An Exploratory Study on Adolescents Experiences of Using ICQ (I Seek You)

Zenobia C. Y. Chan
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, zehippo@yahoo.com

Wilson Cheuk
Po Chiu Catholic Secondary School, cheuk_w@hotmail.com

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Abstract

Little research exists into adolescents rationales for using ICQ (I Seek You) and these adolescents relationships with their peers, families, and strangers in ICQ communication. Our curiosity about these subjects led us to adopt a qualitative inquiry, a multiple case study of ten adolescents via purposive sampling. Three major results were discerned: (1) rationales for using ICQ as a major communication tool and for its entertainment functions, (2) contents of ICQ included the participants school lives, peer relationships, family issues, and playing games, and (3) the participants relationships with their peers, family, and strangers like female adolescents are more protective than males. Finally, adolescents voices should be amplified in order to let adults respond to their contextual practices such as ICQ.

Keywords

ICQ (I seek you), Hong Kong, Adolescents, Qualitative Study, and Case Study

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Zenobia C. Y. Chan

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China

Wilson Cheuk

Po Chiu Catholic Secondary School, Hong Kong

Little research exists into adolescents' rationales for using ICQ (I Seek You) and these adolescents' relationships with their peers, families, and strangers in ICQ communication. Our curiosity about these subjects led us to adopt a qualitative inquiry, a multiple case study of ten adolescents via purposive sampling. Three major results were discerned: (1) rationales for using ICQ as a major communication tool and for its entertainment functions, (2) contents of ICQ included the participants' school lives, peer relationships, family issues, and playing games, and (3) the participants' relationships with their peers, family, and strangers like female adolescents are more protective than males. Finally, adolescents' voices should be amplified in order to let adults respond to their contextual practices such as ICQ. Key Words: ICQ (I seek you), Hong Kong, Adolescents, Qualitative Study, and Case Study

Introduction

Face to face communication can be regarded as the most direct and effective way to exchange feelings and ideas. However, a new mode of communication is emerging in Hong Kong's adolescent culture which does not include seeing faces and hearing voices, but instead consists of sharing their views by typing on a keyboard and reading each other's minds by reading text on a computer monitor. This popular cyberspace communication is I Seek You (ICQ). We were interested in how the dense living conditions of Hong Kong and relative lack of privacy might also influence adolescents' use of ICQ.

The Internet has changed the lives of citizens (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998; Singer & Singer, 2001; Weiser, 2000). Such technological advancement has had both positive effects (Breakthrough, 2004; Dornan, 2000; Katz & Rice, 2002; Leung, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004; Rollman, Krug, & Parente, 2000; Singer & Singer; Suler, 2004; Tappscott, 1998) and negative effects on its users (Laurence, 2003; Leung 2001, 2003; Widyanto, 2004). Using the internet allows for better social relationships, provides entertainment, enhances education, improves information retrieval, and increases the skills and confidence of computer users (Kraut et al.). Little is known about Chinese adolescents' views of ICQ. In the light of this knowledge gap, we conducted this multiple case study to explore the rationales and the contents of messages of Hong Kong adolescents who use ICQ, and their relationships

with their peers, family, and strangers. We utilized a qualitative inquiry method, multiple case study, which we hoped would reveal the meanings of their experiences and provide a socio-culturally specific understanding of it.

Overview of ICQ

ICQ could be defined as a kind of Multi-user domain (MUD) (http://www.icq.com), and a text-based virtual reality game on the Internet. Users communicate with each other directly in real time via text messages, screen graphics, or icons that other players can see (Leung, 2003). When using ICQ, people immerse themselves in a world of textual representations. For example, users can redefine themselves, pretending to be the opposite sex, for example, or being very talkative where in real life they are not. ICQ allows them to present themselves as different people when interacting online (Leung). This "fluidity of identity" gives them a feeling of status and modernity, which might bolster their self-esteem (Dornan, 2000).

E-mailing, web surfing, and using ICQ are three of the most popular Internet activities for adolescents in some local adolescents' lifestyle surveys (e.g., Breakthrough, 2004). E-mailing is the transmission of messages through the Internet. It is like communicating through letters, but the delivery is much faster, requiring only a few seconds to deliver an email. In order to send and receive email, users have to click buttons and remember email addresses. This is not convenient when compared to ICQ. Web-surfing is simpler and large amounts of information can be gathered at one time. However, there is no interaction involved, especially when users must wait a long time for a reply.

