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Refugees, Post-Migration Stress, and Internet Use: A Qualitative Analysis of Intercultural Adjustment and Internet Use Among Iraqi and Sudanese Refugees to the United States

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Abstract

Post-migration stressors represent significant obstacle to refugee adjustment, and continued exposure to post-migration stressors can negatively affect mental and physical health. Communities of support maintained over the Internet may provide a sense of constancy and reliability that may insulate against the negative effects of stress. We conducted five focus group interviews with Iraqi and Sudanese refugees to understand how refugees use the Internet to access support in their daily lives. Four trends were observed: (a) Internet use was related to culture of origin, (b) refugees were reluctant to explore online, (c) children served as brokers of online knowledge, and (d) limited Internet access is associated with increased time and financial obligations. This study aims to contribute to theory on Internet-mediated social support and to refugee health by creating smoother pathways to self-sufficiency and allowing refugees to exhibit agency in constructing and maintaining online networks of support.

Keywords

adaptation, coping, enduring; communication; Internet; refugees; social support; well-being; qualitative; Iraq; Sudan

Introduction

During their transition abroad, refugees face a series of pre- and post-migration stresses. Often from war-torn countries or seats of intense civil conflict, many refugees flee their home countries having witnessed or experienced imprisonment, torture, starvation, the death of a close friend or family member, or the forced enacting of violence (Onyut et al., 2009; Sinnerbrink, Silove, Field, Steel, & Manicavasagar, 1997). Furthermore, the cascade of stressors continues once refugees are resettled in their host environments. Having fled under duress (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008; Rasmussen, Crager, Baser, Chu, & Gany, 2012; Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2005), refugees arrive with limited knowledge of their new environments and limited language proficiency (Khawaja et al., 2008). Separated from home cultures, familiar environments, and relationships, refugees face the daunting challenge of re-establishing their lives, relationships, and identities in a new and unfamiliar context. Although official support mechanisms exist to help in the resettlement process, support services may lapse before refugees feel prepared and despite continued post-migration stress experiences (Barnes & Aguilar, 2007; Simich, Beiser, Stewart, & Mwakarimba, 2005).

Although continued exposure to stress can significantly affect mental and physical health (Sapolsky, 2004), research has demonstrated that participation in community networks of support can help to buffer against increased stress during times of transition (Beiser, 1999; Simich et al., 2005; Stewart et al., 2008). Unfortunately, transition may correspond to a time of decreased family and community support. However, significant research from the field of communication and social psychology has demonstrated that during times of transition, when previously established networks of support may be rendered unavailable or ineffectual, the Internet can be an effective tool for the transmission of advice, resources, and information. The communication of support in online

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settings can help buffer individuals against stress following transition and can assist in the rapid re-establishment of socially supportive peer networks (for a complete review see, for example, Mikal, Rice, Abeyta, & DeVilbiss, 2013). Once conceived of as a superficial replication of more authentic face-to-face support exchanges, more recent research has demonstrated that the Internet can foster authentic support exchanges and that online support offers a host of functional advantages that can increase the effectiveness of support exchanges (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wellman, Hasse, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Those advantages map well onto the post-migration stresses faced by refugees.

Despite this apparent match between refugee support needs and functional advantage of Internet-mediated support exchange, very little research to date has examined how refugees are using the Internet to access support. Using qualitative data gathered from five in-depth focus groups with local refugees, this study examines the extent to which refugees report using the Internet in their daily lives. We pay particular attention to characteristics of Internet use; barriers to access, creation, and maintenance of peer networks of support; and how a failure to adopt Internet technology affects access to local resources. By constructing a profile of Internet use among refugees, this article not only contributes to theory on Internet-mediated social support during times of transitional stress but can also help refugee support services create smoother pathways to self-sufficiency for the refugees they support.

Theoretical Framing

From a theoretical perspective, the known advantages of Internet-mediated social support appear uniquely well-suited to coping with common post-migration stressors faced by refugees. The goal of this study is to examine the degree to which this theoretical alignment corresponds to common practice among refugee populations. In this section, we present the theoretical alignment, beginning with a discussion of refugees and post-migration challenges. Next, we argue that the most commonly reported post-migration stressors faced by refugees are quite similar to those faced by other cross-cultural migrant groups. Finally, we discuss how social support serves to alleviate stress and promote health and how the Internet has helped to facilitate the transfer of support following transition.

Refugee Adjustment

The UNHCR defines a refugee as

> a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. (UNHCR, n.d.)

Currently, 51.2 million people around the world have been uprooted from their homes due to conflict or persecution—however, many of those remain displaced inside the political boundaries of their country of origin and, thus, ineligible for refugee status (Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2015). As a result, there are currently 16.7 million refugees worldwide, 11.7 million of whom are under the protection of the UNHCR. The United States is the world's second largest refugee-receiving country, after Germany (UNHCR, 2015). Since 1975, the United States has resettled more than 3.0 million refugees, with an average of 70,000 refugees per year (U.S. Department of State, 2014) and 84,400 applications for asylum in 2013 (UNHCR, 20 Jun 2014).

Refugee status entitles recipients to support services, including obtaining a social security card, school registration, medical evaluation, and English language training within 30 days of arrival in the United States (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2015). Refugee support service organizations may provide additional services, including job placement, and may continue to provide support services to refugees for 6 months or more following relocation (Ascentria Care Alliance, 2015; Refugee Council USA, 2015). Despite adjustment assistance available to refugees through refugee support agencies, evidence suggests that termination of services represents a stressful transition for refugees and that many refugees feel inadequately equipped for the challenges of integration and adjustment to new cultural contexts (Barnes & Aguilar, 2007). Specifically, compounding pre-migration stresses faced in the country of origin, Schweitzer et al. (2005) suggest that refugees continue to struggle with issues related to "communication, discrimination, worry about family back home, employment, immigration difficulties, access to health and welfare services, and acculturation difficulties" (p. 181).

