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SEEING THE WAY THEY ARE IN THE WAY THEY IM: CASE STUDIES OF INSTANT  
MESSAGING IN TAIWANESE FIFTH GRADERS' LIVES

BY

WANJU HUANG

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Klaus Witz, Chair  
Professor Clifford Christians  
Associate Professor Susan Noffke  
Associate Professor Ralph Page

## Abstract

Empirical studies suggest instant messaging (IMing) is a dominant Internet activity among teenagers and has been portrayed as an essential element in teenagers' social lives. How IMing exists in younger aged children, however, receives little investigation. What a person's IMing usage can tell us beyond its critical role in one's personal relations deserves further exploration. With this in mind, I interviewed five 11-year-old elementary school students in Taiwan on their use of IMing with peers over Yahoo! Messenger and on their interactions with their "online friends" in online gaming chat rooms. To achieve my research goal I adopted two approaches in this study. First, to understand the role of Yahoo! Messenger in a child's life I asked questions such as: "How it is related to the child's personal relationships?"; "How did it become a part of the child's Internet activities?"; "Where is it situated in the child's daily life?" Second, I also sought to obtain a larger picture of the child through examining the ways the child used Yahoo! Messenger. In other words, I looked at the ways the child's IMing reflected his or her character and ideas about friendship.

To capture the nature of the child's IMing experience and how it is related to other aspects in the larger image of the child, I adopted the "participant as ally—essentialist portraiture approach" research methodology, which argues that a researcher's task is not just to understand the investigated phenomenon but also to explore how the investigated phenomenon ties into the other aspects of the participant's life. The primary research data are in-depth interviews with five 11-year-old children, each of whom had three to four 40-minute interviews. I conducted hour-long interviews with the children's parents, and their homeroom and computer teachers to obtain a richer understanding of these children. The research findings suggest there were immediate effects of the computer education on the children's Internet activities. In the computer class the

fourth grade students were taught how to use Yahoo! Messenger. I observed the use of Yahoo! Messenger among these students and their peers immediately after this class. IMing quickly became an afterschool activity and their primary Internet activity. My second discovery is that each child's own strong and distinct identity was apparent in the ways they each used IMing. Who the child was in the real world was never left behind when he or she IMed. Further, the images of the child's family, parents, and peer groups were also reflected in the essence and nature of the child. The third research finding indicates that Yahoo! Messenger was a social tool assisting these children in maintaining their offline friendships (and online friendships for three of them). Nevertheless, in their perceptions of genuine personal relationships, in-person contact was considered indispensable. These research findings were possible to achieve because the spirit of the essentialist portraiture research methodology puts the participant in a caring relationship with the researcher and yields a more holistic image of the participant. All five participants in this study noticed and commented favorably on the relationship they felt with me.

*To my teachers, friends, and family*

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

I remember the first time I logged on to the World Wide Web. It was a year after I graduated from the university and a couple of months before I enrolled in a teacher's college. I went back to the university which was known for its advanced technology facilities and credited as one of the most important technology development centers in Taiwan. A friend of mine, I-Jing, studied there and worked at the computer lab in the library. She made me sit in front of a computer monitor, double-clicked an icon that said "Internet Explorer" and told me "Here you go. Have fun!" Then, she left for her work. I do not remember the first Web site I browsed, but vividly remember, and can still feel the anxiety I experienced when I clicked a link on the website that took me to another page. Immediately, the content on the screen changed and I panicked. I thought I had damaged the machine! I tried to think of ways that could take me back to the previous website and "rescue" the content before my friend found out! Finally, my friend returned and I told her – with a pang of guilt – about the damage I had done to the computer. She looked at me with a smile and clicked on the "last page icon," rescued the page and I felt relieved. I turned to her and said, "This is enough for me."

A few months later, I enrolled in the National Taichung Teachers' College and took "Computer-Aided Instruction," a fairly new and popular course in education at that time. It was also a core class for people like me who were seeking to become certified teachers in the post-graduate teaching program. Visiting the school's computer lab quickly became routine and the World Wide Web was no longer a mysterious monster to me. In an art education class, I created a poster with the World Wide Web as the theme. Suddenly seen as a tech-savvy student, one of

my classmates commented: “people can create things that represent them.” Indeed, I was completely “into” the Internet.

By the end of our study, I had created a web yearbook for our class. My classmates were thrilled to see their pictures, descriptions and music that I had put together for them. One of my classmates asked, “Will other people also see my pictures?” I think what she meant to ask was “Will the whole world have access to my photo?” I shrugged and said “Yes.” I didn’t worry about issues of identity theft or copyright. In fact, I thought my classmate was very out-dated! In my head, I screamed “The Internet is our future! Get with it!”

When I began my foray into the world of computers and the Internet, I was very pro-technology. However, my views towards the Internet changed with my very first (and last) anonymous interaction with an undergraduate student in a chat room on our school’s BBS (Bulletin Board System). During my brief interaction with this student through text messaging, I made him believe that I was an overseas Taiwanese who just returned to Taiwan and was a student in the music department – an identity that did not belong to me and was not even close to my real one. Our chat lasted about three minutes, with five text messages. I felt guilty for lying to a person who took my words seriously and apparently wanted to have a nice conversation. I stopped logging onto online chat rooms after that incident, thinking how easy it would be for a person to lie about anything in an anonymous environment.

Gradually, that experience receded from my thoughts and it wasn’t until years later, when I was preparing for my qualifying exam that I recalled my encounters with the Internet and the interactions with the stranger in an online chat room. When I read studies on human interaction with computers, especially topics on Internet activities or phenomena such as Instant Messaging, blogging, online gaming, and Internet addiction, I found very few researchers were discussing

ethical, moral, or deeper social issues about cyber space. In Taiwan, where I would conduct this study, most researchers focus on the issue of Internet addiction, emphasizing the numbers of hours people spend online, behavioral problems due to violent or inappropriate content on the Internet and/or the decline of academic performance. However, these researchers rarely address fundamental questions, such as, ‘How do people start getting involved in the Internet activities?’ and ‘Why do people become addicted to the Internet?’

As a researcher, I think it imprudent *not* to pursue this topic further, especially in relation to a child’s or adolescent’s life. I believe we need a broader spectrum of research in terms of the depth of inquiry into a research participant’s use of the Internet. A person who enjoys an intensive or active online social life implies a positive correlation between the Internet and personal social life. However, it may also represent a lack of human contact in the real world or finding temporary relief for problems in their offline world (classic avoidance tendencies, a way of using the Internet’s anonymous environment). In the limited area of quantitative research on Internet addiction, there are important issues not addressed. For instance, a situation where a person plays online games eight hours a day is quite different from a situation where a person instant messages his or her friends online for the same amount of time. Yet, it is highly possible that a survey research will group both of these items in the category of “Internet addiction.”

In addition to embracing a broader vision and a deeper inquiry into the issue of Internet use, the population of research participants needs to be expanded as well. Studies of Internet use in Taiwan are conducted mostly teenagers and adults. Elementary school students are largely excluded. In Taiwan, information technology education begins at the third grade and children’s formal use of the Internet begins at an early age. Their voices, however, have been neglected and understudied in research literature. In this study, I step into Taiwanese elementary school

students' lives in an effort to understand their perception of the Internet, their adaptation to the Internet and the role of the Internet in their ethical, moral and social development. Even more than this, I hope to present their stories in an authentic and sincere manner.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Internet was once portrayed as “the third place,” such as how coffee shops were used, helping people get through the day (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001). Now it is becoming a “must-visit” place for people every day, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Its growing functions and applications substantially fuse people’s virtual and real lives (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Haythornthwaite, 2001; Howard et al., 2001; Livingstone, 2002, 2003). Searching for information, finding entertainment, expanding social life, conducting business, and even earning degrees are common activities on the Internet. Gartner (2007), a leading information technology research and advisory company, predicts “80 percent of active internet users will have a ‘second life’ in the virtual world by the end of 2011.” As the Internet grows into “a natural, background part of [our] everyday life” (Bargh & McKenna, 2004, p. 574), we must ask in what ways do we change when we so naturally breathe in air filled with the invisible flavors of the Internet? Even more specifically, how have children’s lives been transformed by the Internet? What does a child’s everyday life look like in the age of the Internet?