Americans spent over 16.5 billion minutes, or 105 million hours in 2003, logging on Instant Message Services such as ICQ. Today there are nearly 110 million ICQ users all over the world, and there is one new registration every second (IANXXI, 2004). The use of these instant messenger services could accelerate the process of globalization because it allows people to communicate beyond geographical boundaries (Barry & Yuill, 2002). Such rapid technological changes, including the invention of the home computer, video games, and the Internet (Dacey & Kenny, 1997), affect adolescents' daily life (Santrock, 2001). For example, their communication methods have shifted from face-to-face interaction to emailing.

ICQ in Hong Kong

The Hong Kong government promoted home computers and the Internet through electronic trade and identity registration. Schools also carried out information technology education. At the same time, the cost of both home computers (Intel Pentium 4 costs US$700 on average) and Internet service (unlimited usage charged at US$20/month) has come down and thus made the use of information technology preferable to playing video games, which are for entertainment only. Home computers and the Internet play a vital role in an adolescent's growth (Leung, 2004). Adolescents make use of this technology to escape their personal problems and negative feelings (Leung, 2003; Tappscott, 1998).

Leung is among a few researchers who have started and continued the research topic of ICQ and adolescents in Hong Kong. Therefore, Leung's studies will be reviewed

below. Leung (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004) studied the uses and social impact of new media technologies, and the interaction between the Internet and adolescents. In his study in 2001, relaxation, entertainment, and fashion were instrumental motives, while inclusion, affection, sociability, and escape were the intrinsic motives for using ICQ. The rapid growth of ICQ seemed to have influenced the development of adolescent's personality (Leung, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004). The experiences of adolescents while using ICQ are diverse. For example, adolescents experienced a degree of "loneliness" and "self-disclosure" during the course of using ICQ. The relationship between using ICQ and adolescent development has become an important topic (Leung, 2002). It was found that the lonelier the students, the more dishonest, more negative, and the less revealing were the quality of the self-disclosure of their ICQ interaction. Conversely, self-disclosure might lead to decreased loneliness when one feels understood, accepted, and cared about on ICQ. There were some confounders in the relationship between loneliness and ICQ. Loneliness took on a more important role in ICQ among young adolescents (Leung, 2002). In brief, the attitude and behaviour were different between male and female users of the Internet (Leung, 2002).

A quantitative study using the UCLA Loneliness Scale applied Western findings to the Hong Kong situation (Leung, 2003). This ready-made instrument with a positivistic paradigm might not be able to describe and conclude the actual contexts of using ICQ in adolescents due to the cultural differences and lacking the existing knowledge of adolescents' real ICQ experiences based on a naturalistic paradigm. Though Leung (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004) has contributed a lot to the quantitative perspective since 2000, we could only understand the situation through his statistical analysis. We hope through this study to give voices to local adolescents about their rationales for using ICQ. We also wanted to understand what the contents are in the ICQ communication exchanges through assuming an open stance with individual face-to-face interviews rather than through the use of content-bound instruments speaking for the adolescents with minimal considerations of them as human agents.

Participants' subjective experience in a specific socio-cultural context enriches our knowledge on the adolescents and ICQ from a humanistic perspective. Their voices provide more rich and in-depth information than numbers/statistical analysis representing their stories. Therefore, we prefer and endorse the qualitative research stance that we held for conducting this present study.

Methods

This is a qualitative study adopting a multiple-case method in order to explore the rationales and contents of communication exchanges of adolescents using ICQ, and the features of relationships between ten adolescents and their families, peers, and strangers in the course of using ICQ. Morse and Field (1985) explained that qualitative research is adopted when the research question pertained to understanding or describing a particular phenomenon or event about which little was known. Qualitative methods are particularly useful when describing a phenomenon from an emic perspective Qualitative research plays an important role in understanding the world and in complementing other forms of knowledge. The qualitative approach to a case study is related to the in-depth analysis of a single or small number of units. This approach offers a richness and depth of

information that is usually not accounted for by other research methods. This multiple-case study is exploratory in nature. In health studies, case study approaches to informants usually contain in-depth interviews so as to explore the richness of their experiences around a particular health issue. Likewise, in this study, two interviews were conducted with each participant in order to enhance the credibility of the results. An open-ended structured interview mode was adopted. We carried out pilot studies with one male and one female participant in order to modify the research questions. Eventually, three main research questions were formulated.

1. What are the rationales for the adolescents using ICQ?
2. What are the contents of the communication exchanges found in the process of using ICQ?
3. What are the features of adolescents' relationships with their families, peers and strangers in the course of using ICQ?

Sampling and Setting

We adopted a purposive sampling technique (Creswell, 2003; Rubin & Babbie, 2001). Table 1 summarizes the participants' data, aged 15-16, studying in grade ten. All the participants were given pseudonyms in order to ensure their anonymity.