Common Stressors Associated With Migration

The migration experience of refugees is unique with respect to that of other immigrants. It is generally longer, spans multiple countries, and follows severe pre-migration trauma (UNHCR, n.d.). Nevertheless, the general models of intercultural adjustment stress provide interesting insights into the lived experiences and post-migration stressors faced by refugees as they adapt to new roles and expectations of life abroad. Traditional models of inter-cultural adjustment have relied on two main assumptions: (a) that intercultural adjustment is characterized by heightened stress and (b) that inter-cultural adjustment stress can be alleviated by increased interaction and engagement with members of the target community. Models such as the U-Curve (Adler, 1975; Lysgaard,

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1955; Oberg, 1960) and W-Curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) suggest a normative fluctuation in well-being from high to low and back again as a sojourner learns about and effectively integrates into their host culture. Although these models have been critiqued on the basis of theoretical limitations (Church, 1982) and empirical counterevidence (Gong & Fan, 2006; McKinlay, Pattison, & Gross, 1996), even more recent models such as the acculturation attitudes model (Berry, 1997; Ward & Kennedy, 1994) continue to predict stress and adjustment as a function of co-national and host culture, thus highlighting the key role of peer networks of support.

The post-migration stressors reported by refugees (communication, discrimination, worry about family back home, employment, immigration difficulties, access to health and welfare services, and acculturation difficulties) are consistent with the stressors faced by other migrants. Furthermore, research from other studies of migrants can provide additional insights into the stresses that generally accompany cross-cultural adjustment among other migrant populations, such as uncertainty, insufficient understanding of the host culture, difficulty adapting to host country customs, and difficulty with the physical environment (Chen, 1999). Left unchecked, these stresses can result in isolation, depression, anxiety, decreased work performance, and decreased feelings of well-being (Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Wei et al., 2007), along with psychosomatic illness (see, for example, Anderson, Bradley, Young, McDaniel, & Wise, 1985; Winkelman, 1994). However, consistent with models of inter-cultural adjustment, research finds that interaction with formal and informal networks of support can help refugees weather the logistical and emotional challenges of adjustment to life abroad (Barnes & Aguilar, 2007; Schwarzer, Jerusalem, & Hahn, 1994; Simich et al., 2005).

Social Support and Health

Social support refers to the exchange of advice, information, and resources in response to life problems (Pearlin, 1989). Supportive exchange can help an individual to manage uncertainty and increase perceptions of control regarding one's life (Rains & Young, 2009). Social support can insulate against the negative effects of stress through either (a) "main effects" or (b) "buffering effects." The "main effects" model refers to the support derived from social networks at all times and is independent of a stressor being present. Meanwhile, the "buffering effects" model posits that in the event of a stressor, having socially supportive peer networks can serve to insulate an individual against the negative effects of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The "buffering model" acts through two mechanisms: (a) perceived support and (b) received support. When an individual "activates" their support networks by explicitly requesting advice, information, or resources, this is referred to a "received support." However, individuals need not necessarily activate their support network to derive benefit from it. Simply knowing that support is available is often sufficient to buffer an individual against the negative effects of stress (Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007).

Traditionally, social support has been comprised of four categories: informational, instrumental, socio-emotional, and embedded (Cutrona, 1990). *Informational* support refers to the transfer of information related to a particular stressor or stressful event. *Instrumental* support refers to the transfer of resources—and may include actions and materials. *Socio-emotional* support refers to both esteem support (knowledge that one is accepted or esteemed) and social companionship (support gleaned from togetherness). Finally, *embedded* support refers to the identity affirmation that comes from participation in a broader social network (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Research on the benefits of social support has not yielded systematically positive results. However, three conditions have been shown to improve the overall effectiveness of support transactions: (a) support must be empathetic (Thoits, 1986), (b) support must be fitting to the stressor (Cohen, 1988), and (c) support must not be perceived as burdensome to the support provider (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessier, 2000).

Social support provides a useful mechanism for understanding the ways in which increased social integration can affect both mental and physical health. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) present stress as a set of two cognitive appraisals, beginning with the appraisal of an event as either positive, negative, or neutral. It is followed by a "secondary appraisal" of coping resources. If an event is deemed negative and an individual lacks coping resources, the event is perceived as stressful and can lead to diminished mental and physical health. Mental health outcomes of chronic stress include depression, anxiety, cognitive impairment (Schlotz, Yim, Zoccola, Jansen, & Schultz, 2011), and insomnia (Akerstadt, 2006). Similarly, stress has been implicated in the etiology of physical disease through behavioral, psychological, and disease pathways (Uchino, 2004, 2006). In a study of 6,928 adults, Berkman and Syme (1979) find a relationship between social support and all-cause mortality, demonstrating that adults with fewer social and community ties were more likely to have died by the 9-year follow-up. Social support is hypothesized to intervene in the secondary appraisal, increasing an individual's perception of available coping resources.