The Pew Internet & American Life Project (2005) conducted a survey on 1,100 teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17. This study shows that 83 percent of teenagers are Internet users. Further, 81 percent of these Internet users play online games and 75 percent use instant messaging (IM). The latest statistics show the percentage of teenagers in the United States using the Internet increased to 93 percent in 2006. IMing is the third favorite communication method

among teenagers after the landline telephones and cell phones. However, it is still the most preferred online communication medium (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007).

In Taiwan, a study involving 1,031 Taiwanese children between the ages of 7 and 14 shows that 72 percent use the Internet weekly and 30 percent indicated they *could not live* without computer, email or IM systems (CTS News, 2007). The Child Welfare League Foundation (2007) conducted a survey on the topic of online gaming in children's lives among 1,818 Taiwanese children between the ages of 11 and 14. This study shows 88.2 percent of these children play online games, 20 percent of them play online games more than three hours a day on weekdays and 3.9 percent of them play more than 8 hours on weekdays. The number of children playing online games increases on weekends with 40 percent of them playing online games on weekends and 10 percent of them playing online games past midnight. Contact with strangers in chat rooms embedded in the online games was also discussed. The study says that 61 percent of the students chat with strangers in these chat rooms, 22 percent have more intensive interaction with their online friends (such as making phone calls or IMing) but have no face-to-face interaction and 15.6 percent meet their online friends in person.

The studies above, whether conducted in the United States or Taiwan, indicate that the Internet occupies a major part of children's everyday life, especially in their social and leisure activities, with IMing and online gaming dominating children's Internet activities. We need a deeper understanding of IMing and online gaming in children's lives. In this study, I will focus on IMing in the context of Instant Messaging systems such as MSN, Yahoo! Messenger, AOL and Skype (used among friends in real life) and online gaming chat rooms (where communication is usually restricted to strangers).

**Problems of Instant Messaging (IMing) on the Internet.** The literature discusses what is going on in IMing under the headings of anonymity and interactivity. IMing through Instant Messaging systems and in online chat rooms are distinct with each representing anonymity or interactivity. Whereas IMing among friends, families or acquaintances through Instant Messaging systems represents the characteristic of “interactivity,” IMing in online chat rooms qualifies as “anonymity.” Many researchers have looked at the different issues with anonymity and interactivity, but they have not considered two critical issues: (a) moral challenge (moral and ethical issues); and (b) forming and maintaining relationships (social issues). This section presents the literature on IMing and what I feel has been neglected in current arguments and findings.

***Interactivity – Talking to friends in Instant Messaging systems.*** Instant Messaging systems, such as MSN, AOL, and Yahoo! Messenger, are online spaces where friends or families gather together to have either one-on-one or small group talks (Grinter & Palen, 2002; Grinter, Palen, & Eldridge, 2006). Empirical research, mostly studies of the nature of IMing among adults in the workplace, shows IMing supports “the conduct of work and reinforce[s] the social ‘glue’ that ties people together” (Grinter & Palen, 2002, p. 22). IMing in this social context has a positive effect on people’s relationships. Researchers studying young people’s use of IMing report a comparable finding. They contend children’s relationships with their peers are positively affected by IMing (Bradley, 2005; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Grinter et al., 2006; Heitner, 2002; Livingstone, 2002, 2003; S. C., Wang, 2007).

However, anecdotal data suggests that children are intentionally online to be with their friends or even schedule times to be online in order to maintain membership in their peer groups (Bradley, 2005; Livingstone, 2002; S. C. Wang, 2007; Wei, 2006). One participant in Bradley’s

study explains ‘Not being on [IM] . . . is like . . . out of the loop. I think there are a lot of people who do it because they need to be in the loop’ (Bradley, 2005, p. 70). Several of Livingstone’s (2002) research participants expressed a negative attitude towards their peers who did not participate in online conversations. Although peer pressure takes different forms in terms of social-economic status, gender or culture, in the age of the Internet, there is a universal form of peer pressure which is to be online IMing.

Have children’s lives changed as online social interaction becomes increasingly essential to them? Researchers find that children isolate themselves from their families and have less time for studies (Chou & Peng, 2007; Tsai & Lin, 2001, 2003). It is true that forming friendships is a natural and essential part of childhood or adolescence. However, when forming friendships becomes an external pressure or force it may endanger the whole child development and obstruct potential interactions between an individual with other aspects of his or her life. Added to this influence is the concern that children place themselves in an artificial and impoverished environment where human interaction is limited and less genuine.

Grinter and Palen (2002) classify children’s IMing into three categories: socializing, event planning and schoolwork collaboration, with socializing being the major activity. Grinter and Palen explain children’s IMing conversation as “reflections on the daily events, gossip about others including what clothes were worn and who [was] seeing whom, and so forth” (ibid., p. 25). Subrahmanyam, Kraut, Greenfield and Gross (2000) also indicate that children often use the Internet for “keep-in-touch communications involving small talk, gossip, and news of the day, with a ‘here-and-now’ flavor” (p. 134). This “keeping in touch communication” exists not only in their on-line conversations, but also is a part of their off-line conversation. However, the whole-person human contact that a child experiences in a face-to-face communication is reduced

in the context of the Internet. A child is confined in a disembodied and faceless space when IMing. In this space, the child can only engage with other people through short text messages and icons. Human contact on IMing is limited.

A typical example that shows how interactivity on IMing is artificial or less authentic is the use of paralinguistic cues that express an individual's feelings. Dietz-Uhler and Bishop-Clark (2001) emphasize that, as opposed to face-to-face communication, users of computer-mediated communication (such as email and IMing) do not see or hear "facial expression, tone of voice, posture, etc. of the other participants" (p. 270). IMing users adopt a set of pre-prepared paralinguistic cues to express their emotion and meaning. To some extent, paralinguistic cues make online conversation more "alive" (Liu & Ginther, 2001; Wei, 2006). Liu and Ginther (2001) suggest that online course instructors who use paralinguistic cues are more successful in engaging students. However, paralinguistic cues are stereotypical and de-contextualized. They simplify and dehumanize a person's existence. They stop a person from articulating his or her self thoroughly. The convenience and availability of paralinguistic cues prompt a person to substitute stereotypical and de-contextualized objects for his or her more complex meaning or emotion. A weak relationship that is neither genuine nor mutual is fostered within this artificial interactivity.

***Anonymity – Talking to Strangers in Online Chat Rooms.*** Empirical research contends that online chat rooms are virtual laboratories for "identity experiments" (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Calvert, 2002; Chak & Leung, 2004; Gackenbach & von Stackelberg, 2007; Livingstone, 2003; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Turkle, 1995; Varnhagen, 2007). Bargh et al. (2002) argue "the anonymity of the Internet enables people the opportunity to take on various personas, even a different gender, and to express facets of themselves without fear of disapproval

and sanctions by those in their real-life social circle” (p. 34). Livingstone (2003) praises the Internet for offering “a comparatively safe yet private place for children to experiment with identity” (p. 151).

With the aid of the windows technique, a person is able to simultaneously “enact multiple identities” with different groups of people. Doug, a participant in Turkle’s study (1995), is simultaneously plugged into four different MUDs<sup>1</sup> windows within which he plays four different roles, plus a chat window open for possible “real communication.” He says: ‘RL [Real Life] is just one more window . . . and it’s not usually my best one’ (ibid., p. 13). Turkle (1995) considers the phenomenon of people having multiple identities or “trying multiple roles” online as the evolution of a de-centered, fluid, nonlinear, and opaque identity. Although this viewpoint is in line with her argument that we are living in the age of postmodernism, it does not address my concern with how the “identity experiment” on the Internet is related to children’s development.