Table 1

Participants' Data

Participant	Age range	No. of family members	Birth order	Accommodation
Amy	15	4	Eldest	Homeowners
Ann	15	4	Only child	Homeowners
Kelly	16	5	Eldest	Public housing
Mary	15	6	Eldest	Homeowners
John	15	7	Only child	Public housing
James	16	5	Second child	Public housing
David	15	5	Second child	Public housing
Peter	15	3	Second child	Public housing
Danny	16	3	Third child	Public housing
Kelvin	15	4	Third child	Public housing

The school setting was considered a place where the participants would feel relaxed enough to discuss their experiences truthfully. To maximize their relaxation and reduce any anxiety, the interviews were done in the common room where there was a comfortable sofa, coffee table, and fruit drinks. The environment was quiet and peaceful.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were face-to-face and one on one (Creswell, 2003). Between the first and second interviews, almost two months elapsed. Based on our previous research experience interviewing adolescents, we felt a second interview was required to build rapport. Usually, Chinese adolescents are more shy and passive than their western counterparts, and a strong rapport was necessary to obtain trustworthy data. Therefore, after conducting the first round of interviews, the second author reflected on his techniques, and sought the first author's advice for the second round, in order to collect the richest data possible. All the conversations were recorded on a digital recorder (JNC, mp363).

All the interviews were conducted in Cantonese (written texts as Chinese), the mother-tongue of Hong Kong people. We transcribed the interviews into Chinese and wrote up the research results in English. We sought a professional editor to translate the Chinese interviewing scripts into English. We proofread the English transcription with the original sound track of the interviews in order to ensure the appropriateness and correctness of the translation. We read through all the transcriptions individually before we discussed and shared our views about the contents and ideas of the interviews. Three meetings were held to discuss how to analyse the data.

We thematized the ideas under each research question with the following steps. We counted the frequency of some common themes and ideas. Text units were collated according to theme of questions by using the simple and constant comparison method. For example, we used a word processing package to "cut and paste" the relevant themes within the three main research questions stated earlier.

Morse and Field (1985) suggested that qualitative research has been critiqued if there is lack of control over the validity and reliability of the findings. Streubert and Carpenter (1995) argued that the goal of rigor in qualitative research was to accurately represent what those who have been studied experienced. Therefore, to ensure the trustworthiness of our interpretations, four measures were implemented. Firstly, peer checking was performed. We listened to the recordings to verify the contents and meanings of all interviews before we came up with an agreement rate of about 80%. Secondly, saturation was a term that referred to the repetition of discovered information, where no new themes or essences emerged from the participants (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). Thus, data collection is required to continue until saturation is achieved because there is possibility of discovery of new information if saturation of data is not reached. Each participant was interviewed two times in order to reveal his/her experience toward ICQ communications in details that tried to reach saturation. Thirdly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) concluded that the dependability audit is concerned with the process of the inquiry, including the appropriateness of inquiry decisions and methodological shifts. The said editor was recruited to independently transcribe the interviews; his work provided a means to audit the interpretations of the two researchers. Lastly, the second author had a

prolonged engagement with the participants. He built trust, learned the culture, and tested misinformation from the participants and from himself by self-reflection in the process of data collection and from the discussion with the first author during the analyzing of the research data.

Ethics and Confidentiality

This study gained the University's approval for its ethical standards. Written consent was sought from all participants' parents in order to ensure the participants' rights and confidentiality. In the beginning of every interview, the interviewer (second author) explained the purpose of the study and informed the participant that if he/she did not want to be interviewed, he/she could quit without any negative consequence because this study must not be viewed as an activity related to schoolwork or results. It was even more important that the participant not view the interviewer as a teacher. Therefore, the interviewer had to be conscious not to slip into a teaching or counseling role. As Marshall and Rossman (1989) stressed, ethical considerations are pivotal including the strategies of giving an informed consent and protecting participants' anonymity. Because the participants were high school students, they were given a consent form for their parents to sign. The supplemental sheets were used to identify the aims, the procedure, the potential impact, and the outcomes for the study (Creswell, 2003).

Research Results

Three main themes were identified: (a) rationales for using ICQ; (b) the content of ICQ communication exchanges; and (c) the adolescents' relationships with their peers, family, and strangers in the course of using ICQ.

Theme One: Reasons for Using ICQ

All participants (ten participants) accounted for why they started using ICQ. Friends (eight participants), classmates (four participants), and elder sisters (five participants) were the people who introduced them to ICQ. Three of the participants were the eldest child in the family and two were only children. Danny described it as follows,

> I saw her (Danny's elder sister) using it…when I was in Primary Four...normally I asked her what she was doing…when she used the computer, I felt quite funny. I asked her what it was. She answered it was a communication method. I asked her how to use it. She set up an ICQ account for me, and then I started to use it.