Internet-Mediated Social Support

The anticipated benefit of Internet-mediated social support in responding to the adjustment needs of refugees derives from two areas: (a) the conditions for effective

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support outlined above and (b) the fit between the specific support needs cited by refugees and the demonstrated advantages of Internet-mediated social support. Specifically, the Internet is unencumbered by some limitations encountered in face-to-face support exchanges, including geographic proximity, social indicators of hierarchical standing, cultural and linguistic barriers to communication, and reciprocal social obligation. Following transition, the Internet enables users to reconnect with established networks of support (Mikal, 2011; Mikal & Grace, 2012; Rice & Hagen, 2010), while also enabling the rapid re-establishment of new socially supportive peer networks (Khvorostianov, Elias, & Nimrod, 2012). Furthermore, the Internet provides several functional advantages over face-to-face support that may be of particular use to refugees. These include (a) increased congruence with support needs (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), (b) low geographic and other barriers to communication (Wellman et al., 2001), (c) increased control and potential for privacy (Rains & Keating, 2011), and (d) reduced social obligations (Walther et al., 2002).

These advantages of online support exchange map neatly onto the nature of the stressors faced by refugees (listed above). For example, refugees may struggle with barriers to communication, due in part to acculturation difficulties. Research has found that the Internet can be quite effective in removing cultural and linguistic barriers to communication by allowing individuals to carefully write and edit responses with the assistance of online language resources (Mikal & Grace, 2012). The Internet can also help individuals overcome other barriers to communication encountered by refugees, including embarrassment or sensitivity around a particular issue (Malik & Coulson, 2008), or perceived differences in social standing (Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Wellman, 2001). Furthermore, refugees reported worry about family back in the country of origin—or feel disconnected from other family members who migrated to other countries. By bridging large geographic distances (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) and multiple time zones (Dimmick, Ramirez, Wang, & Lin, 2007), the Internet has the potential to connect (at relatively low cost) family members who have been separated during migration. Finally, although many refugees reported difficulty in accessing social services, the Internet allows users to exercise agency, decreasing the reciprocal obligations of support exchange and allowing users to carefully craft questions and responses (Pfeil, 2009). The Internet thus becomes a social lubricant, allowing refugees to independently seek out services—and may help to facilitate pathways to self-sufficiency.

Research that has looked at refugees and online support seeking has been promising. One study that examined Internet use among six refugees living in the United Kingdom and participating in an Internet training course found that the Internet was quite effective in both accessing information and in the transmission of support (Siddiquee & Kagan, 2006). Nevertheless, this study examined refugee Internet use among a very small, self-selected sample, in the ideal setting of receiving guided instruction. To date, we are unaware of any studies looking at how refugees are actually using the Internet on their own and to what end. Where refugees are using the Internet, we examine how they are using the Internet and to what end. Where refugees are not using the Internet, we aim to look at the barriers to access and what resources are barred access due to insufficient Internet literacy. By creating a profile of Internet use and barriers to access, our broader goal is to promote mental and physical health among refugees by fostering a smooth transition from dependence on official networks of support to creation of unofficial co-national and host community networks of support.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through several refugee support service organizations in one particular refugee-receiving community in the Western United States. Solicitations were generally sent through single-ethnicity communities, including a Sudanese group that meets through a local church and an Iraqi men's group with no religious affiliation that meets regularly once per week. Other recruitment avenues included local English language courses for adults. Our recruitment efforts yielded 25 participants: 12 from Iraq and 13 from the Sudan. Our sample included 10 Sudanese men and 3 Sudanese women, along with 10 Iraqi men and 2 Iraqi women. Iraqi respondents ranged in age from 35 to 55 years old, with an average age of 45, whereas Sudanese respondents ranged in age from 21 to 50 years old,[1] with an average age of 35. Time in the United States ranged from 4 months, for 1 of our Iraqi women respondents, to 18 to 20 years, for our Sudanese women respondents. Average time in the United States varied by country, with refugees from the Sudan having resided in the United States for more than 10 years, and our Iraqi participants generally having migrated several months to up to 6 years earlier.

Given the focus on two refugee groups, the sample provides cautious insight into the different lived experiences of different refugee groups. Specifically, although both countries have been characterized by internal strife, the Sudan is a developing country characterized by a history of colonization and limited economic development. Sudanese refugee migration is characterized by three distinct waves: one beginning in the mid-1950s, a second wave in the 1980s, and a most recent wave of refugees

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from the South Sudan beginning in 2013. By the end of the year 2014, there were more than 2.0 million displaced Sudanese, with 488,000 under the protection of the UNHCR, 70% of whom are children (UNHCR, 1 May 2015). At the time of out-migration, Internet penetration in the Sudan was less than 0.03% (www.Internetworldstats.com). Unlike the Sudan, Iraq is a middle-income country, and refugees tend to be ethnic and religious minorities of the Sunni. Although Sudanese migrants are more characteristic of other African and Asian refugee groups, the demographics of Iraqi refugees tend to mirror the demographics of other middle-income countries. Refugees tend to be older and more educated (Mowafi & Spiegel, 2008). At the end of 2014, there were 4.2 million (1 in 7) displaced Iraqis with 369,000 Iraqi refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2015). At the time of migration, Internet and Facebook penetration were 9.0% and 8.2%, respectively. These differences in age, history, and development infrastructure may provide additional insights into migrants' willingness and ability to adopt and capitalize on available Internet support resources.

