer-mediated communication (CMC) provided by Web-based e-mail.

expression, and advancement within marginalised communities. Within the limited research available, key issues emerge with regards to those marginalised due to ethnicity, immigration status, or gender<sup>2</sup>. In terms of ethnic identities, the Web can be used to locate alternative discourses, as well as providing forums and virtual spaces in which identities can be developed and asserted without conforming to conventional stereotypes (Wright, 2005). For immigrant identities, Mitra (2005) purports that the Web can be used in various ways to resolve the identity dissonance associated with diaspora. Accepting the importance of geographic location in identity and its narratives, the Web provides a 'safe' virtual space in which conflicting identities (from the place of origin and place of adoption) can be expressed and resolved. Digital technologies thus allow those marginalised "to find a new voice with which to produce the new discursive places where the silenced identity narratives can be articulated again" (Mitra, 2005, p377). In terms of empowerment, Internet research generally focuses on the pragmatic informational and communicative properties of the Web. By providing access to large amounts of information, the Web is described as providing a "psychologically empowering role in assisting with the efficient and effective means by which information can be accessed" (Pinkett & O'Bryant, 2003, p194). Studying Indian women's interactions with digital technologies, Nath (2001) suggests that augmented opportunities for networking and communication empower women to participate in economic and social spheres, and make informed decisions about issues which affect them. This occurs as women access information which they previously were not privy to (due to a patriarchal system); and as they interact, share, and innovate with knowledge in new ways. Barriers for the women included access, awareness, and

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<sup>2</sup> These forms of marginalisation have been chosen as focal points due to the nature of the marginalised group within this research.

capacity; though once overcome enabled empowerment to be actualised for this marginalised group.

### *Community, Participation, and Empowerment & Identity*

Community and participation have been largely exempt from literature examining the use of digital technologies (as previously outlined), which tends to focus on online as opposed to offline processes. Due to the nature of the CIP as a participative and communal learning forum however, it is appropriate to consider these elements and their implications for empowerment and identity.

Community is a contested and debated concept; implicated as the basis for common identities and as a resource for empowerment (Howarth, 2001). Locating empowerment within the community context (see for example Fawcett et al., 1995), empowerment refers to how power is obtained, produced, or enabled (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). However it is accepted that conditions of participation within a community or setting, are instrumental in determining the impact of empowerment for members involved (Rappaport, 1987). As Orford (1992) states, when a relatively powerless group takes some form of social action to improve its power position, this power can be thought of as a collective quality. This requires the often difficult task of “collective awareness of a common cause, the development of group solidarity” (Orford, 1992, p103). This aspect reinforces the importance of participation and the development of a social or collective identity for empowerment to flourish within a community. This alludes to Freire’s (1974) notion of conscientisation, in which the social process of learning characterised by dialogue and participation, enables individuals to develop ‘critical

understanding’, thus empowering them to ‘critical action’ on conditions that shape their living. Linking these elements together, Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000) propose a theory of the social psychology of participation as a guide for application within practical contexts. Their central premise is that ‘community’ and ‘participation’ are intrinsically linked, and that “it *is through participation* that key constituents of community are enacted” (p264). They propose three inter-related dimensions at the root of participatory processes and the formation of community. This includes the development of social identity, which occurs as individuals share common social identifications, and collectively construct and reconstruct identities; the expression, reaffirmation, or renegotiation of social representations (or world views); and the power context (both symbolic and material) which differentiates between experiences of participation (e.g. if power deficits prevent social change from occurring, this will be unfulfilling as it may reinforce marginalised identities). In this manner, through the social process of participation, empowerment and identity are concepts which acquire a social or collective component.

### *Study Aims*

The aims of the research are to understand refugee women’s engagement with the Internet and its impact on their empowerment and identity. Exploring this through participation in the CIP, this relationship will be contextualised within a community participative framework. Thus, the focus will be on the “experience of context and the way this experience produces knowledge, expertise and practices which emerge from, and at the same time respond to, the concrete conditions under which a group of people live” (Campbell and Jovchelovitch, 2000, p258).

## **DESIGN AND METHOD**

The approach taken by the study was informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which advocates the development of theoretical knowledge from the data obtained rather than other sources (Crotty, 1998). This method was chosen as it complements the nature of the research aims (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); allows facets of the phenomenon under investigation to emerge free from pre-conceived ideas (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990); and grounds theory in the lived experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 1990). Theory and conceptual frameworks were applied post-data analysis, as a means of organising the findings and discussion.