What is the mindset of those who want to construct a new identity? In my opinion, the researchers quoted above make no moral judgments. They deem the behavior or mindset of taking different personas in an anonymous environment as “identity experiments.” They often ignore the fact that participants in online chat rooms can abuse anonymity by deceiving other people, indulging in “voyeurism,” or worse. They also neglect the fact that taking different roles simultaneously may fragment ‘self’ and prevent a person from fully presenting his or her self. In other words, a person may be less likely to be their honest ‘self’ in this type of interaction.

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<sup>1</sup> MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon) was the first online role-playing game, developed by Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw in 1978 (Boudreau, 2008). It is a text-based virtual space in which its players control their roles and communicate with other players by entering commands or messages through keyboards.

Bakardjieva (2005) reports stories of people interacting anonymously with strangers in on-line chat rooms, finding support and forming genuine friendships. While her study presents positive human interactions in an anonymous context, she fails to mention possible misuses of anonymous interaction in her analysis. It is important to note that what a person reveals through his or her anonymous encounters may not be “healthy” in its essence. It could be something immoral (fantasizing about adult movies), something unlawful (wanting to take drugs) or something that needs medical or psychological attention (feeling depressed or being suicidal). This represents a type of *misuse* of online communication, where an individual seeks consent for his or her “unhealthy self” instead of taking actions which would promote a healthier state of being.

From a Taoist perspective, which is an essential part of my cultural background, only when a person is true to his or her self can he or she realize true freedom, which is the harmonious state within a person. The short-term relief (or false freedom) a person obtains from the anonymous encounter, does not always help the individual deal with his or her problems or resolve inner conflicts. Indeed, it may harm the person psychologically. Subrahmanyam et al. (2000) as well as Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, and Gross (2002) analyze the data from the HomeNet project<sup>2</sup> and argue that online relationships, which they term, “weak tie” relationships, tend to exist for shorter periods of time and are not as strong as offline relationships. These researchers suggest a teenager may experience increased loneliness and depression, especially when he or she spends greater amounts of time communicating with “weak ties.” The

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<sup>2</sup> The HomeNet project is a longitudinal survey on 169 people in 73 families in Pittsburgh between 1995 and 1997 (Kraut, R., Patterson, 1998; see also Kraut, R., Kiesler, 2002; CMU HomeNet Study, 2008).

anonymous online communication, to some extent, is detrimental to the harmonious and balanced holistic development of the person.

To summarize the argument, behavioral and psychological processes in using IMing, in both Instant Messaging systems and online chat rooms, reveal sophisticated ways people incorporate this medium into their personal life and the profound influence of this medium on the development of a person. Empirical studies talk about IMing through Instant Messaging systems as enhancing offline relationships, but failed to discuss the artificial interactivity that impoverishes a person and further hinders the person from reaching the state of inner oneness (knowing his or her true nature). Researchers also speak about “identity experiment” activities in an anonymous environment without mentioning ethical and moral issues of appropriating personas which are sometimes dynamically different from one’s self. It seems to me that analysis of IMing requires a more sophisticated, complex approach. The more subtle influence of IMing on a child’s self, especially moral, ethical, and the deeper social issues requires our attention. Therefore, a qualitative, grounded theory study should be used to explore the role of IMing in children’s online and offline lives and researchers should endeavor to view IMing in children’s lives from a larger perspective.

**Educational philosophy inspirations.** Which educational philosophies resonate with my concerns and arguments? The previous discussion of anonymity and interactivity in the section of “Problems of Instant Messaging (IMing) on the Internet” (above, pp. 6-12) indicates that children’s Internet activities contribute in some sense to forming the self (and presenting the self). In respect to forming the self, the literature is divided into two major camps. On the one hand, there are researchers who feel that there is a unified self in a person’s development. In their articulation, a unified self means there is a natural way of being connected with self, society, and

the larger world (Chuang Tzu, 1968, 1998; J. P. Miller, 1999, 2001, 2005; Noddings, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Erikson, 1963, 1968). On the other hand, there are scholars who feel that a person's self is an assemblage of "multiple selves" with no concrete form of what a self should be. Writers that value anonymity and interactivity and do not comment on moral and ethical issues on the Internet tend to be social interactionists and align themselves with the concepts of "multiple selves" (Calvert, 2000). However, those who advocate the concept of a unified self would have moral and social concerns and are more likely to resonate with my arguments.

One theorist with similar concerns to mine, is Erikson (1963, 1968). Erikson (1968) suggests the optimal sense of self is coherent and unified. He argues a child is able to develop such an identity if he or she is given opportunities to explore different roles and is assisted with proper stimulations and guidance. He emphasizes school as an important place where a child can be assisted in searching for his or her own optimal life role. Instead of providing a definite method for guiding a child to a unified self. Erikson discusses three different educational theories (methods) and identifies problems within each of them: (a) doing what one is told to do, where a child's autonomy is sacrificed; (b) doing what one likes to do, where a child is denied challenges or stimulations; and (c) doing what machines can do, where the value of being human is diminished (Erikson, 1968, pp. 126-128). In this critical discussion of the three different educational methods, he argues that different ways of guiding a child may result in different problems in a child's development, although, to some extent, they seem to be beneficial to the child.

On the Internet, where a child has unlimited freedom to enact and assume a variety of roles, the influence of the child's identity exploration on the formation of a unified self, though unpredictable, greatly depends on the attributes involved in the child's identity experiment; e.g.

such as the child's motivations for taking on different identities, people with whom the child interacts, and manner in which the child negotiates the interactions. If identity development is an indispensable part of a child's whole development and, as Erikson argues, it is greatly affected by the way he or she is guided and nurtured, then how and with whom the child interacts with on the Internet (specifically the child's identity experiments on IMing) should require examination.

Besides Erikson, considerable sympathy and support for my concerns can be found in *Bildung* Theory. In Witz's discussion (2007b) of the *Bildung* theory, several writers (Humboldt, Litt, Roth, Weniger, and Wieland) favor a unified self and assume that a person develops in a healthy way with values, finds his or her place in society, and becomes a healthy social being. However, the self is unified in rather different ways. For instance, Litt (1963) sees a unified self in the person who has been able to create an internal order (as cited in Witz, 2007b). He emphasizes that in order to reach this inner order a person has to regulate his or her relation to the world in an appropriate manner. In the context of IMing, whether it is in online chat rooms or Instant Messaging systems, a person is more likely to simultaneously engage in multiple conversations or even take up multiple identities. Litt's viewpoint of regulating one's relationships with the larger world to create an inner order within one's self provokes one to consider how to analyze a person's mind and soul within IMing, where disordered interactions exist continuously.

Two educational philosophies that I am predisposed to accept are holistic education and Taoism, philosophies with comparable articulations of the origin and development of a human life. Both holistic education and Taoism envision the highest state of a life as being at one with the self, society and Nature. They emphasize that by having authentic connections with people or

things, a person will be able to present his or her self and interact with the world in an appropriate manner.

Taoism is a Chinese philosophy that can be traced back to Lao Tzu who lived in the fourth century BCE. Tao is a way of seeing the inner nature of things; an energy that leads a person to respond to the larger world without disturbing the order of Nature. As one is able to see through Taoism and act in Tao, or using Lao Tzu's words, "live in accordance with Tao" (Lao Tzu, Lin, & Chuang Tzu, 1948, p. 211), he or she reaches the highest state of consciousness, being at one with Nature. Chuang Tzu (1968, 1998), a Taoist master elevating the essence of "freedom" in Tao, sees the heart of the harmonious state as a state where a man becomes a free soul. Watson (1964) interprets this as "all human actions become as spontaneous and mindless as those of the natural world" (p. 6).

Because my cultural background is infused with these perspectives, I am more sensitive to and employ the insights that holistic education and Taoism offer for my study.