Data Collection and Analysis

The decision to collect data using focus group interviews was made for two reasons. First, the research is exploratory in nature, and focus groups are an effective way of exploring underlying processes. To reduce the spotlight on the researcher, and emphasize interactions between participants and group norms (Morgan, 1996), we decided to interview refugees in co-national and sex-specific groups. The second reason for using focus groups was to promote access to refugees and refugee groups. According to Kitzinger (1995), some participants may not be comfortable in a formal research setting, and this discomfort may be exacerbated by the fact that interviews were conducted in English. Nevertheless, our goal was to discuss commonalities among refugee populations in general, and we did not have a budget that allowed for interpreters in Mua Ban and Arabic. Interviewing participants in groups provided social assuredness to participants and allowed more proficient English speakers to translate for less proficient speakers. This technique was used rather infrequently, as most participants were proficient in English.

To understand the processes underlying refugee Internet use and to account for the differential in familiarity with Internet technology, we conducted a series of five focus groups using a semi-structured protocol. The semi-structured protocol was used to define ideas such as "stress," "social support," "Internet technology," and "connectivity" in the participants' own language and to understand how participants organize their knowledge (Spradley, 1979). Our protocol consisted of four "grand tour" questions designed to allow participant interactions to guide the direction of the conversation (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987). Grand tour questions were related to (a) the transition to the United States, (b) available technology use in the United States, (c) barriers to accessing additional technology, and (d) forging connections within the host culture. During the focus groups, as we came upon "rich points," or clashes between how the interviewer and the respondents define key concepts (Agar, 1994), we used probing questions to delve farther and elucidate key concepts.

Focus groups were conducted between September and December 2013. Following Hennink's (2007) model, focus groups began with individual introductions—allowing each participant to speak in turn. However, most of the groups were comprised of participants who had known each other previously. Focus groups were audio recorded with participants' permission. Following the focus groups, the audio recordings were transcribed by the authors, using Express Scribe. The transcription yielded more than 200 pages of text. Once the transcriptions were complete, they were reviewed by both authors for clarity and accuracy—and subsequently redacted in accordance with Institutional Review Board requirements—and to protect respondents' privacy. Following the model set forth by Mostyn (1985), we conducted a content analysis—allowing hypotheses to emerge from a close reading of the text and then subsequently returning to the text for evidence of the hypotheses. On the first pass, each author created a list of salient themes that emerged from the entire data set and then met to discuss their findings. Given significant overlap in the authors' findings, we were able to easily merge the list of themes into a single schema. At that point, both authors conducted a separate top–down analysis to look for additional evidence.

Results

Our analysis of the transcripts demonstrated that refugees continue to experience post-migration stressors. Furthermore, although many refugees exhibit agency in seeking social support online, our results indicate that refugees are reluctant to engage in online exploration or to form online communities of support: two demonstrated avenues for accessing support online. This reluctance to explore or build community may be due to cultural differences or barriers to Internet use, including safety concerns, technological literacy, and access to a home Internet connection. In this section, we review the post-migration stressors faced by refugees, followed by evidence of refugees' online support-seeking behavior and the limitations of that engagement. Next, we review evidence of inter-group variation based on culture of origin and examine the barriers to Internet use that refugees must surmount before having

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access to the gamut of social support that have been endorsed in the research literature on computer-mediated communication.

Post-Migration Stressors

The most common stressors reported by refugees in our focus groups were consistent with those found in previous research (e.g., Schweitzer et al., 2006; Simich et al., 2005). Despite cultural incongruences between the groups interviewed, common themes emerged related to language and cultural difficulties, separation from family, loss of social support and social capital, cultural differences, and financial distress. For example, each group of refugees we interviewed indicated that learning English constituted a significant stressor. According to one Sudanese respondent,

> Number one difficulty when I got to U.S. first thing is English. Language barrier. So I just in Washington state. I have no one over there. Just me and my wife and kid, and I don't speak English. It was very difficult for me. (Sudanese, Male)

Even those with more formal education prior to migration had some difficulty adjusting to living and working in English-speaking environments. According to one participant,

> I speak English in my country. I studied in a university. I have a bachelor's degree in accounting, but after this year I forgot everything. (Iraqi, Female)

These language difficulties caused stress among participants, and some respondents reported feelings of helplessness and vulnerability corresponding with a loss of control and social capital. A Sudanese respondent tells the story of the helplessness he felt during his initial days in the United States,

> I brought my family in the bus and I just got in the bus only me and my wife and I'm like where is our people? They took them, get in the airplane. They just put me in the airplane. I am like let's go . . . and they send me with a paper and yes come with me and I just follow him and get in the car. I got in the car but they took us home and we got home and they took us to basement and they just told us this is where you gotta stay and where you sleeping. It was scary because nobody I can talk to and I am in a basement. (Sudanese, Male)

Although many of our respondents eventually learned to speak English, facing this transition to the United States with limited language skills left this respondent trapped in a basement feeling scared and limited in his ability to exercise control over his circumstances.

Although post-migration stressors were consistent across our respondent groups, different stressors manifested differently based on the culture and country of origin. For example, it was common for refugees to discuss the financial hardships they faced in migrating to the United States, but the hardships manifested differently in each group. For many Sudanese, using money for quotidian expenses was new:

> It is difficult, because back home paying bill—we don't have it. Back in Mua Ban culture, I have to build my house. If I build my house, if I have money I need to do something else, not pay rent. If I have a lot of money, I just keep it—maybe buy clothes, buy some food, or something like that . . . That is the thing that is difficult in the United States. Month-to-month. If you don't pay everything you are going to be in trouble. You know, maybe some day they are going to cut everything away. If you don't pay rent, sometime they are going to ask you to leave the house. That is a big problem for us. (Sudanese, Male)