### **Collaborating Organisation & Structure of CIP**

The research was conducted in collaboration with the Manchester Women's Electronic Village Hall (WEVH), which hosted the CIP. The Manchester WEVH was established in 1992 as a centre run by women for women, providing ICT training and resources to meet community requirements. The WEVH's ethos is rooted in the needs of women and all courses are organised around school hours and vacations. Trainee groups are kept small (approximately 10 women) to ensure full support is given, and as part of the training women are offered personal development, counselling and career guidance (WEVH Website, 2004).

The CIP was developed by the Manchester WEVH in conjunction with community partners (including local refugee groups, committees; and local community centres) to support female refugees in using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).



The CIP consisted of a minimum of 25 hours of training; transport costs were paid for; and crèche facilities were provided (WEVH Website - Projects, 2004).

## **Participants**

The research sample consisted of 6 refugee women, and this number reflected those women who completed the CIP and attended the final session. The CIP had originally commenced with 12 women, but numbers declined as the course progressed (mainly due to changes in employment; but also including changes in housing locality, and care responsibilities).

Common characteristics were that the women all had an Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR<sup>3</sup>) asylum status; and prior to the CIP had little or no Internet related technical competency. For the purpose of this research the women were given pseudonyms reflecting their nationality:

**Waseema** from Eritrea is 36 years old, has children in the UK, and has been in the UK for over three years. She has never experienced employment, and is educated up to basic level<sup>4</sup> in Eritrea. She self-rated her English speaking and reading skills as fairly good.

**Samina** from Eritrea is in her late 30's, and has 4 children in the UK aged between 11 and 15, and has a 16 year old daughter in Sudan. She has been in the UK for three years. Educated to intermediate level in her country of origin, she is currently seeking employment.

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<sup>3</sup> ILR is otherwise known as permanent residency, and places no time limit on the person's stay in the UK (Dumper, 2002b).

<sup>4</sup> Educational level disclosed by the women was categorised according to 'basic' or 'intermediate', as hierarchies differed between countries of origin

**Rasheeda** from Sudan is 31 years old. She has a child under the age of 2, and has been in the UK for three years. She has no formal education from her country of origin, and taught herself to read and write.

**Catherine** from Zimbabwe is 28 years old, and has a young child. She has been in the UK for one year, and had left a university course unfinished in her homeland.

**Jennifer** from Zimbabwe is over 40 years old. She has a 9 year old child, and has been in the UK for over three years. She was employed previously for a short-while (in her home country, but did not disclose in which capacity), and rated herself highly literate.

**Zoobia** from Ethiopia is 26 years old. She has been in the UK for approximately one year, and has a basic level of education from Ethiopia.

The final participant was the course tutor, who was an integral part of both organising and arranging the CIP; taught all of the CIP sessions; and worked closely with all the women on the course. The tutor was a middle-aged white female, who had recently qualified as an adult trainer within the WEVH. Part of this training included dealing with the specific educational needs of adult females; and prior to the CIP the tutor had attended training in working with refugees (including cultural awareness and sensitivity).

### **Data collection**

A multi-method investigation was conducted, utilising semi-structured interviews and observation. Individual interviews were conducted with 6 refugee women and the CIP course tutor, and lasted from between 30 - 90 minutes. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to allow a continual flow of questions in order to delve into the

position and comments of the interviewee (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994). Consistent with research aims, an interview schedule was drawn up consisting of the following topic areas: reasons for taking part in the CIP; favourite and least favourite aspects of the course; use of the Internet and e-mail; impact of use; and further aspirations for Internet usage. Questions were designed to be relevant to all the women, and of a broad enough scope to raise issues of personal significance. The interviews of women who agreed to be tape-recorded (a total of two women and the course tutor) were audio-taped, and later transcribed by the first author; and notes were taken for the remainder of the interviews. The observation was conducted in a manner whereby the women were aware of the presence of a researcher and the nature of the study; and was non-participative in that the researcher did not take part in the session. The observation recorded how the women engaged with technology during the final session of the CIP, and was unstructured to allow the researcher to note down engagement not only with technology, but with other women in the group, and facilities provided by the centre.