When the participants were the eldest child in their families, they would be the one to introduce ICQ to their younger siblings. Kelly was an eldest sister who told us that, "When he saw me using ICQ, he wanted to play with it too. He asked me to apply for an account for him and I helped him to apply."

This study also found that adolescents shared positive moments with siblings through emotional support and social communication (Santrock, 2001). As Table 2

shows, five of the participants considered communication one of the rationales they used ICQ. The other rationales were making friends (three participants), sharing files (three participants), and having nothing else to do (one participant).

Table 2

Rationales for using ICQ and Other Communication Methods (1st Interview)

Participant	Reasons	Purposes	Other methods
Amy	Friends	Nothing to do	Telephone and QQ*
Ann	Friends	Communication	Telephone and MSN*
Kelly	Friends and classmates	Communication and making friends	Telephone, MSN*, and email
Mary	Friends, curiosity, and boredom	Making friends, academics, and communication	Telephone and MSN*
John	Friends	Sharing Files	Telephone and email
James	Friends and elder sister	Making friends and sharing files	Telephone, email, and QQ*
David	Friends and classmates	Sharing files	MSN*
Peter	Friends and elder sister	Making friends (female)	No
Danny	Classmates and elder sister	Communication	MSN*
Kelvin	Elder sister	Communication	MSN* and Yahoo

* QQ is a software similar to ICQ and is popular on mainland China.
* MSN is a communication software that enables use of a web cam: It is manufactured by Microsoft.

Peter stressed that he used ICQ for making friends with girls. John shared the same feeling. "For example, making new friends. I am a boy so I naturally want to find girls." Peter and John used ICQ to build friendship via ICQ chatting.

Communication takes place via various forms, including file sharing. Three participants mentioned that they shared files, and that they considered ICQ to be a means of simple communication. Three of the participants said they exchange files, especially computer games, through ICQ. The function of file sharing is certainly powerful on ICQ. It is a point-to-point technology that allows the needs for speed and volume to be satisfied. One of our participants who shared computer games, David, explained that, "After discussing the game, he wanted to play it. Then I sent it to him..."

These results show that sharing files via ICQ is a common act among our participants. Therefore, education about the importance of respecting people's ideas, work, and copyrights should be provided to adolescents who use ICQ frequently, as file sharing might be considered copyright infringement (Mingpao News, 2005). The Hong Kong government has taken action to arrest those who break the law by sharing files, especially video files. Those arrested used a peer-to-peer (P2P) technology, BitTorrent (BT) (Mingpao News, 2005). This technology was used for passing files from one computer to another, from one to many or from many to many. The speed was so fast that a large file such as a video could be transmitted in just a few hours. ICQ has similar functions and technology that are also illegal.

Girls are less enthusiastic about computer games than boys are (Funk & Buchma, 1996; Ko, 2002; Mark, Mark, & Darren, 2003). In our study, the female participants did not talk about computer games during their interviews. The files they shared were mostly music, but they often did not share even these.

The last rationale our participants gave for using ICQ was that they had nothing to do, or they did not want to do the things that were available to them. Slater (2004) commented that a lot of adolescents in Asia spend leisure time at home, where watching TV and playing video games are viable options.

Amy was one who used ICQ because she had nothing to do. "Sometimes I have nothing to do...I don't want to watch TV or talk on the telephone...I open the ICQ and wait for others."

Among our participants, some of them (Danny and Kelvin) had more than one computer at home. The reason was related to the number of siblings. Both Danny and Kelvin had two elder siblings. In larger families, having two computers helps reduce sibling conflict (Santrock, 2001; Steinberg, 1998). For adolescents, ICQ has become their main communication tool. Some even prefer it to the telephone. We compared ICQ with other communication tools in order to discover the reason for this preference.

Compared with using ICQ, the participants listed the telephone (60%), MSN (50%), email (30%), Yahoo (10%) and QQ (10%) as communication tools they use. The telephone has a long history for adolescents (Slater, 2004), but they might not use it in some cases. Some participants preferred ICQ when they wanted to quickly spread a message, or when the telephone or the person they wanted to reach was unavailable. Ann explained the advantage of spreading a message on ICQ. "ICQ is so convenient. You can copy a message many times and send it to many people, all at once."

James and John explained that if one of their family members is using the telephone and they also want to talk to their friends, ICQ is an excellent option. Communicating via the written word has advantages that have enhanced the popularity of ICQ, especially during arguments (when a voice over the telephone might escalate the pressure) or for those with an introverted personality. Ann described in the quote below.