Financial distress manifested differently among our Iraqi respondents. Although the idea of standard monthly expenses was difficult for some of the Sudanese men, Iraqi participants reported feeling as though they were underemployed relative to their skills and that this underemployment undermined their anticipated standard of living. According to one participant, he had worked as a veterinarian in Iraq but was not licensed to work as a veterinarian in the United States. He says,

> It is difficult. There is no vet university here, only in California or Texas. But I need a first practice and pass the test and it costs more than 30,000 dollars and no one can help me. The DWS can help you and support you a maximum of 4,000 dollars. (Iraqi, Male)

Another Iraqi participant echoed a similar sentiment,

> You cannot get your goal [job]. I am senior electrician. Nobody hire me. I don't know why. I send my resume over 15 jobs. They send me email. Just email. When I knock on doors they say go online. (Iraqi, Male)

For the Iraqi men, this translated into a significantly lower standard of living than what they had access to in Iraq—particularly when women were not working outside the home or were doing unpaid volunteer work. The Iraqi veterinarian said,

> Here, we are living in a cave. We call it a cave. We have no choice. You need a lot of money here. In Iraq everyone has his home, but here we have to rent. Either way, we have to pay over 1,000 dollars. All my income is 2,500 dollars, so it is very hard. (Iraqi, Male)

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Table 1. Evidence of Support Transacted Among Refugees.

	Iraqi	Sudanese
Socio-emotional	Reconnecting separated families: • So I am now before 2 years I wait. Where is my wife? I wait I want just visa for to come my wife here and my baby. And I am using the internet every time because I want continue to see my wife my baby I come to back to the Turkey for the marriage. And my wife she [gave birth to a] boy. (Iraqi, Male)	Connecting socially: • I use the Internet sometimes to communicate. I'll use a network like Facebook, and emailing to try to communicate with the friends. Just use the Yahoo, and email some of my friends which is really useful. (Sudanese, Male)
Informational	Banking and other information: • We use the Internet like you. I check my emails, I go to my bank accounts, I get books online, I watching [my children's] grades, I see their assignments. (Iraqi, Male)	News and employment: • Well, sometimes I go [online] to see the news in Sudan and what's going on in Sudan and also if I want to go and just to see my email I will go there also and if I want to look for something like jobs I can go there and search for a job. (Sudanese, Male)
Instrumental	Purchasing materials: • I am looking for technical things I am going to technical, buy something KSL. We use Internet just like you or maybe more. (Iraqi, Male)	Saving money: • I find like cheaper books when I go online like one useful like the one in the store I buy like 100 or 200 and when you go to like EBay you find some of them for like 10 dollars. (Sudanese, Male)
Embedded	No evidence	No evidence

Whether adjusting to monthly expenses or to underemployment and a lower standard of living, these financial stressors were a unifying theme across all focus groups. This loss of capital, coupled with reports of cultural difference, separation from family, and discrimination resulted reports of sadness, anxiety, and isolation among refugees.

Refugees Online Support Seeking

Despite these stresses, our findings echo trends in online support exchange research. Specifically, qualitative evidence revealed that refugees are using the Internet to access social support, with strong evidence in support of socio-emotional and informational support exchange and weaker evidence of instrumental support (see, for example, Malik & Coulson, 2008; Mo & Coulson, 2008). Table 1 below presents evidence of each sub-type of support, along with supporting evidence from Iraqi and Sudanese refugees. With respect to socio-emotional support, our focus groups revealed that some refugees used the Internet to bridge large geographic distances, to reconnect with family members throughout the world, and to maintain relationships within the target culture. With respect to informational support, evidence revealed that members of both cultures were likely to use the Internet to obtain information. Respondents reported that they were likely to use the Internet to obtain banking information, to access their children's school records, to find news and other information from their community of origin, and to research employment opportunities in the United States. Finally, although the definition of instrumental support in online settings varies widely, for our purposes, we viewed obtaining materials or saving money as evidence of refugees attempts to access material support through online channels.

Although evidence of online support seeking emerged in both groups, support-seeking behavior among refugees is limited relative to support seeking observed in other populations. For example, research in the field of Internet-mediated social support has demonstrated that individuals benefit from a sense of community online (M. C. Howard & MacGee, 2013; Katz & Rice, 2002; Walther, 2002), whereas other research has demonstrated a sense of fluidity between online and offline networks of support (Kim, Kim, Park, & Rice, 2007; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2007). By contrast, our study shows no evidence of *embedded support* or a sense of identity affirmation stemming from participation in a broader social community. Participants did not report involvement in any online communities and reported limited social networking. Similarly, no respondents reported using Internet technology to create new relationships, including either *host* nationals or other refugees or refugee groups in the United States, whose experience in the United States may be leveraged to access additional support materials. When asked whether she would be comfortable meeting other refugees online, one Iraqi woman respondent said she would prefer meeting face-to-face. When asked why, she stated,

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> I have spoken to them. I live maybe a few months with them and I know how they think, how they raise their children. So I can relate. I don't know people on the Internet. Maybe they are lying, and maybe they will give me wrong information.

These concerns over safety and accuracy are legitimate, but may point to an approach to online relationship formation that is characteristic of earlier conceptualizations of online social support, as impersonal or superficial (Kraut et al., 1998).

Previously Established Networks and Pathways

Our results indicated that refugee respondents generally followed prescribed pathways online, using Internet technology as an access point for the familiar. When asked how they used the Internet, the majority of respondents reported using the Internet to connect with people back in their home country or to find information. When asked to specify as to the types of information they were likely to pursue, participants specified an interest in news and sports from their home country. One younger Sudanese respondent reported using specific websites to access information about school and courses—even taking particular courses online. Those refugees who were taking English courses reported using the Internet for opportunities to practice English on educational websites provided by instructors.