***Holistic education.*** Holistic education is rooted in the "spiritual concept of the human being" (R. Miller, 2000, p. 6) where a child is regarded as a sacred creature of the unknown power. Pestalozzi, who some consider the founding father of holistic education, argued:

Nature forms the child as an indivisible whole, as a vital organic unity with many sided moral, mental, and physical capacities. She wishes that none of these capacities remain undeveloped. Where nature has influence and the child is well and truly guided by her, she develops the child's heart, mind, and body in harmonious unity. (as cited in Heafford, 1967, pp. 47-48)

The spirit of holistic education, a whole-child development and the state of being in harmony and unity within a self, is depicted in Pestalozzi's description of the origin of life and his vision of the unified self. Practice of Pestalozzi's vision in contemporary education may be categorized

into two themes: (a) having authentic connections with the self and the larger world (John P. Miller); and (b) whole-child development in caring relations (Nel Noddings).

J. P. Miller suggests that education should awaken a child to “a sense of the sacred and to the interconnectedness of life” (2000, p. 5) and ultimately to expose the child to the “larger vision of what it means to be a human being inhabiting the earth and cosmos” (J. P. Miller & Nozawa, 2005, p. 43). In other words, a child’s vision of life should be broadened in a way that the child understands what it means to be a human being in the universe. In educational practice, J. P. Miller advocates the concept of “connection” and the idea of “integrated curriculum.” He asserts that a child should learn his or her relationships within a variety of domains: body-mind, school subject, individual-community, earth, and self (J. P. Miller, 1999, 2001, 2005). He emphasizes that through the interaction between the child and the larger world, the child will enrich his or her self, understand how different domains (such as self, knowledge, community, and the earth) are related to one another, and see his or her existence through a more integrated and larger lens. Ultimately, the child becomes able to present his or her self and respond to life’s challenges appropriately.

Children’s engagement in IMing (or the Internet), to some extent, puts them in connection with the domains that J. P. Miller advocates in a way that readily cross the borders of age, gender, race, culture, landscape, and so on. For example, a child who is IMing her online acquaintances may expand her exposure to different domains, cultures, and landscapes through such interactions, a phenomenon that is less likely to happen through real world interactions. A child who is IMing his or her teachers or elderly relatives might be able to experience a more intimate relationship with adults (in some cultures real life intimacy is inconceivable). Keeping the concept and vision of “connection” that J.P. Miller articulates as the frame of reference for

this study, I examine the role of this cross-border interaction in the child's development (unfolding her true self, knowing the connection among different domains, and finally responding to the world in an appropriate way).

Noddings (2003, 2005a, 2005b) contends that the primary purpose of education is to create a caring community that grants a child the space and time to grow while supporting his or her whole-person development. It is only when a child is situated in a caring environment (or relationship) that his or her true image is preserved and can be further nourished. She emphasizes, "Caring is a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviors" (2003, p. 17). According to Noddings, a caring teacher is in this higher state of being when that teacher acknowledges, "What I must do is to be totally and non-selectively present to [each] student . . . . The time interval may be brief but the encounter is total" (ibid., p. 180). The caring human contact that Noddings depicts is genuine to the core and intense (in particular, at the teacher's end), a whole-hearted caring. It seems to me that whole-hearted caring also applies to interactions between students, friends, peers, etc., in face-to-face and in IMing situations.

How does a child present him or herself when IMing, where his or her thoughts, feelings or emotions are mostly expressed through short text messages? Noddings emphasizes that a caring relation starts with a person completely emptying him or herself to the other person. When IMing, where one-to-one chat possibly proceeds with more than one chat window being used concurrently, I want to study if "caring" is accomplished.

***Taoism.*** How is the philosophy of Taoism implemented in education? The educational practice of Taoism in Taiwan focuses on moral and life education to nurture a child's character, to cultivate human relations, and ultimately to assist the child in understanding the meaning of life (Chen, 2001; Dan, 2001). Chen (2001) argues "The core of education is to open a child's

mind and soul to the meaning of Tao; to guide the child to get in touch with his or her inner self and to see the world through Tao” (my translation, p. 24). Chen emphasizes that the learning of Taoist spiritualism is essential, especially in creating harmonious relations among students and teachers in schools. He believes when a child understands how his or her action or behavior is related to others, the child will present his or her self in a proper way. Therefore, a harmonious relation between the child and others becomes possible.

When viewing the combining of the philosophy of Taoism and the educational practice of Taoism, one can see that the focus of Taoism centers on the issue of being and acting within a relation. In this instance, the relation includes interaction between a person and his or her inner self; between a person and his or her surroundings or context (including people, rules, and so on); and between the person and the larger world (in the spiritual view). The highest state of Tao is to reach the harmonious state within every relation. Therefore, in analyzing IMing, I will examine how a harmonious relation is created, retained or disturbed and how a person’s cultivation of his or her philosophy relates to the way he or she IMs.

**A need for a qualitative study.** With my concern of moral issues and with the inspiration of these educational philosophies, I shall conduct a qualitative study to further investigate IMing in a child’s life. This study, driven by grounded theory will pay attention to the child’s current family condition, her parents’ (or guardians’) attitudes toward computer use, her history (such as major experiences or events in life), her social life, her interests in school (subjects or hobbies), as well as her school life and after-school activities. The focus of this study is on the role of IMing in the child’s life. It involves interviewing the child and informal talks with the child’s parents, especially concerning the issues of the child’s computer use at home and after-school activity arrangements.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to conduct an interview study where one can see how a child incorporates IMing in the context of his or her online and offline life. By interviewing eleven and twelve year old Taiwanese children, this study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the following research questions: (a) What are children's perceptions about IMing?; (b) Does a child's use of IMing evolve over time?; (c) What role does IMing play in children's online and offline social lives?; and (d) How do family relationships and parents' adoption of Internet relate to children's use of IMing?

## **Significance of the Study**

Information technology education in Taiwan starts at the third grade with general computer operations. Elementary school students learn how to use the Internet in the fourth grade. This study uses qualitative research to investigate IMing activity among fifth graders learners immediately following their IMing instructional class. Studies on IMing use (or broadly speaking, Internet use) focus on teenagers and adults. This study will provide a fundamental piece in understanding IMing by the younger generation. By using qualitative research methods, this study will provide more lively and convincing stories and viewpoints of IMing by elementary school youth

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This study aims to understand what children do in the context of the Internet and how children's Internet activities relate to their inner development. Accordingly, the literature review focuses on children's Internet activities in the sector of computer-mediated communication (CMC), more specifically on instant messaging systems (IM) and chat in online public chat rooms. I divide the literature review into two parts. In part one, I begin with a brief introduction to CMC. As CMC is constantly changing and developing, I feel there is a need to discuss the development of CMC and its role in empirical studies (or how it shapes empirical studies). I particularly adopt two longitudinal research projects, the two-year HomeNet project (Kraut, Patterson, et al., 1998) and its one-year follow-up project (Kraut, Kiesler, et al., 2002), to show how CMC changes over time, how people's Internet activities change in respect to the evolutions of CMC, and how it affects research findings. In part two, I focus on the discussion of CMC use. I first give a general description of CMC use and then review what the literature says about the use of IM systems with friends and family and chatting with strangers in online chat rooms. Finally, I conclude the literature review with a section in which I suggest another way to look at children's Internet activities. Inspired by holistic education, I explore the way a child reveals himself or herself when interacting with other people on the Internet while examining the essence of the online communication and how it is related to the child's development.

Before I begin the literature review, it is essential to clarify that the research articles cited in this chapter are not all about children's Internet activities. CMC is an interdisciplinary research topic and researchers from various fields explore its role within their domains of interest. For example, in the field of education – evaluating the teacher-student relationship

within online courses (Liu & Ginther, 2001), or in computer science – focusing on the issues of design and features of CMC (Choi & Kim, 2004; Isaacs, Walendowski, & Ranganathan, 2002), or in the business sector – looking into the work efficiency of using CMC at workplaces (Handel & Herbsleb, 2002; Isaacs, Walendowski, Whittaker, Schiano, & Kamm, 2002). While there are numerous topics about CMC, the research subjects are limited to either adults or adolescents. In other words, children, especially ages 12 or younger, are rarely included in the studies of CMC. Although the research population of this study are children between 11 and 12 years of age, the literature review inevitably incorporates research studies of adults and adolescents.