> ...after the argument, you will be very angry. That's not the time to face each other. You don't want to listen to him/her. You can feel the attitude by hearing the voice. It may make you not calm down. ICQ is good before talking to others.

Theme Two: Contents of ICQ Communication Exchanges

Mostly, the participants talk about their daily lives on ICQ and four of them also talk about school issues. They would share their feelings honestly in ICQ and the results were shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Contents of ICQ Communication and the Process of Relationship Change (Please Refer to the First and Second Interview Guides in the Appendix)

Participant	Trustworthiness of ICQ content	Contents of ICQ communication	Change in peer relationships	Change in family relationships
Amy	50% true	Homework and school lives	Developing	No change
Ann	Yes	Family communication and school lives	Improving communication	Weakening
Kelly	Some are true	Usual lives	Becoming more complex	No change
Mary	Yes	Homework and school lives	Improving communication	Sometimes
John	Some are true	Dating and making friends with girls	Establishing	No change
James	Nil	Nil	Nil	No change
David	Mostly true	Games	Reducing communication	No change
Peter	Some are true	Usual lives	Becoming suspicious	Argument
Danny	True for known	Homework and dating	Improving communication	No change
Kelvin	Some are true	Usual and school lives	No change	No change

For adolescents, school is the main setting for socializing (Steinberg, 1998). After school, they continue socializing through ICQ. Kelvin would ask his friend in ICQ, "…at school…what happened today?"

Due to the pressure to attain good results on examinations (Slater, 2004), the adolescents also talk about their academic work on ICQ. Three of the participants discussed homework there. Amy is one of them, and she said, "…if it is a friend you know, just ask what the homework today is, and what is happening…"

"I am a boy. It is normal to prefer females. Males are fewer. There are my teammates, female net friends and female classmates. There are more females than males."

Dating could be a form of recreation, a source of social status and achievement, an aspect of socialization, a context for learning about intimacy and sexual experimentation, a source of companionship, and a means of mate sorting (Santrock, 2001). Cyberdating means dating over the Internet, and it has become popular among middle school students (Santrock, 2001). A detailed description of intimacy development and dating on ICQ follows.

On ICQ, adolescents are often less than truthful. They protect themselves by keeping some things private, especially when they do not know the others very well. Amy shares an example.

> Sometimes he asks me some questions and I tell lies. He believes that they are true. For example, he asked me if I had a boyfriend. I lied and said I had one. He then asked me how we are doing.

The female participants were more likely to talk about their interpersonal relationships, but they sometimes preferred to disclose these details to male friends. Ann is an example. "…I talk with him because I trust him. He will not tell my secrets to others. Actually males do not like to talk and they can keep secrets…even though females promise not to tell, they usually do."

Because Ann considered boys to be better at keeping secrets than girls, she decided they could be trustworthy. Thus, intimate conversations and faithfulness are not the monopoly of girls (Santrock, 2001).

Theme Three: The adolescents' Relationships with Their Family, Peers, and Strangers in the Course of Using ICQ

Family Relationships

Family relationships have a great impact on adolescent development (Atwater, 1992). In their interviews, the participants expressed that most of their parents attempted to stop their use of ICQ. The parents wanted them to study rather than play computer games or use ICQ. However, it was often just a verbal restriction; parents did not take further action when their children continued to play. In these instances, the relationship between the participants and their families saw no change. When parents took further action, there might be quarrelling. James did not talk to his parents for weeks for this reason. "They just cut the cable to stop me from getting online. I was so angry. In the

following weeks we didn't talk with each other. After the examination they reconnected the cable. Our relationship recovered."

David quarreled with his elder sister quite seriously. "She asked me to stop playing as she wanted to watch a film. After I stopped so she could use it, she did not watch it. I became very angry and I threw a chair on the ground."

These stories offer examples of how family relationships can be affected by ICQ. Outcome also depends on the methods of restriction. Mild restrictions are sometimes welcome, as in the case of Kelly and her father. "When he read the news about ICQ, he would share it with me and ask me to be more careful on the Internet."

These adolescents were well aware of the reasons their parents discouraged their use of ICQ. They considered ICQ a distraction from studying, but did not know it could be a place for relaxation. Mary said,

> They always made academic performance the first priority. Everything else should come later. They don't understand the pressure of studying. On weekdays, I go to school, study and do homework at home. On weekends, I go on studying. I think I should be able to use ICQ to relax.

The families of the above participants show different parenting styles James's parents were authoritarian, while Kelly's were indulgent. Many parents use a combination, rather than a single technique, although one might be dominant. Although consistent parenting was usually recommended, the wise parent might sense the importance of being more permissive in certain situations, and more authoritarian in others. In the case of ICQ, the style of indulgent parenting was more welcome by adolescents. However, this kind of style was also associated with adolescents' social incompetence, especially a lack of self-control (Santrock, 2001).