Focus group data showed a general discomfort with exploration and the pursuit of new relationships in online settings. Rather than pursuing new relationships or novel experiences online as is characteristic of young college students (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2007) and other Millennials (P. E. Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; Thayer & Ray, 2006), even the most net savvy respondent reported going online with a particular destination or a particular correspondent in mind, and most respondents were fearful of online exploration. Participants often reported being fearful of what they might stumble upon when exploring online. Concerns were not limited to impropriety. Other participants reported concern with online predators or legal ramifications of happening on the wrong site when exploring online. One Iraqi woman expressed concerns about the trustworthiness of strangers in online settings:

> Sometimes they tell you they are a woman, they have problems, and you discover that he is a man . . . they fall in love with that person and after that she is just 16 years old and he is 60. So it is big problems. (Iraqi, Female)

As a result, despite social and informational websites available for refugees, and the demonstrated potential of Internet technology in the creation of online communities of support around common experiences, refugees were unwilling to engage in Internet exploration.

Variation by Cultural Group

Internet adoption varied widely by cultural group. However, we found no evidence linking adoption of Internet technology and Internet-mediated social support to the duration of time a refugee had lived in a country. For example, Sudanese women reported the lowest overall Internet use. All of the women in that group reported no home Internet access and limited Facebook and email use. However, the three women interviewed in that group had been in the United States for between 18 and 20 years. Conversely, although the Iraqi men and women had only been in the United States for between 2 months and 6 years, respondents reported that the Internet is much more well integrated into daily life. As mentioned in Table 1, above, men reported using the Internet to gather information, make purchases, and survey children's school performance. Even the Iraqi women respondents who had been in the United States for less than a year reported using the Internet to access information on certain medications, to stay in contact with friends and family back in Iraq, and to apply for both volunteer and paid employment. The observed relationship between cultural group and degree of online involvement may have to do with the degree of Internet penetration in the country of origin. Respondents from Iraq reported significantly higher Internet use prior to departure than Sudanese respondents who were often living in rural villages.

Another possible explanation for cultural variation could result from cultural differences related to oral versus written traditions. Although Internet technology was used by all of the Iraqi respondents, Sudanese respondents tended to rely more heavily on telephone communication. According to one Sudanese respondent,

> We just talk on the phone. We want to go back to touch your family, but you don't have money to go over there. So we buy the phone card, like five dollars.

Most of the Sudanese were from rural villages where not everyone in the family has access to a phone. As such, the women reported calling to talk to one person who could let them know how others in the village were doing. Nevertheless, it was not only among women and not only in bridging large geographic distances that the Sudanese exhibited a preference for oral communication. For instance, one of our younger Sudanese respondents, who had migrated as a child and was more familiar with Internet technology, still reported using his phone as his primary point of access. During one exchange, he said, "I mostly [access the Internet] through my cell phone." And when asked what he does online, the respondent reported, ". . . texting, talking to my friend, or my cousin . . . "

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Table 2. Barriers to Internet Use and Online Support Seeking.

Barriers	Iraqi	Sudanese
Technical literacy	When I apply for a job, I go to the site and I start to fill the application and want to submit but it doesn't go and I don't know why. I close the site and I don't know how. Sometimes when I apply for a job, I skip the education and I continue to fill the application, and I can't finish because I skip this. I don't know. (Iraqi, Female)	Yeah my kids use [the Internet]. Me, no I don't know how. We do not have it at school, you know. We do not have it at school [in] my country, so now we need the to go to school. [It] is very hard. (Sudanese, Female)
Safety concerns	[In Iraq] you could use the Internet, but only certain websites. Pornography is not allowed in Iraq, these websites are not allowed. The rest of it you can use it. We have the Ministry of Media. So the people are watching these sites, which is good for us because we don't want our families using the sites. So we are using it before, but through the government. (Iraqi, Male)	Like for me, if you see things online . . . I kind of like be careful with it because I don't want to get involved with things that wasn't quite right . . . there is things that I avoid. I avoid Internet because they post like pictures and I don't want to get involved like that. Every different things on it. Things like cybercrimes because I don't want to get involved with things that would lead me to a negative situation. I just don't want to get involved. (Sudanese, Male)
Access	I have a computer that does not have Internet. My kids say mom you go win the Internet back we need to do the homework. (Sudanese, Female)	

Intergenerational Conflict and Children as Brokers

Literature on immigration and assimilation over multiple generations often finds that children become brokers of culture and language (see, for example, Weisskirch & Alva, 2002). With interactions in the home reflective of native cultures, and interactions in public spaces reflective of the dominant host culture, children often find themselves as cultural translators, negotiating public space on behalf of their parents. This reliance on children for culture and language brokering was a common theme among parent participants, particularly among mothers. This brokering created a sense of conflict as participants saw their children adopting more American cultural attributes. In the Iraqi men's group, one father worried about the loss of respect that occurred when raising children in the United States:

> It is about family, respect. My father, when he calls I will sit, my father walks in, I will stand up . . . this is respect. It is about our culture, the father show special respect like the high person in the family. It is what we call head of the household. It is different. It is about respect. But here . . . if I tell [my child] don't do that, or maybe one day I have fight with him, he will call the police for me and I will end up in jail. (Iraqi, Male)

This type of concern over children's adoption of cultural attributes was not unique to the Iraqi men. In fact, Sudanese women expressed similar concerns regarding their children—who no longer spoke Mua Ban or who failed to meet their obligations to the family. In one particularly telling event, a Sudanese woman respondent told the story of her "runaway" daughter—but follow-up questions revealed that the daughter had, in fact, left home as an adult with her partner at the age of 19. Nevertheless, the departure was not only inconsistent with cultural expectations as the daughter was not married but also left the family in a difficult position as the daughter was the only family member with a valid driver's license.