### **Reflexivity**

The authors approached the research from a community psychology perspective, which strives for diversity and underrepresented perspectives to be heard (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004). The research was conducted by the first author: an educated, British-born, South-East Asian female. In terms of ICT experience, this researcher is technologically competent and qualified to teach adult ICT skills; and has prior experience as an ICT tutor for adults. To overcome some of the differences in power between the researcher and women, relevant aspects from Goodkind and Deacon's (2004) principles for conducting research with refugee women were followed. This

included building trust prior to interviewing through initial group interactions (allowing individuals to feel less intimidated); use of positive non-verbal cues and body language; and demonstrating a genuine interest in their opinions (as opposed to testing their skill or knowledge). Language was a barrier throughout the study, and non-verbal communication formed an integral part of the interview process, which may have been misinterpreted due to cultural differences. The women were given the option of having their interview tape-recorded, and only two of the refugee women agreed. The main reason stated for not being tape-recorded was a lack of confidence in English speaking skills. Due to this low number of transcribed interviews and some communication problems, snippets of the women's dialogue have been integrated to retain readability, whilst conveying as accurate a representation as possible. However, this also results in the voices of certain women appearing more frequently than others (namely Samina, and the tutor); and a reliance on the tutor's comments to summarise the women's position. These comments mirrored those of the women, and due to the personal characteristics of the tutor (rooted in meeting and addressing the needs of the refugee women as they arise without an authoritative or rigid structure), the authors are of the opinion that this is most likely to have been a reciprocal process. Nevertheless, in hindsight, the use of interpreters during the interview process could have reduced this problem.

### **Data Analysis**

As per Bolam and Sixsmith (2002) grounded theory principles were applied to the data in a non-prescriptive manner, following the ethos and philosophy of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The aim was to understand the

women's technological engagement and participation; grounding theory in close examination of the data. Analysis was conducted thematically on individual interviews, whereby line-by-line analysis was followed to develop a coding frame. Observation data was analysed in the same manner, and was merged with the coding frame produced through interview analysis. With this new coding frame in place, all data was re-analysed and the process was reiterated until all themes had been exhausted.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In conjunction with the aims of the study, themes from the analysis were categorised under the following headings: 1) Technological Engagement Outcomes; and 2) Process Outcomes Associated with Participation. These themes will be explored in detail with supporting excerpts from the observation and interview data where appropriate.

Ellipses (...) indicate material omitted from transcripts for brevity, and interviewer remarks are in bold.

### **1) Technological Engagement Outcomes**

The women's technological engagement corresponded with the domains of the Internet: i.e. communication (or CMC), and information retrieval (via the Web). Communication formed the larger portion of engagement and consisted of e-mail, which were phonetically written in respective native languages (thus the women were not hindered by having to write in English); and contained digital images (either uploaded via a scanner or digital camera provided by the WEVH centre). Web use was at the level where the women could locate and read relevant Websites, and provided an invaluable source of information regarding the local community, educational opportunities, and

current affairs from their country of origin. The outcomes of this technological engagement were sub-divided into intermediate outcomes in the form of maintaining links and re-building networks, and the facilitation of resettlement and integration; and empowerment and identity outcomes. These outcomes, their various components, and Internet domains are illustrated in Table 1:



### **Intermediate Outcomes: *Maintaining Links & Re-building Networks***

Communities are significant arenas in which identities are developed, loyalties are assigned, meaning is attributed to daily practices, political differences are explored, and we engage in an understanding of ourselves (Howarth, 2001). For the refugee women in the CIP however, participation in such processes had been severed due to the experience of forced migration. In a new asylum community, restrictions including the legal (pertaining to asylum status), cultural (also within the refugee community), and economic, further confounded attempts to renew this sense of community. In order to recuperate *some* of this loss, a major portion of the women's technological engagement (predominantly via e-mail) consisted of maintaining links and re-building networks rooted in their past or present status. By doing so, outcomes included a reduction in isolation and anxieties through a recuperation of social support networks, maintaining links with their country of origin, and fostering localised support networks:

#### *Reducing Isolation and Anxieties through Recuperating Social Support Networks*

E-mail was described by the women as a “*life-line*” (stated by Jennifer) in maintaining quick, cost-effective connections with geographically distant members from their country of origin. Whilst this has been found in relation to general ethnic minority use (Thompson, 2002), for the refugee women this was highly significant as it allowed them to recuperate some of their fragmented (due to war, or political unrest) social support networks. As Samina explained, the need to seek asylum was common amongst her community (or as she describes, ‘Eritrean people’), however through e-mail she maintained links with some of these networks:



America, Sudan as well, Holland. Yeah, Saudi Arabia... Yeah, I have friends, lot of people, all Eritrean people is came out from Ethiopia everywhere, that's why contact with the people [*via e-mail*]. Sweden... easy, not pay money. [Samina]

These networks were important for the women, as they provided a source of support and salvaged connections linked to their past identity and status. More importantly however, e-mail allowed the women to remain in contact with close family members who were left behind in their country of origin. This aspect further reduced their isolation, and allowed them to manage anxieties about family trapped in potentially hostile areas. During the observation, Samina engaged with the researcher explaining how via e-mail she had been monitoring the progress of her recently graduated daughter who had been left behind in a neighbouring country. Other women empathised with this aspect, and throughout the session were observed sharing personal stories, and expressing relief that family members were in good health. The course tutor aptly captured an element of this:

But of course communication with home you know, you sort of wonder how people managed before they had their account, sending photographs, you know, Christmas time and all that, and everybody, yeah, its sort of quite moving the whole thing of the first time people would show you photographs that somebody had sent them and things like that. So I think in reducing isolation, e-mail was a great thing... [Tutor]

In this manner, technological engagement was used to counteract the isolating affects linked to the experience of diaspora and forced migration. Whilst the use of text within

e-mail was an important feature, the use of digital images (both sent and received) added a further dimension to this re-building of connections. At some point or other during the session, most of the women (namely Samina, Waseema, Jennifer, Rasheeda, and Zoobia) made use of the centre's facilities to attach or print digital images to augment the two dimensional quality of e-mail. Whilst for other Internet user groups this aspect may be taken lightly, for the refugee women the emotional importance was paramount. For example with Samina, whilst the e-mail sent by her daughter alleviated concerns for her welfare, it was the image of her daughter in her graduation gown which reduced her to tears of pride and joy. Zoobia also expressed extreme delight upon receiving pictures of her family via e-mail, and hurriedly printed them out to show to the rest of the group. Additionally, for those women who lacked confidence in their literacy skills, the use of images provided a means with which to communicate via image, rather than solely relying on text. In this way, e-mail provided the women with a textual and visual connection with individuals rooted in their past communities.

#### *Maintaining Links with Country of Origin*

Another means of re-connecting with past community included the use of news Websites, which the women visited in order to keep abreast of current affairs in their country of origin. These sites were all written in the women's native languages, and to some extent reduced the need for high levels of English literacy. The women were all predominantly from war torn areas; and Rasheeda disclosed her country was "*small with lots of fighting*", but that the Web enabled her to find out what was happening in her country. This was reinforced by Samina:

...News from my country, easy to find, no problem. Because they're still fighting in Eritrea and Ethiopian, that's why every night I need to know about my country, but important the news... that's why I need the Internet, easy, yeah, easy to find about your country. [Samina]

For the refugee women, the need for reliable news was paramount; and rather than relying on hearsay or other local community members (other refugees in the area), the Internet provided an (arguably) unbiased reliable source of information compared to other alternatives:

... You don't hear what's happening in Eritrea on the news, you just don't, there's no way. And I suppose if you listen to people in your community then people... there might be factions, you might not get impartial news etc. [Tutor]

Digital technologies were thus used as an information source to provide the women with an instant and continual source of information regarding their country of origin.

#### *Fostering Localised Support Networks*

Whilst it is possible that the process of maintaining links and networks rooted in past communities has the potential for isolation by negating local contacts and networks, the study found this was not the case as e-mail was utilised to foster localised support networks. Research highlights that refugees may experience distrust towards those within and outside their refugee community (Cambridge & Williams, 2004; Colson, 2003), however via e-mail the women were able to maintain contact with other refugees

in the area without having to disclose personal addresses or telephone numbers. This was expressed by the tutor:

It meant all the women could stay in touch with each other personally as well without maybe giving out their home addresses, or anything, but just quite an anonymous sort of way that they can now e-mail each other and stay in touch on their own back really. [Tutor]

This was a particularly important aspect for the women who had few opportunities other than attendance at the WEVH centre to leave their home and form local contacts.

However, whether or not over-time this use widens to incorporate networks from diverse communities (i.e. not just the refugee community) is one which will require further scrutiny.