Peer Relationships

Most participants stated that they considered ICQ a communication tool. It has advantages when compared with other tools. Four of the participants believed that ICQ could enhance their friendships. When compared with the telephone, ICQ only requires people to type. They do not need to actually talk. They can avoid facing and hearing each other. Ann also pointed out ICQ can eliminate any embarrassment.

Two of the participants used it for making an apology. They were Ann and Danny. "…arguing with friend. I might not say sorry to him/her. I will use ICQ pretending nothing happened, sending a few messages. And then I call him/her on the phone. That can avoid embarrassment."

> Sometimes [ICQ] is convenient to say sorry for mistakes. I had made someone angry when playing badminton. I did not know that and was upset at that time. Then I used ICQ to communicate, and finally I was able to apologize.

These experiences detail the vulnerability of adolescents' relationships (Santrock, 2001; Steinberg, 1998). Adolescents try to find their identity and status through

socializing. They develop superficial to intimate friendships throughout their whole adolescence. They look forward to the intimate ones and to the emotional support they offer. Using ICQ, they do not need to face others. Attitude and voice can be omitted. John felt that was good for him. "I don't like…communicating by telephone. Using ICQ, I don't need to listen to the other person's voice. Then I feel more comfortable."

However, sometimes people can be misunderstood on ICQ because words transmitted without voice, attitude and direct contact might be unclear. Further, it is easier for people to tell lies. Even vulnerable adolescents become suspicious on ICQ. Kelly had such an experience. "She doesn't understand what I say. She gets angry with me. Sometimes you will be suspicious whether the other person is telling the truth or not."

This attitude of suspiciousness might carry into real life, affecting the development of trustfulness and loyalty. The experience of using ICQ might modify personality development and social skills (Kraut et al., 1998). As people communicate by typing in ICQ, they do not need to talk. They might be shy when dealing with others face to face. In our study, David and John were two examples. "You get used to 'talking' with ICQ. Gradually you stop wanting to talk by mouth."

Both of these boys might develop into lonely ones. "I became silent with others." There might be a connection between ICQ use and loneliness. This study focuses on the life within ICQ. It is also one kind of experience that affects the healthy development of adolescents. It not only has an effect on the adolescents themselves, but also on their family members, especially their parents. Though the participants said on the questionnaire that there were few or no effects on their family relationships, the information they shared in their interviews was different.

Stranger Relationships

Table 4 shows that six of the participants did not meet strangers and three did, one did not respond this issue.

Mary had been offered the chance to date a male ICQ friend, but she did not accept the invitation. Adolescents had some principles in their ICQ use. Even if they met strangers, they would not go by themselves. They would ask their own real friends to go with them. Kelly's story:

> When I was in Form 2 or 3, I made a male friend in ICQ, and knew him for quite a long time. I thought I could trust him. So I met him out of ICQ. I would not go by myself. I asked other friends to go with me. When we met, we had nothing to say to each other. We walked for a while. Then I said that I had something to do. I left. He replied that was okay and he would see me later.

Table 4

Experience of Meeting Strangers and Participants' Narratives

Participant	Meeting with the stranger	Narratives
Amy	No	Don't meet with strangers; if you do, take a friend with you.
Ann	No	Privacy should be protected.
Kelly	Yes	It is not a problem to meet someone you know well.
Mary	No	While meeting a net-friend, avoid nighttime and quiet places.
John	No	Understand each other before developing friendships.
James	No	He did not answer this question
David	No	People lie on the Internet; they can be very different in reality.
Peter	Yes	Don't play too much and don't trust people on the Internet, especially in ICQ.
Danny	No	You may be hurt on ICQ.
Kelvin	Yes	Don't trust people on ICQ because you don't know each other.

John's stories:

> My friend searched a girl to be his girlfriend. He went to meet her and asked me to go with him. He was so excited. Both of them held a red flower for recognition. Before dating, they had sent their photos to each other. She was quite beautiful. However the girl we met was not like the one in the photo. She was also with her own friend. When my friend knew she was not the one in the photo, he threw the flower away and went away. The girls chased us. We went into the crowd but they could still see us. Then we went into a restaurant and pretended to have a meal. After we saw they had left, we left.

This suggested that opposite-sex relationships might play a more important role in the development of intimacy among adolescent boys than among adolescent girls.

Discussion

In the following, the four effects of using ICQ on adolescents will be discussed, and the relationships between the adolescents and their families, peers, and strangers will be highlighted.