### **Part One: Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)**

**A brief introduction to computer-mediated communication.** Researchers suggest the major use of the Internet is for interpersonal communication, especially through e-mail, Instant Messaging systems (IM) or online public chat rooms (Haythornthwaite, 2001; Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; Kraut, Patterson, et al., 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 1998, 2000; Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2001, 2005, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007, 2009). This type of Internet use is called computer-mediated communication (CMC). Dietz-Uhler and Bishop-Clark (2001) describe CMC as “any form of exchange (e.g. video, audio, text) that requires the use of a computer” (p. 269). Generally speaking, CMC exists in two major forms. One form is synchronous in which communication between two (or more) people happens in real time such as IM systems (e.g. Yahoo! Messenger, MSN, AOL, and Skype) or online chat rooms (e.g. MUDs, ICQ, and Internet Relay Chat). Very few researchers categorize IM systems as semi-synchronous CMC (see Avrahami, Fussell, & Hudson, 2008; Madell & Muncer, 2007). The other form is asynchronous in which people respond to each other with a time delay (e.g. e-mail,

newsgroups, message boards, and listservs). The newly developed social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook<sup>3</sup>, MySpace, YouTube or Blogs can be described as a mixed mode CMC as they provide their users with both synchronous (e.g. instant messaging) and asynchronous (e.g. posting comments, photos or videos clips) functions.

**From public to private (The development of CMC and its role in empirical studies).**

The literature suggests that the development of CMC is following a trend of making them more private and personal (Grinter & Palen, 2002; Kraut, Patterson, et al., 1998). In the early 1990's when the Internet had just become more available for laypeople, MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon) was the most popular communication tool (or platform) besides e-mail (Katz & Aspden, 1997; Kraut, Patterson, et al., 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). MUDs, the first online role-playing game, was developed by Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw in 1978 (Massively multiplayer online role-playing game, 2007). It was and is an open, public virtual space where text messages among its users are the primary mode of communication. MUDs is predominantly used to support communication between strangers or, more accurately, people who do not know each other in real space (Grinter & Palen, 2002). In the late 1990's, IM systems became available. In contrast to MUDs or online chat rooms, IM systems support communication between people who know each other in the real world. Researchers find people's online communication choices seem to go along with the development of CMC – starting from the beginning period when people tended to expand their social life through MUDs, to the most recent stage of using IM for maintaining their social life (Kraut, Kiesler, et al., 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Because of this transition in people's preference of online communication tools, that of coming from the

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<sup>3</sup> Facebook is a free-access social networking website found in February 2004. Facebook users can join networks organized by city, workplace, school, and region to connect and interact with other people. People can also add friends and send them messages, and update their personal profiles to notify friends about themselves (Facebook, 2009).

public-oriented to the more personally-inclined tools, researchers of CMC (or more broadly, Internet use) have also observed and reported different images of personal relationships through time. The original HomeNet project (Kraut, Patterson, et al., 1998) and its followed-up project, the HomeNet Project revisited (Kraut, Kiesler, et al., 2002), are the best empirical studies to illustrate how individuals' online communication behaviors and personal social lives evolve or change due to the development of CMC.

The HomeNet project, a widely cited study that investigated the effects of the Internet on social involvement and psychological well-being, was carried out by Kraut, Patterson, et al. at Carnegie Mellon University. These researchers recruited households in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for this project in March 1995 and March 1996. It was a two-year long research project where participants were either in this project for 24 months or 12 months, depending on when they were recruited. Overall, there were 93 families, with 256 participants in this project. Children, younger than 10, were not included in the sample. *One unique characteristic shared by the recruited families was that they were first-time Internet users and for most of the households, participating in this project was their first experience with a home computer.* From March 1995 to March 1997, Kraut, Patterson, et al. tracked the participants' Internet usage and service, collected periodical questionnaires and conducted one in-home interview with each household. Included in the final data analysis were 169 people from 73 households. In the discussion of the research findings, mostly based on the survey data, Kraut, Patterson, et al. (1998) suggested:

Greater use of the Internet was associated with small, but statistically significant declines in social involvement as measured by communication within the family and the size of people's local social networks, and with increases in loneliness, a psychological state associated with social involvement. Greater use of the Internet was also associated with increases in depression (p. 1028)

In their more detailed statistical discussion of the findings, Kraut, Patterson, et al. disclosed there was a statistical interaction of Internet use with age in their sample that suggested growing isolation, “increases in Internet use were associated with larger increases in loneliness . . . and larger declines in social support for teenagers than for adults” (ibid.).

Kraut, Patterson, et al. called their finding *paradoxical* because the Internet, most assumed to be a social technology, was instead found associated with declining social life and having negative influence on one’s well-being. They provided two plausible causal mechanisms. The first mechanism they named was “displacing social activity,” which they suggested was “time that people devote to using the Internet that might substitute for time that they had previously spent engaged in social activities” (ibid., p. 1029). The second one they called, “displacing strong ties,” where they suspected that “people were substituting poorer quality social relationships for better relationships, that is, substituting weak ties for strong ones” (ibid.). These two mechanisms were regarded as *social displacement* of Internet use, which had been a commonly adopted description when researchers observed the phenomenon in which a person appeared to be distant and less engaged in his or her real social life as a result from being involved more intensely in online social interactions.

The HomeNet project clearly affirmed the more the Internet was used by participants, the more disconnected an individual became in his or her personal social life. However, in their after-thoughts on this project, Kraut, Patterson, et al. acknowledged that these negative research findings of Internet use could be due to the development of technologies (or accurately CMC). They emphasized that “Technologies are not immutable, especially not computing ones. Their effects will be shaped by how they are constructed by engineers, how they are deployed by service providers, and how they are used by consumers” (p. 1030). This assertion reminds all

researchers that the effects of technologies are dynamic. Although Kraut, Patterson, et al. observed a negative effect of Internet use in their sample, there could be various scenarios found in other samples, settings, and technologies. At the end of the paper, they hinted that they could have had different research results had they had the chance to explore the technology, which in their words “supports preexisting social groups such as America OnLine [AOL]” (p. 1030). AOL was the first IM system; it was officially released on May 1997 (Instant messaging, 2009). The participants in the HomeNet project never had the chance to used AOL (or other equivalent IM systems) while they participated in this study. Even though Kraut, Patterson, et al. did not give specific information as what online communication tools their participants used, it is logical to suggest that what they had observed in their participants’ Internet activities were taking place through e-mail, Newsgroups, MUDs or discussion boards which were *public spaces designed to encourage strangers to interact with each other*. Coherently, the findings of the HomeNet project showed people developed social relationships on the Internet, which to some extent was a predictable result since the project took place during the time when online communication tools were more for expanding social life. In reviewing the HomeNet project from the perspective of technology development, it is fair to suggest that the HomeNet project mostly reflected the influence of more public online communication tools in a person’s social involvement and psychological well-being. In fact, research on Internet use during the same period (in the middle of 1990s) like the HomeNet project mainly explored the interactions between strangers on the Internet and the development of online friendships (see Katz & Aspden, 1997; McKenna & Bragh, 1998; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Stoll, 1995; Turkle, 1995). Some of them praised the Internet for creating a social community where people met new people and made friends. They claimed the Internet was connecting people and was a positive influence on personal social life (Katz &

Aspden, 1997; McKenna & Bragh, 1998; Parks & Floyd, 1996). There were studies like the HomeNet project, however, finding the online relationships less genuine compared with a person's offline friendships, bringing a negative influence to one's well-being (Stoll, 1995; Turkle, 1995).