### ***Facilitating Resettlement & Integration***

Resettlement is the process by which a refugee “gradually re-establishes the feeling of control over his/her life” (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2003, p62); whilst integration refers to the position of refugees in comparison to the dominant majority via indicators such as access to jobs, housing, and education (Mestheneos & Ioannidi, 2002). In order to cope with the emotional and pragmatic constraints associated with settling in an asylum country, the refugee women technologically engaged in ways which were meaningful for them. This included using the Web to obtain local community information; use of e-mail as a tool to communicate with formal services (in this case housing associations);

and information to increase employment prospects (in the form of training opportunities in the area):

#### *Local Community Information*

The dispersal system the women were subjugated to as refugees meant that most of them were forced to experience living in various localities. With no prior knowledge of these communities or areas, the women were weary of new residencies, but discovered that local government sites could be used to meet their needs. For example, Rasheeda used local government sites to find information about those areas within her neighbourhood which were unsafe, and once she had obtained this information, located maps on the Web in order to find a route to her house which suitably avoided these areas. Catherine used local authority Websites to find information about the best schools in the area for her child, as well as the location of recreational parks.

Furthermore, when Samina had been trying to resolve her housing situation, local government sites had provided her with listings of local housing associations to help her situation. These examples illustrate the breadth of information the women found from local authority sites, including information about housing, schools, crime and safety, and recreation. Thus, digital technologies allowed the women to gain access to knowledge which they previously did not have easy access to.

#### *E-mail as a Tool for Contacting Local Government Services*

The women were aware of the importance of e-mail as a tool to communicate with formal services and organisations. The most potent example of this was that of Samina, for whom the dispersal process as a refugee meant that she was living in a different

locality from her children. To remedy this, Samina e-mailed her local government housing service for assistance:

I have problem with housing, I contact by Internet, yeah.

**So you e-mailed someone?**

Yeah, yeah...I say now, I'm living in Manchester, but my children in Salford, that's why I need help, that's why I need to go to Salford because the children is you know... I write e-mail for the housing. [Samina]

Samina was eventually able to find accommodation suitable for both herself and her children, but throughout the process experienced numerous anxieties and difficulties. Whilst it would be naïve to suggest that e-mail played a vital role in helping her resolve her situation, it can be suggested that e-mail played a significant role in managing additional difficulties associated with dealing with bureaucratic systems.

### *Increasing Employment Prospects*

Employment is one of the largest obstacles faced by refugees in successfully integrating into an asylum nation (Oatley, 2000), and is compounded by hurdles such as unfamiliarity with jobsearch mechanisms, support networks, and the education system (Cliff, 2000). All the women taking part in the CIP were granted with an ILR asylum status, which permits them to work legally, but they were acutely aware of the problems associated with finding employment. To alleviate this, the women located information on the Web to assist in the development of employment strategies. This included using the Web to find local training opportunities to improve their employability. For

example, Catherine explained she was interested in training as a nurse and had used the Internet to find institutions in her locality which offered such training. Once she had found a suitable course on the Web, she telephoned for an information pack and was waiting for the information to arrive in the post. Jennifer had also used the Internet to obtain such information:

I'm also looking if, because I'm a student, I still want to do my special needs education, so I'm looking for areas which I could, I'm supposed to have. There's information that I don't know, that I still need on that subject, special needs education. I need to know where to get that and that information. And the sponsorship, I'm looking for sponsorship... So I think I'll find it through the Internet. [Jennifer]

The ability of the Web to provide access to such resources was recognised as both a useful and necessary part of career advancement; particularly as the refugee women were aware that previous qualifications (if any) were not recognised within the UK.

When questioned on projected future use of the Internet, most of the women agreed that the Internet would be used as an employment seeking tool. Rasheeda stated that although she was not ready to work at present due to childcare responsibilities, in the future the Internet would be used to help find suitable employment. This was echoed by Jennifer:

**Right, and do you think you'll use it [Internet] more than you do now in the future?**

I should think so yeah, to get myself a better job. [Jennifer]

All the women recognised that in their new asylum context, training was a necessary stepping-stone for future employment. With aspirations of becoming in Catherine's case a nurse, in Samina's case a caterer, and in Jennifer's case a teacher; the women recognised that the likelihood of achieving this immediately was small. The Internet was thus used as a source of information to develop strategies, provide resources to chart possible career directions and advancements, and to assist in developing long-term settlement plans.