Tool for Ensuring Privacy

In Hong Kong the living environment is quite dense. It has a total area of just under 1,100 square kilometers, but a population of around 6.7 million (Slater, 2004). The adolescents want to protect their privacy and not let others overhear their telephone conversations, but in a homelike Danny's that would be quite impossible. Sometimes adolescents like to continue their conversations late into the night (Katz & Rice, 2002; Naidoo & Wills, 2000). In order not to disturb others who are sleeping, they see ICQ as an excellent substitute for the telephone.

Tool for Low Cost Long Distance Communication

ICQ communication offers a place where users can chat with each other without facing them. Most of the adolescents thought ICQ could lead to improvements in relationships with others, but it depended on the people involved. Using ICQ with their real-life friends improved those friendships. Using it with parents or relatives offered a chance to show they cared for each other. One participant was Ann, who had divorced parents who did not live with her. She lived with her aunts and grandmother. She communicated with her parents through ICQ. She also chatted with her cousin, who studied outside Hong Kong. Without ICQ, she commented that she might not communicate with them.

Tool to Improving Typing Skills

All participants stated that by using ICQ they improved their typing skills and that it was helpful for them in terms of doing their homework and surfing the net quickly. Improved typing skills were noted in several studies (Dornan, 2000; Tappscott, 1998; Suler, 2004). Our participants also commented that their Chinese typing improved after they started using ICQ. One participant, Kelvin, mentioned that he learned typing by using ICQ. There are more Chinese characters and glyphs than there are on standard computer keyboards. In order to type Chinese, three input methods were designed; verbal input, hand writing input, and keyboard input. The verbal input method and hand writing input method require extra tools and suffer from a high error rate. Almost all Hong Kong schools promote the keyboard input methods, even though the maximum typing rate was limited and learning the system was difficult. It was highly related to memory and experience. Different people were comfortable with different methods and each standard had its strengths and weaknesses.

Tool for Relaxation

In Hong Kong, placement in secondary school and Form Four are determined through in-school examinations. However, further studies mainly depend on public examination results. The first one is the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). Students spend the years in Forms Four and Five preparing for these examinations. The results determine whether they will be allocated a place in Form Six. Only one in six Form Five students is promoted to Form Six. These Form Six students

then study a further two years for another public examination entitled, *The Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination*, which determines who can pursue university studies. One participant, Mary, said that ICQ gives her short breaks from study mode.

Relations of the Adolescents and their Families, Peers, & Strangers in ICQ

In order to understand their children's ICQ world, some parents searched the news for information about ICQ. They shared it with their children. For example, when Kelly's father read related stories, he would show them to Kelly. He reminded her there were cases of bullying and harassment through ICQ. This action was mild compared with other parenting methods.

This study's results suggest that adolescents are interested in understanding their peers. They might be more open on the Internet, especially the males. As mentioned above, ICQ eliminates the pressure of face-to-face or voice-to-voice situations. The adolescents dare to establish and develop friendships within it. However, there is another side to the coin. The disappearance of face and voice create a feeling of insecurity. All of us, including parents, teachers, policy makers, and adolescents themselves are concerned about cyberdating. Compared with males, females are more protective of themselves. Both males and females are sensitive about opposite-sex relationships. However, they express their concerns differently. Females rejected dating and it was the males who asked for dates (Santrock, 2001). Male dating scripts were proactive; those of females, reactive. Dating is common and important to the adolescent's psychosocial development (Steinberg, 1998). We cannot stop them but can make them think more about it.

While adolescents used ICQ, they were fully involved in the world of it, especially in the beginning stages. This was their private space. No one could enter without permission. In some cases, parents were worried about their children using ICQ. They wanted to know with whom their children chatted. Parents might stand beside the computer silently or hack into their children's ICQ accounts. In one case, Ann discovered that a stranger hacked into her friend's ICQ account. She found that he was the friend's elder brother. He explained that he wanted to know with whom her sister chatted. Though he asked Ann not to tell her friend, she revealed this fact. Her friend became very angry. Ann stressed it was unreasonable for someone to hack in. The adolescents hated these behaviours that destroyed their privacy. Ann said, "If someone enters a house, he/she has to knock on the door first."

Most of the adolescents believed what they read in newspapers. Amy, Ann, Mary, John, and Danny gradually learned to protect themselves in ICQ. They had some principles in ICQ that varied based on gender difference. The male participants were more likely to make friends with female participants; for example, Peter. They searched for female strangers around their age. They tried to make friends with them by chatting. In the following months they exchanged phone numbers and photos. When they thought they could trust each other, they would have a date. They would not go alone at first. They would be with their own friends. A further relationship might be developed at this stage, but these cases were rarely successful, because in fact they did not really understand each other.