This understanding of American culture, coupled with increased educational opportunities, increased technological knowledge and the ability to assist parents in accessing local resources, meant that—along with brokering access to language and culture—children were often called upon to be brokers of online access, as well. This was particularly true for mothers. In both the Sudanese and the Iraqi women's groups, mothers reported that children were responsible for helping with online job applications. However, like with the post-migration stressors, the role of children differed based on the culture of origin. As noted in Table 2, Iraqi women reported seeking help from their children for access difficulties with the user interfaces of online job applications. Conversely, Sudanese participants reported struggling with language. For example, one respondent reported,

> When you need a job, she will look for you . . . and she ask you what job you want and you will say, "maybe that one." Then my daughter fill report together, or she do it and ask me something. (Sudanese, Female)

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The language difficulties meant that the Sudanese mother needed help in both locating the position to which she would eventually apply and assistance in translating the questions and responses in the application itself. This pattern was observed primarily among women respondents, which may suggest that either (a) Internet proficiency and literacy is stronger among men or (b) that as "heads of household," men may be less comfortable asking children to broker cultural information. This is a potential direction for future research.

Although this brokering is consistent with the roles adopted by most immigrant children, a lack of language, culture, and technical learning among parents may serve to exacerbate and prolong that dependence on children. Furthermore, in the case of parents' technological dependence, the children are often left to independently negotiate a third space that may be fraught with potential pitfalls. Most parents from both the Sudanese and Iraqi groups—fathers and mothers—reported that children were more technologically savvy, using the Internet for homework, Facebook, and online games. One Sudanese respondent said that while she no longer had Internet access at home, "I buy Internet for my kids and they bring the homework from the school" (Sudanese, Female). According to this respondent, her children do not engage in social networking. However, this differential technological know-how creates the problem that parents are often unable to supervise their children's online activity. This Sudanese mother reported that at one point her son had fallen behind on his homework but that she was unable to check due to a lack of technical knowledge. Other parents worried about the content of the online material that their children were viewing. As a result, rather than the Internet being used to diminish stress among participants, this chasm created between children and parents may exacerbate stress and leave parents feeling dependent on children, or unable to engage with the Internet, or to guide their children's online exploration.

Barriers to Access

Table 2 shows barriers to Internet use and support seeking that emerged, along with evidence from the focus group transcripts. The categories include safety concerns, technical literacy, and access to Internet technology. Among respondents, there was a perception that the Internet is dangerous—and that exploration may lead to either fraud or exposure to unsavory content. These concerns created an attitude of trepidation where refugees felt the need to be careful in their Internet use. Issues with technical literacy may exacerbate safety concerns, as refugees were not familiar with net safety tools, net monitoring, or strategies with which to ensure the safety of themselves and their families. As cited above, many of the refugee women rely on their children to broker online knowledge due to limited technical or limited literacy skills, and this may make them particularly reluctant to capitalize on online resources that may facilitate communication with friends back home or the creation of new relationships in the target culture. Finally, although all of our Iraqi respondents had home Internet access and used the Internet frequently and for a variety of purposes, only one of the Sudanese women had home Internet access, and only three of the Sudanese men had home Internet access. As a result, the Sudanese respondents who did want to use the Internet to connect with family or view the news had to do so from the local library, and children who wanted to do homework were required to use school computer labs.

Differential access to online resources did appear to create challenges for refugees in three principal ways. In the first, refugees had more limited access to online channels of support. Principally, refugees who struggled with Internet access experienced additional challenges in accessing information related to jobs, insurance, or business hours. When asked whether he would be able to find a business's hours of operation online, one Sudanese respondent reported, "No. They didn't teach me that. It was too high of a level" (Sudanese, Male). However, it was not exclusively in barred access to online information that refugees appeared to be at a disadvantage. The inability or unwillingness to engage in online exploration put many refugees at a disadvantage in accessing online communities and community support. Although many refugees were willing to look up individuals through Facebook, or to contact individuals via email, most reported that they did not explore online—nor were they comfortable meeting new friends. However, language resources and communities of support exist online that could be helpful for refugees struggling to adjust to life in the United States. Where face-to-face communities may be small and constructed around geographic proximity, access to other refugees throughout the United States and throughout the world has the potential to provide a sense of community and to enable refugees to leverage the collective experience of refugees who have come before (Mikal et al., 2014).

Our results further demonstrated that difficulty in accessing the Internet created different obligations among the various refugee groups. The Sudanese groups' difficulties in accessing the Internet created new time obligations for the groups. For instance, an inability to attend to financial obligations online or to understand online banking meant that many refugees were required to pay their bills in person. Sudanese women reported having to take the bus to the local grocery store to pay their bills. Not only did this take time out of their day, but women also reported situations in which they would arrive with insufficient funds and have to make a separate trip to the grocery store

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later to pay the remainder of the bill. The younger Sudanese participants who were attending university courses reported having to stand in line to ask questions about school registration or financial aid. Compounding other obligations related to work, family, studies, and community integration, these additional time obligations can constitute additional stressors for refugees.