### **Empowerment & Identity Outcomes**

Empowerment and identity outcomes emerged as technological engagement provided the women with a tool to develop relationships, community, and identity (via CMC); and to foster psychological empowerment via greater autonomy and control around the experience of living in the UK, perceived competence in terms of ICT skill and autonomy, access to knowledge and resources and developing critical awareness, and an ability to address specific refugee needs:

#### *Relationships, Community, & Identity*

Social psychology highlights the importance of relationships and social exchange in the development of identity, and as Gergen (2000) indicates: "understandings of self are inherently rooted in community... through relationships we develop a sense of who we



are and what we are worth” (p202). Whilst Gergen (2000) continues how technologies of communication are destroying contemporary communities, for the refugee women in this study, as demonstrated previously, technology was utilised to build and re-build elements of past community and to re-establish a new sense of community. This occurred as the women re-established and maintained networks rooted in their past identity, and initiated and maintained new networks centred on their new identity. On close examination, it emerges that in the process of achieving this and using CMC, the women engage in the development, manipulation, and expression of identity. Taking the example of Zoobia; by receiving pictures and e-mails from her family from Ethiopia, she is connected to her past identity of a daughter and sister (in her new context she is devoid of immediate contact), and is able to maintain visual and narrative links to events occurring in this community. In the process of sending text and images centred around her present status, she re-defines her identity, and through manipulating and expressing this current identity engages in the process of resolving identity conflicts of the past and present (as per Mitra, 2005). A further testimonial to this resolution is the use of current affairs sites to retain a sense of citizenship with their country of origin; and the manipulation of Roman script by all the women to type in native languages (also to some degree illustrating the technology’s adaptability and ethnic diversity). Throughout this process, technological engagement and the Internet provide the necessary ‘voice’ for the negotiation, construction, and reconstruction of personal identities (K. G. Gergen, 1989, 1991). This relationship however necessitates further investigation, and whilst personal e-mails were not disclosed within the present study, future research could chart evidence of exactly how CMC develops and maintains identities; the role of gender and the construction of identities through gendered

narratives (M. Gergen, 1997); and whether or not as per Wright (2005) other forms of CMC (such as forums, and online groups) are used to manage identity.

### *Empowerment*

Consistent with previous research, technological engagement empowered the women through efficient and effective access to previously intangible information (Pinkett & O'Bryant, 2003; Nath 2001). This form of empowerment based at an individual level (community empowerment is discussed under the process of participation), was categorised according to Zimmerman's (1995) model of psychological empowerment with intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural components:

At an intrapersonal level, empowerment occurred as the women were able to gain *greater autonomy and control around the experience of living in the UK*. This occurred as the women were provided with the necessary skills and competency to manoeuvre the Internet and meet their various needs (as demonstrated through intermediate outcomes of facilitating resettlement and integration). To determine exactly how integral a role the Internet played in this, during interviews the women were asked to suggest if there were any other means (other than the Internet) by which they could have located such information. All the women agreed that their second option would have been to use books in the library:

**If you didn't have the Internet how do you think you'd have found that information?**

I could've gone to the library, but then it might take a longer time than on the Internet. Internet would be faster. [Jennifer]

Jennifer's view of the efficiency of the Internet was unanimous with the other refugee women, who additionally acknowledged the autonomy associated with its use. This was very important for the women as Waseema, Samina and Zoobia stated that due to lack of knowledge around the classification system, locating information from the library was an arduous task often requiring assistance. Lack of confidence and the barrier of language however, meant that the women felt unable to approach librarians for assistance. Using the Internet as an information source, removed the need for this physical assistance, and thus engendered feelings of *perceived competence in terms of ICT skill and autonomy*. This ICT skill was not only restricted to the Internet, but included other technological skills such as ICT expertise in uploading digital images, file management, and basic computer hardware and software knowledge. This was of great significance to the women who recognised the role of ICTs in society and in potential employment; which Zoobia captured with the sentiment that “*everything is now to do with computers*” which warranted why “*to get good job, you need to know computer*”.

Through interactions with the Web, the women gained *access to knowledge and resources*, which were instrumental in *developing a critical awareness* regarding their situation. This is a crucial aspect of interactional empowerment, which refers to the ability to develop a critical understanding of forces that shape the environment, as well as knowledge of resources and methods of access in order to produce social change

(Zimmerman, 1995). This was chiefly evident in terms of the women's empowering use of the Internet to increase employment prospects. Through recognition of the qualifications and skills necessary to fulfil employment aspirations, the women not only critically understood their position within a hierarchical society, but used the Web to locate the necessary resources to counteract this marginalised status. Thus they were not only engaging with technology, but also with social systems embedded within their new context.