In the landscape of Internet activities, or the development of CMC after the data collection of the original HomeNet project was finished in 1997, more and more communication services such as IM systems, which Kraut, Patterson, et al. (1998) described being used for preexisting social life (and less for online friendships), surfaced and were adopted by Internet users. America Online released AOL in 1997. Yahoo! Messenger debuted in 1998. Microsoft launched MSN messenger in 1999.

Kraut, Kiesler, et al. (2002) began the follow-up study of the HomeNet project in May 1997. They recorded the Internet use of 208 participants of 93 Pittsburgh families from the original HomeNet project and conducted a survey in February 1998. Included in the data of this follow-up project, were a three-year long Internet activities record from the participants who were recruited in 1995, a two-year long record for those participating in 1996 and the three surveys administrated in 1996, 1997, and 1998.

Kraut, Kiesler, et al. found after three years of using the Internet their sample generally experienced positive effects of using the Internet on communication, social involvement, and well-being; *the negative effects of Internet use they documented during the first two years dissipated* (see Kraut, Patterson, et al., 1998). In addition, the data supported the "rich get richer" model that suggests that extraverts or those who are more sociable and have more existing social support, benefit more from Internet use (Kraut, Kiesler, et al., 2002, p. 49). In these participants' Internet use, more specifically, Kraut, Kiesler, et al., found the top three Internet activities were:

first, communication with family and friends; second, searching for information; and third, looking for entertainment. Using the Internet for meeting new people, however, came in fourth. It is obvious the participants were using the Internet more often to interact with people in their existing social relationships than in online friendships. Furthermore, in this sample the extraverts were more likely to use the Internet to keep in touch with friends and family members. If one applies the “rich get richer” model here, it might be fair to say that using the Internet to communicate with friends and family was more likely to benefit a person’s well-being, especially for extraverts. Kraut, Kiesler, et al. (2002) argue the effects of the Internet use depends on what people do on-line, what people give up to spend time on the Internet (p. 70). They explicitly asserted, “[using the Internet for] *interpersonal communication with friends and family* would have more beneficial effects than . . . downloading music, playing computer games, or *communicating with strangers* [italics added]” (ibid.). Apparently, a person’s existing social life is critical and cannot be omitted in the whole picture of the Internet’s impact on that person.

Looking back at the original HomeNet project, more of the discussion was on the aspects of using the Internet with the online friendships. The follow-up HomeNet project, however, made existing social relationships the central theme in Internet use. In both projects, the researchers never specified the Internet activities that the participants were engaged with. “Internet use” was the term they labeled their participants’ Internet activities in these two papers. While tracing the timeline of CMC development, it became clear the two projects had investigated different online communication tools. Whereas the follow-up HomeNet Project was able to record the participants’ use of IM systems, the original HomeNet project merely tracked the use on MUDs, Newsgroups or other public online spaces. The discrepancy between these two

projects to a certain degree, showed the development of CMC affected the results in these empirical studies. More important, it proved that people migrated from the public sectors to the more personal and private spaces on the Internet.

By presenting and comparing the HomeNet project and its follow-up project, this section shows the development of CMC never stopped and people's preferences of CMC changed over time. From the early or middle 1990's to the current stage, the trend of CMC development and Internet use have evolved in their nature from the more public to the more personal. In the future, we might observe different images of both CMC and CMC use. For example, Facebook, considered as the most popular social networking site (SNS) among college students (Barker, 2009; Sheldon, 2008; Quan-Haase & Collins, 2008), is creating a social community for both strangers and friends online. As it becomes more popular and reaches more age groups, it is probable a mixed model of online communication (both personal and public) will be the future trend (or the norm) of Internet use.

## **Part Two: The Use of CMC**

In reviewing the empirical studies as a whole, there is a consistent finding across research regarding the question of which communication tool/s is or are used by people. *E-mail, IM, and chat in chat rooms are the most commonly adopted ones. Nevertheless, different generations favor different tools.* More specifically, adolescents are fond of using IM and chat while adults are more likely to use e-mail (Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Shklovski, 2006; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Gross, 2004; Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Quan-Haase, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). In this section, I focus on discussing the two popular Internet communication tools among teenagers – IM systems and chatting in online chat rooms. Although these two online

communication tools share similar technical and social functionalities, they play different roles in teenagers' personal social lives. IM system is mainly for online communication with people who know each other in the real world. Chatting in online chat rooms is primarily between strangers. This section reviews the nature of these two tools and how teenagers incorporate them into their lives.

### **Instant Messaging systems and preexisting relationships (friends and family).**

Bradley (2005) interviewed several high school students about their Internet activities to investigate the moral development of teenagers within the digital world. In the article where she shared her findings, she began with excerpts from two of her research participants, Claire and Diana, both juniors in high school.

“I have a schedule,” Claire says. “When I get up in the morning I check [my IM and selected blogs]; when I come home from school I check and before I go to sleep I check; but there are times in between I can check it too.” Diana, a classmate of Claire, adds, “I have four e-mail addresses but I don't use them much. I use them for different things, but if I want to say something, I IM or blog.” (ibid., p. 57)

Claire made it clear that IM and blog were embedded in her everyday life. She started and ended her day with them. Although Diana used e-mail, she explicitly excluded it from her communication arsenal and favors using IM or blog to express her self. In these two teenage girls' examples, IM and blog are essential in their lives. Survey data from empirical studies show that Claire and Diana's preferences over certain Internet activities (namely, IMing or blog) are not exceptional among teenagers.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project (2001) suggests e-mail and IMing are the top two Internet activities among teenagers in the United States. 74 percent of the teenagers that use the Internet adopt IM to interact with their peers and family. Teenagers are dubbed as the rising *instant-message generation* in this report. IMing remains as one of the major Internet activities

among adolescents in the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2005). Gross et al. (2002) surveyed 130 seventh-grade students from a middle-class public school in California and found that IMing, web surfing, and e-mail were the top three Internet uses for this particular sample. In another survey study on 40 seventh-grade students (11 to 13 years of age) from a middle school in a Midwestern college town in the United States (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006), IMing occupied 60 percent of the time these participants were online. van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, and Engels (2008) surveyed 663 Dutch adolescents (ages between 12 and 15) and found that IMing was the most popular and most frequently used online communication form, where 89 percent of their participants used it and 55 percent of them used it on a daily basis. Valkenburg and Peter (2007a) found 97 percent of their respondents (794 primarily White Dutch adolescent ages 10 – 16 years) used MSN messenger and 88 percent of them indicated they often IMed with preexisting, offline friends. There are also empirical studies that look into the role that IM plays in an adolescents' life while exploring teenagers' Internet activities (Boneva et al., 2006; Fox, Rosen, & Crawford, 2009; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Hu, Wood, Smith & Westbrook, 2004; Lin, Sun, Lee, & Wu, 2007; Lloyd, Meszaros, & Gotow, 2006; Ramirez & Broneck, 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009).

There is no doubt that IM occupies a dominant place in adolescents' Internet activities. Its dominance is seen in anecdotes, survey data and the high interest scholars that show in choosing IM as their research topic. The question is then why IMing became the core of Internet activities among youth. Examining Claire and Diana in Bradley's study (2005) as examples, why did Claire almost always check her IM or blog whenever she had the chance? And for Diana, what was so special about IM that she would prefer to say things in her mind through IMing? In general, why do people IM? What do they do when IMing? Who do they talk to? The

mechanisms of IM, which merely allow communication between people that know each other in real world, destines IM to have influence on a person's *existing social life*. When Valkenburg and Peter (2009) decided to merely focus on IM's effects on the adolescent social life, they declared "if there is an online communication technology that is to influence adolescents' existing friendships, *it should be IM* [italics added]" (p. 81). Although the assertion sounds bold, it is in fact a logical assumption, even if merely taking the design and nature of IM into consideration. What remains a mystery is why teenagers adopt IM.