Discussion

The goal of this article was to examine general trends related to Internet use patterns among refugees, factors that contribute to differential access among refugee groups, and barriers to resources based on limited engagement with technology. As is often customary with qualitative research, the research objective of this article is not to test for generalizability but to suggest patterns and hypotheses that may form the basis of subsequent quantitative tests for generalizability. Nevertheless, the above results have stand-alone implications for theory and future research along with practical implications related to policy and practice in supporting refugees and refugee adjustment.

This research has implications for refugees' mental and physical health. In the research literature, significant attention has been paid to the stress experienced by refugees as a result of conflict and persecution in their countries of origin. Similar to other research (Khawaja et al., 2008; Schweitzer et al., 2005; Silove, Steel, Mcgorry, & Mohan, 1998), this study demonstrates that refugees continue to face both acute and chronic stress in the aftermath of migration to the United States. Our findings further indicate that despite inter-cultural variation, refugees face barriers to informational, emotional, material, and community support resources available online. This may affect health in one of two ways. First, these limitations in computer-mediated communication may leave refugees unable to find resources to cope with post-migration stresses, leading to chronic stress and diminished well-being. Over time, that chronic stress can lead to depression, increased anxiety, and a host of somatic symptoms. Second, valuable information related to health, health promotion, and health insurance is housed online through both formal and informal channels. An inability to access this information and related services may further compromise refugee health.

We found no evidence that time in the United States was predictive of Internet use. Rather, evidence supported the existence of a cultural distance model. Specifically, Sudanese respondents, many of whom came to the United States with limited literacy skills, reported lower levels of Internet engagement than Iraqi respondents who had access to Internet technology and more formal education in their home country. This finding is open to interpretation and requires further study regarding which elements of a particular culture affect the uptake of Internet technology. The roots of differential access across cultures may be traceable to different literacy skills, rural versus urban upbringing, use of technology in the home country, presence of children in the home, level of integration within the host culture, or degree of "technological lock-in" among socially supportive peer networks—in other words, the degree to which access to friends would be limited *without* access to the Internet (Whitcomb, 2010). Further research would be required to determine which elements of cultural difference may lead to differential Internet use and access.

Our study provides further counterevidence to normative models of intercultural adjustment, by emphasizing the degree to which refugees had very little say in how they were received and integrated into the target community. Nevertheless, we found strong evidence echoing findings of Siddiquee and Kagan (2006) regarding the potential benefits to further engagement in online communities. Refugees who engaged in online communications reported being able to bridge large geographic distances, overcome barriers to communication, and locate information online. However, where the Siddiquee and Kagan study represents an ideal, our findings indicate that actual refugee Internet use falls short of this ideal. Certain of our refugee groups engaged in online communication only insofar as was required to apply for jobs, whereas others exhibited much more comfort in online communication. However, refugees reported being significantly less likely to explore and make new friends in online settings, thereby limiting the likelihood of finding communities that could be integral in the provision of support related to immigration and other logistical issues, locating friends and family members, and providing support based on a common experience.

More practically, there are a number of factors refugee support agencies may consider in encouraging refugee populations to use the Internet to foster independence and exchange support. Specifically, the reluctance to explore online could be alleviated in two ways. The first would be to provide additional guided exploration time in courses or during drop-in hours at refugee support facilities. This would enable refugees to see for themselves where the potential pitfalls of online searching are and to learn how to avoid the types of material they are not interested in finding. The second way to alleviate fear of exploration in online environments would be to have government- or agency-sanctioned websites or discussion boards where individuals from the same culture can come together to exchange information and support. Perhaps to alleviate some fear that individuals may misrepresent themselves, agencies can provide refugees and support staff with login and password information that they can use, and

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individuals can create a profile, or individuals may choose to have their avatar linked to a photo or file. This way, broader communities of support may be possible, agencies can promote literacy through textual exchange among refugees, and refugees would be able to find support whenever it was convenient. These factors together may foster the transition toward independent support seeking and, ultimately, encourage self-sufficiency.

Other techniques that refugee support agencies may consider are strategies encouraging refugees—particularly mothers—to remain enrolled in language and computer courses. Many of the refugee women who failed to complete language training did so because they became pregnant or due to financial constraints. And as a result, most of the Sudanese refugees had limited occupational opportunities and worked as unskilled laborers, often in overnight shifts. Two ways to encourage opportunity for women refugees would be to provide instructional aid in reproductive health and education for women refugees and their partners. Refugees who make informed decisions regarding their reproductive trajectories may better understand how having children early in the migration process can serve to limit later career opportunities. Alternatively, support programs can provide financial incentives to refugees who enroll in English language and computer programs. Encouraging literacy and technological skills among parents can help parents to better supervise their children's Internet use and can make parents less reliant on their children for the brokering of technological skills.

Conclusion

Using focus group data gathered in five group interviews with Sudanese and Iraqi refugees, we examined the relationship between refugee adjustment, Internet use, and access to resources. Our findings indicated that the post-migration encountered by refugees are consistent with the struggles encountered by various short- and long-term migrants following migration. Although our research indicated a willingness on the part of refugees to engage in online support seeking, we found more limited evidence that the Internet was being used effectively as a tool for stress reduction. The result is that refugees continue to grapple with post-migration stresses that may have negative implications for their mental and physical well-being. As support agencies face restricted resources and increased responsibility, it is important for researchers and support agencies to promote pathways to independent living in the United States. Part of that responsibility is helping refugees learn to access resources, information, and support that most Americans regularly access. Understanding barriers to that access for refugees is an integral step in promoting self-sufficiency.

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1. Only one respondent was 21 years old. The next youngest respondent was 30 years.

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