The behavioural component of empowerment considers actions that address needs in a specific context (Zimmerman, 1995). All of the women's interactions with the Internet can be thought of as pertaining to this component, though a prime example is the use of current affairs sites regarding their country of origin. By utilising the Web in this manner, the women bypassed reliance on a patriarchal system operating within their community, and were provided with more reliable sources of information specific to their needs. Collectively, the ability to control and access social support networks and local community information, the women adapted to adverse conditions which were not malleable to change due to their status as refugees.

## **2) Process Outcomes Associated with Participation**

This theme presents those outcomes associated with the social process of participation observed in the CIP. These outcomes include the development of a social identity and community narratives; and collective consciousness-raising:

*Social Identity and Community Narratives*

A sense of ‘group solidarity’ (Orford, 1992) was observed amongst the women via a variety of social interactions, though predominantly through dialogue. This ranged from simple conversation (about the weather, timings for activities, and centre facilities) to more in-depth interactions regarding health, well-being, and family welfare. This aspect is instrumental in developing a social identity, which allows anxieties and fears to be aired with others, thus to some extent reducing the vulnerability of individual identities (Bauman, 2001). This was observed throughout the CIP, whereby the women collectively shared narratives based around their experience of seeking asylum in the UK, thus forming community narratives (Rappaport, 2000). These narratives are those which are common among a group of people, and in this case included the experience of the loss of friends and family, dealing with resettlement, and future aspirations for employment (linked to their work permit, and provision for their family). One of these communal aims (in terms of employment) was mentioned by Samina:

Everyone [*in the CIP*] is happy because, they same mine, learn. Now maybe 15 ladies coming here to learn Internet, yeah, very important. You know, everyone need help for the children and they want to go to job, they want to find the job.

[Samina]

Part of the essence of forming a social identity and creating community narratives, involves the ability to celebrate both commonalities and differences within communities (Rappaport, 2000). This was observed in the CIP which boasted a collection of women from different countries, cultural backgrounds, and religions. Over lunch (which was provided by the centre) women were observed sharing recipes, and (as it was near the

time of a Christian religious event) commenting on religious differences. This diversity of cultural perspectives was referred to by Samina:

**What about other women who are doing courses with you?**

I know from Zimbabwe, I know from Ethiopia, from Sudan and I speak Arabic, and from Iran.

**So do you get on with all of the women, what was it like?**

Yeah I know that, yeah. Everyone is happy. Everyone is happy, I don't know, I am as well friendly. Joking, learning. [Samina,]

*Collective Consciousness-Raising*

Narratives provide an important resource for empowerment (Rappaport, 2000), and as previously discussed, technological engagement was used to provide psychological empowerment and facilitate resettlement and integration. These proactive problem-solving mechanisms were not arrived at individually, but through the sharing of community narratives and forming a social identity, the women participated in collective consciousness-raising. This was supported within the CIP through mechanisms to share online experiences:

We had a data projector in the middle... and people really got into that and then I'd always have it set up in the middle and sometimes people would just go on and say 'oh I got involved in this Website, click click click, and here's the photograph of me and stuff', so it was a way of sharing, people sharing information about things that

they knew about. Or ‘here’s a good Website for people who speak Somali’, and somebody would type it up and everything. [Tutor]

During the observation, Catherine demonstrated a local government site with up-to-date information around the quality of local schools; whilst independent of online pursuits, women shared their experiences and strategies around resettlement (e.g. Samina sharing her process of e-mailing housing associations). Working in a collaborative manner coupled together with community narratives, the women learnt from each other about issues which affect each of their lives, and were empowered to alleviate these. This exemplifies Rappaport’s (2000) discussion of community narratives, whereby the process of coming together and shaping a social identity, forms an integral part of personal identity development or change. This involves the process of learning from our own communities, and using resources (in this case from the Internet as well as from each other) with which to help transform individual and community ‘tales of terror’ into ‘tales of joy’.