In order to understand young adults' attitudes towards various communication technologies including IM, mobile phone text messaging, email, voice calls, and letter writing, Madell and Muncer (2007) conducted a 50 minute interview with two focus research groups, each of which included six girls and one boy, ages between 18 to 20 years of age. Participants of this study indicated that IM, email, and mobile phone text messaging, communication technologies *lacking visual and auditory cues*, allowed them more time to compose their thoughts and to some extent, they felt they had more control over their interactions with people. One participant in the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2001) reported: "Online you can think things over, and erase them before you look stupid, rather than to their face, where you can't always take things back" (p. 22). For shy people, the lack of visual and auditory cues within CMC seems to be more comfortable for them than face-to-face communication. However, CMC does not prompt shy people to be more interactive (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a; van den Eijnden et al., 2008). Hertel, Choroer, Batinic, and Naumann (2008) conducted a survey on 228 German college students to investigate their preferences for communication media including face-to-face conversation and email. The research results suggested shy college students favored email over face-to-face conversation. Peter, Valkenburg, and Schouten (2007) found shy

adolescents were less likely to use webcams or microphones when IMing with peers. Although being able to control one's presence, conversation or even self-presentation could be the reason that teenagers adopt IM, adoption of IM might extend deeper than these three reasons.

Psychologists affirm that adolescence is a critical period when one's self identity and social identity are being formed (Boneva et al., 2006; Lee & Sun, 2009; Lin & Yu, 2008). It is a period when peers, in many cases, are more important in one's life than parents. IM provides an alternative way for an adolescent to express his or her self (the self identity) as well as a way to maintain friendships (social identity). Livingstone (2002) points out that IM means mobility to teenagers because it gives teenagers more time and chances to interact with their peers while they are confined at home. Bradley (2005) echoes Livingstone's stand about IM increasing teenagers' mobility while also emphasizing that online communication gives teenagers a feeling of being free from various boundaries they might confront in face-to-face communication.

It seems that IM greatly benefits teenagers in fulfilling their needs for companionship. Whitlock, Powers, and Eckenrode (2006) reveal, "The Internet has become a virtual meeting place where teens hang out with their peers to pass time" (p. 407). Peter et al. (2007) indicate adolescents communicate online more frequently and more competently with online communication being closely integrated into their social lives.

Researchers also suggest that the quantity and quality of online communication is positively related to the quality of an individual's existing social life (Hu et. al, 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). Hanging out with peers on the Internet seems to be crucial for a good social life. It is not, however, necessarily out of one's volition (true desire), but could stem from obligatory feelings aroused by peer pressure. Grinter and Palen (2002) emphasize, "For teenagers, peer pressure is a major catalyst in IM adoption" (p. 23). One 14 year

old girl in their study indicated it was a matter of ‘be on or be out’ and another girl of the same age said, ‘because all my friends were talking [on IM], and I didn’t want to miss out’ (ibid.). One of Bradley’s interviewees explained, ‘Not being on is like not being at school for a couple of days and missing out on lunch . . . You’ll be kind of out of the loop. I think there’s a lot of people who do it because they need to be in the loop’ (p. 70). Even for older adolescents (college students), adopting IM due to peer pressure remains prominent. Quan-Haase and Collins (2008) studied college students’ IM behaviors. They conducted a survey on 293 undergraduate students in Canada and interviewed 21 of the participants who completed the research questionnaire. They found “With the widespread use of IM in universities, students feel compelled to be available via IM as often as possible” (ibid., p. 538). Although peer pressure seems to be the major reason that teenagers adopt IM, it is essential to note that in Bryant et al.’s study 40 children (11 to 13 years old) indicated they did not feel the peer pressure to use IM in order to maintain their friendships. Indeed, participants in this study had different social networks, or different sets of online and offline friendships. It seems that peer pressure did not prompt these children or their peers to use IM.

Though each matters in their own way, convenience, empowerment, desire for friendship, expression of one’s self and/or peer pressure, have brought teenagers to IM. In their interview study with 16 teenagers, Grinter and Palen (2002) found socializing, event planning and schoolwork collaboration were the three main ways teenagers used IM. Among these three activities, socializing was the major use, primarily when “informal conversation—everyday chitchat” (ibid., p. 25) occurred. Grinter and Palen go on to explain:

Since [in their sample] IM peers knew each other in real space, and often shared school experiences, the nature of their conversation was reported to be much like what they have in real space: reflections on the daily events, gossip about others including what clothes were worn and who seeing whom, and so forth. (ibid.)

In this study, these teenagers' IM friendships and conversations appear to mirror what they have in their real lives. However, other studies contend IM interactions sometimes exceed what teenagers' might have in the real world. In the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2001), 37 percent of the teens reported they would say something over IM that they would not have said in person. One 17-year-old girl in this study indicated, 'It is easier to talk to someone about certain topics online, than to talk about them face-to-face' (ibid., p. 22). 42 percent of Bryant et al.'s research participants chose the survey item, "write something you wouldn't say in person" as one of the reasons they used IM. Diana, the girl in Bradley's study, also felt expressing her feelings on the Internet was less intimidating than face-to-face communication. She explained:

These same people [with whom I am emotionally open with online] I would feel terrified to come up to them in person and start this kind of conversation. I want to and I think it would be more meaningful but it's just really scary, whereas on the Internet it's, like, they can just go away. (Bradley, 2005, p. 65)

The examples above suggest that teenagers feel more comfortable expressing their feelings over IM. In other words, the interaction over the IM system to some extent is different than the in-person communication (though they might share similar characteristics such as socializing). In fact, the functions of IM, especially "block," "display name" and "paralinguistic cues," make interactions over IM less predictable and sometimes more interesting or complicated. "Block" is a feature that enables an individual to "hide" from his or her friends on IM. "Display name" is a short text space, originally designed for IM users to show their names. It is now a trend to use this text space to send out personal messages. Some researchers call the display "presence" as IM users are fond of indicating their availability in this particular text box (Bovena et al., 2006). "Paralinguistic cues" are graphic characters and animations that express an individual's emotions or feelings. In the section, "Statement of the Problem" in Chapter 1, I discussed the issue related

to “paralinguistic cues” (see p. 9). I will exclude it from the following discussion and focus on how “block” and “display name” are used presently and what their potential influence might be.

**Block.** Although peer pressure is identified as one of the major reasons teenagers adopt IM (Grinter & Palen, 2002; Livingstone, 2002), it does not cease the moment teenagers subscribe to their IM service, add their peers to the buddy list, or even when they log in to their IM accounts. Peer pressure persists and affects teenagers’ actions and decisions over IM in instances of whether they should be available to chat with their friends or to *block* messages from their friends. Anecdotal evidence indicates that children try to be “available” for their peers to ensure their social group membership or friendships (Grinter & Palen, 2002). However, friendships change over time. While IM interactions with peers reported by most empirical studies benefit (or influence) one’s offline relationships, offline interactions can also affect what happens over IM. When one is no longer a friend with a peer or has arguments with that person offline, it is possible to avoid messaging (as in the offline world one would stay away from the person one is having issues with) through blocking or ‘block’.

Block allows an IM user to remove his or her friends from the buddy list. When A blocks B, A appears as offline when B logs on to IM. Under this circumstance, A would never receive messages from B. In this case, B would not know he or she was blocked by A because A would appear as offline on B’s contact list. In the Pew Internet & American Life Project 2001 and 2005, half of the teenagers admitted to blocking someone they did not want to hear from. However, they also indicated blocking someone only happened once a month and was not a regular or usual practice for them. College students in Quan-Haase and Collins’ study (2008) indicated that they seldom blocked their friends. Naomi, one of the participants in this study, explained to the researchers that block means ‘hurtful system’ when translated to English from Chinese, and this

was why she was reluctant to block her peers. Some participants explained they would rather obtain new IM accounts and recompose new buddy lists than block their friends. It seems that the avoidance of hurting others might be the reason why 'block' was not a common practice among these college students.