Compared with males, female adolescents seemed to be more protective. They seldom met strangers on ICQ. Few of them searched for new friends. They were afraid of

being hurt. They suggested not meeting strangers alone, in quiet places or at night. Both males and females thought that people on ICQ always told lies, especially the ones they did not know in reality. They would not tell the truth to those people.

Limitations

When interpreting the study results, we urge consideration of the research limitations. Firstly, all participants were recruited from one school. This may not be able to reflect other adolescents' ICQ experiences due to some socio-cultural-geographical differences. In future studies, adolescents from various schools should be invited. Secondly, some focused groups can be another possible data collection method in order to facilitate adolescents to share their experiences with their peer in the presence of group dynamics and positive effects of brainstorming. Finally, the results might not be able to explain adolescents' ICQ experiences and behaviors from other cultural contexts. Therefore, a cultural sensitivity lens should be adopted when reading these research results. However, this study is the first qualitative study in Hong Kong explored adolescent's ICQ experience.

Conclusion

Adolescents can use multiple identities in the world of ICQ. Previous literature (e.g., Dornan, 2000; Leung, 2003) discusses how users of ICQ could redefine themselves, test and consolidate their identity or release their true self. The participants only told the truth to their well-known friends or classmates; people with whom they were familiar in real life. The ICQ world was for communication, but not for sharing in-depth feelings. They were likely to share such feelings by telephone or face-to-face. They felt a long story should be shared by oral means rather than by written words. Though their typing skills had improved, it was still tiring to type a story of thousands of words. Moreover, they desired reaction, comments, or attitudes from the other after they shared their feelings. ICQ was not a suitable place for them to reveal themselves because people would not be serious.

This study fills the knowledge gaps (revelation of the advantages of using ICQ from the adolescent users' perspectives) and demonstrates the significance of naturalistic research paradigms and a case study approach that are able to show the hidden subjective experiences, which cannot be captured by a quantitative research. From the presentation of the adolescents' narration, we can learn their rationales and the contents in the ICQ communications, and their relationships with their families, peers, and strangers in the ICQ communications. More research should be advocated to explore the effects of ICQ on adolescents' academic achievement, self-concepts, and mental health. More importantly, adolescents' voices should be given a place in the research realm and amplified in order to let adults and societies respond accordingly.

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Appendix A

ICQ & Adolescence (1st Interview Guide)

1. What makes you use ICQ?
2. Why and how the above factor(s) make(s) you use ICQ? Any other gratifications?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of ICQ?
4. How do you describe ICQ? How do you think ICQ is making a profit?
5. Whom you are chatting with mostly?
6. What are the reasons you chat through ICQ?
7. Have you chatted / communicated in the other ways? What are they?
8. In ICQ, do you use the real name? Will you tell the truth? The reason(s) ……
9. Do you think the person you're chatting with will tell you the truth? How can you prove it?
10. What are the topics you chat about mostly?
11. Do you share in-depth feelings? If yes, whom do you share them with? The reason...
12. How do your friends comment on ICQ? Do you accept? Why?
13. What is/are the effect(s) on friendship?
14. How do your parents comment on ICQ? Do you accept? Why…
15. When your parent(s) ask(s) you to stop, what is your reply? Any effects on your relationship?

Appendix B

ICQ & Adolescence (2nd Interview)

16. Comparing with the beginning stage, did you change your attitude towards ICQ?
17. Why do / don't you have such change(s)?
18. In your experience are there any special or unforgettable events happened on ICQ?

19. What is it? Please describe more in details. (Don't force the participants, attention on the emotional changes, pass the question if necessary.)
20. If it happens again, how do you handle it?
21. Why do you do so?
22. Have you heard about any special experience from your friends? What is it?
23. Any comment(s) on it?
24. Have you chat with stranger(s)? What is/are the reason(s)?
25. What is/are the characteristic(s) of the stranger(s)?
26. Why do you focus on those characteristic(s)?
27. Have you met them in the real world? Why and what is the experience?
28. How can you describe the relationship with the stranger(s)?
29. Any points you wish to add before ending this interview?

Author Note

Zenobia Chan is assistant professor at the School of Nursing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China; E-mail: hszchan@inet.polyu.edu.hk, zehippo@yahoo.com

Wilson Cheuk, M.Sc. (Master Degree of Health Education and Health Promotion from The Chinese University of Hong Kong), is now a teacher at the Department of Physical Education, Po Chiu Catholic Secondary School, Hong Kong, China. The author can be contacted at 1 Po Chiu Road, Yau Tong, Hong Kong, China; E-mail: cheuk_w@hotmail.com

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