## **CONCLUSION**

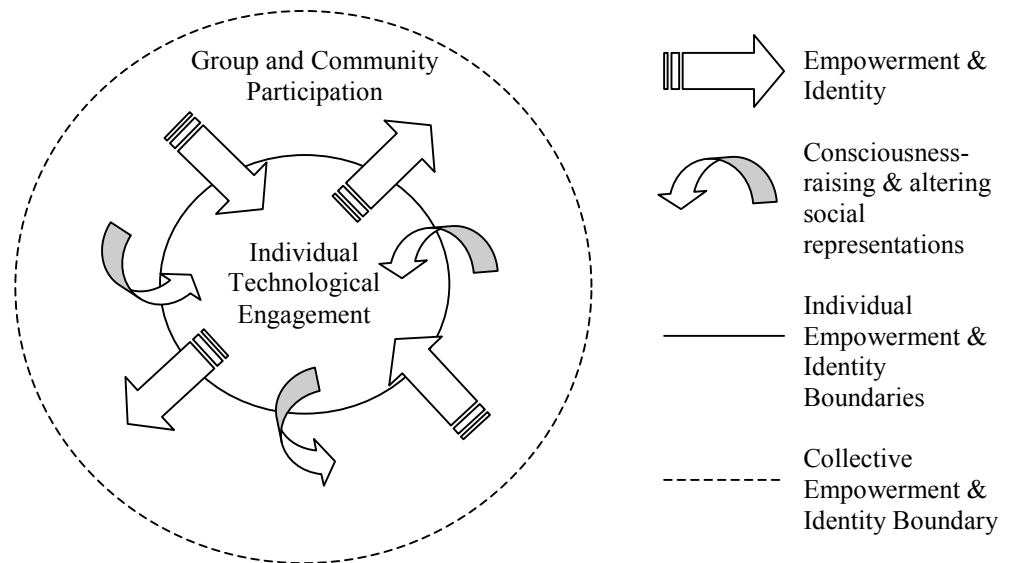
The study has illustrated how through participation in the CIP, the women have wrestled with their marginalised status to re-establish themselves within their asylum context. This occurs as they use technological engagement to develop their identity, resolving conflicts between their past and present status; and foster psychological empowerment in terms of actively facilitating their resettlement and integration. Participation outcomes augment empowerment and identity by developing social identity, community narratives, and collective consciousness-raising. In this way, technological engagement

and participation become arenas in which empowerment and identity processes are grappled with amidst the power constraints held by the women. However, future research is necessary to determine if over-time these outcomes progress from the ameliorative to the transformative; i.e. if digital technologies are used to engage with political participation, and if consciousness-raising develops into critical consciousness (Friere, 1974).

Using these findings to reflect on the theorisation of the social psychology of participation, Campbell and Jovchelovitch's (2000) model is supported, though the analysis has not explicitly considered the process of social representations. If however, one considers in totality the outcomes of technological engagement and participation, it becomes evident that the refugee women are in the process of altering and transforming social representations. This occurs as the CIP provides a 'detraditionalised public sphere' which allows "difference and dissent to coexist, be negotiated and reworked through dialogue and equality of access" (Jovchelovitch, 2001, p173). This process unfolds, as per Jovchelovitch (1997), new modes of communication (through technology and participation) expand social knowledge. As the women make sense of this new knowledge, they challenge the dominant social representations imposed on them (such as those portrayed by mass media which influence representations of the self (Krause, 2002)) and enter into new forms of meaning making (Valsiner, 2003). As Figure 1 demonstrates, this process in its entirety can be viewed as a cyclical model:



Figure 1: Cyclical Model Incorporating Internet use with Participation



In this model, technological engagement provides individual level empowerment and identity developing processes, and reciprocally interacts with consciousness-raising and social representations to augment empowerment and identity boundaries. This however begs the question: what it is about the technological medium which enriches empowerment and identity outcomes of participation, and how can this add to the theorisation of the social psychology of participation? The answer may lie in Ramella and De la Cruz's (2000) call for greater attention to be paid to the subjectivity of actors taking part in participatory processes, and individual agency as its unfold within the group and community. As the model illustrates, digital technology fosters individual agency and action within participatory processes, intermittently shifting the focus from the individual to the collective. This occurs as technology creates space for the individual to obtain autonomy and agency independent of the group; whilst cyclically participatory processes develop, guide, support, and give weight to these endeavours. Furthermore, the study would indicate that it is the intermediate outcomes of

technological engagement (which are based solely on the needs of the individuals) which provide motivation and incentive for participation. These suggestions are tentative however, given that similar to Ramella and De la Cruz (2000), the lack of a “broader base of field implementation” (p281) of the CIP limits to what extent this model can be applied to other marginalised communities (e.g. refugee males, or other ethnic minorities). Nevertheless, the study stresses for the recognition and development of these factors; and a further call into the utility of digital technologies in community participatory processes within this contemporary technological climate.

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