From a technical perspective, block seems to be an individual act. When reviewing their participants' adoption of block, Grinter and Palen (2002) make an intriguing argument about this particular IM function: "Using the access control facility [block], a group of teenagers can all make themselves appear off-line to an excluded "friend," keeping plans and discussions secret, but without the person directly knowing about their exclusion" (p. 28). A similar observation that teenagers used block to shun a person who was no longer in the "in-group" was reported by Grinter, Palen, and Eldridge (2006). In other words, block could become a group activity. Researchers and teenagers (or broadly speaking, IM users) assume that block is fairly discreet and the one being blocked would never find out that he or she has been blocked. Nevertheless, IM is a daily routine for many teenagers and they even know their peers' online schedules. How *discreet* block can be needs further investigation. So does the influence of such behavior on one's offline friendships. Although Bradley (2005) suggests the emotional risks on IM or online communication (e.g. not being able to receive responses from the peers on IM, unable to get one's phone number or being rejected) "do not feel quite as perilous" (p. 64) when compared to face-to-face communication, it is probably safe to assume that a group block could have a more profound consequence on a person, especially since the two lives, on-line and off-line, are so interwoven with each other.

***Display name.*** "Display name" literally means a text space to display one's name. However, IM users creatively adapt this space to "display" their personal messages rather than

their names. Grinter and Palen's (2002) research participants indicated changing their "display name" to explain their IM absences is a common practice. One even changed his display name to "I'm currently removing all dirt, grime and other dead biological matter from my body. I can be found in the nearest decontamination center" (ibid., p. 28), meaning he was in the shower. Whereas this message sounds quite interesting and unique, there are also messages plainly telling of one's presence or availability shown on IM. One participant in the study of Bovenia et al. (2006) wrote 'At the Mall shopping with mom. Back in 2 hours' (p. 213). As this practice of explaining one's availability on IM is vastly shared by IM users, Bovenia et al. call the feature of "display name" on IM as the space that shows one's "presence" information. Grinter and Palen (2002) regard children changing their display names on IM as a way of ensuring their availabilities to their peers. Bovenia et al. (2006) report this as an act where one wants to sustain his or her group membership and the feeling of group participation. In Quan-Haase's review (2008) of research on the use and the role of IM in college students' campus life, she suggests the constant updating of their IM status by college students is to "maintain a sense of connectivity with peers even when they are not online or engaged in IM" (p. 107) which concurs with what Bovenia et al. (2006) suggest.

Although the use of the display name is mostly to provide one's presence or contact information as the researchers above indicate, Baron (2005) conveys it has a variety of functions. Her online survey on undergraduate students' IM usage suggests the messages posted in the display names are not merely the away messages indicating a person's status (e.g. being away, sleeping, or having meals). Some college students indicated they specifically read their friends' away messages to catch up on the activities of their friends. In other words, the display name is also a place for IM users to show what they are facing or going through in life. I, too have

witnessed friends posting messages in this manner. Some examples might be, “Final countdown. Five days to the finals” or “Summer vacation is coming! It’s exciting.” This use of a person’s “display name” broadcasts his or her feelings to everyone on the buddy list while bypassing one-to-one or group chats. Using the display name feature in IM could have different meanings from using it to show one’s availability, however, there is no research yet on using IM this way.

**Online chat rooms—talking to strangers.** The previous section on IM has clearly shown that IM systems assist teenagers in maintaining preexisting social life (and the dynamic between IM technology feature and its users). When looking into people’s social lives (especially in the era of the Internet), the interpersonal relationship is no longer restrained by face-to-face communication. Online friendships are growing and developing continuously on the Internet through various platforms such as newsgroups, listservs, and online chat rooms. Greenfield and Subrahmanyam (2003) found teenagers were not only developing friendships with strangers within online chat rooms but also creating new codes and new modes of communication to make their conversations with anonymous others more coherent. Bradley (2005) indicates some of her participants do spend energy and time “collect[ing] online friends” (p. 64). Chou and Peng (2007) emphasize making “net-friends” is a part of Taiwanese teenagers’ Internet use. Researchers who focus on the interaction between online gaming players contend that socializing within online gaming is essential as game players more or less confront difficult levels and need help from other players (Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005; Whang & Chang, 2004).

Compared with maintaining offline personal relationships through the Internet, forming online friendships still is not a priority in people’s Internet activity. The Pew Internet & American Life Project (2001) shows that 32 percent of online teenagers make new friends through online chat rooms, whereas 74 percent of them use IM to keep in touch with friends and

family. In Bessière, Kiesler, Kraut, and Boneva's study (2008), merely 20 percent of their sample (1,222 people; 85 percent over 19 years old) use the Internet to meet new people. Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, and Espinoza (2008) suggest college students mostly use social network sites (e.g. MySpace or Facebook) to strengthen offline friendships rather than to meet or form connections with strangers. The majority of participants in Grinter and Palen's study (2002) did not use public chat rooms and felt chatting with strangers was a 'waste of time' because of the extremely poor conversation quality that exists between strangers (p. 24). However, 3 out of the total 16 participants reported talking with strangers in online chat rooms for the purpose of either avoiding boredom or sharing music interests. While Grinter and Palen's participants disliked chatting with strangers online due to the quality of conversation, Jackson, von Eye, et al. (2004) found their participants (117 adults; 67 percent are low-income African-American adults; average age of 38.6 years old) avoided online chat rooms, fearing that online chat rooms were dangerous places where predators lurked.

Although interacting with strangers is marginalized in the whole picture of people's Internet activities, the influence these interactions have on people's social life or well-being remains an essential component to understanding the influence of CMC on people's lives. Empirical studies have reported conflicting findings on the quality of online friendships. While some researchers depict online friendships as weak ties in contrast to the face-to-face relationships considered as strong ties (Chan & Cheng, 2004; J. N., Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2002; Hu, 2009; Kraut, Patterson, et al., 1998; Mesch & Talmud, 2006), some insist online friendships could be as solid as offline relationships as well as beneficial, especially for shy, lonely, socially anxious, and people found on the edge of a social group (Heitner, 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 1998, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop,

2004; Whitlock et al., 2006; Ybarra, Alexander, & Mitchell, 2005). The debate over the pros and cons of online relationships to some extent originates from the prominent characteristic of online communication between strangers – anonymity.

There is a general consensus among researchers that CMC distinguishes itself from face-to-face communication by three characteristics: (1) anonymity that makes a person unidentified; (2) reduced visual and audio cues that turns online communication into pure text based communication and potentially exploits anonymity; and (3) a lack of a whole social environment where by each text message or expression is out of context and is defined by the receivers (Chak & Leung, 2004; Christopherson, 2007; Dietz-Uhler & Bishop-Clark, 2001; Turkle, 1995; Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). For communications between strangers on the Internet, “anonymity” best describes its nature. In their comparison between communication and interaction on the Internet and in real life, McKenna and Bargh (2000) emphasize “People can and [thus are] engaging in very different behaviors on the Internet than they do in the real world” (p. 60) because the Internet is an anonymous environment. Among the numerous things people can experience on the Internet and two of the major issues identified by empirical studies are, “greater self-disclosure” and “identity experimenting” (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Heitner, 2000; McKenna & Bargh, 1998, 2000; McKenna et al., 2002). In the next two sections I discuss “greater self-disclosure” and “identity experimenting.”

***Greater self-disclosure.*** McKenna and Bargh (2000) indicate “On the Internet, where one can be anonymous, where one does not deal in face-to-face interactions, where one is simply responding to other anonymous people, the roles and characters one maintains for family, friends, and associates can be cast aside” (p. 62). In other words, what a person can “talk about” or “act like” on the Internet might be much more revealing than (or to some extent different

from) what he or she discloses in face-to-face communication. Empirical studies show that self-disclosure occurs more often online than offline for most people (Bakardjieva, 2005; Bradley, 2005; Heitner, 2000; McKenna & Bargh, 1998, 2000; Witlock et al., 2006, Yang, 2000). For instance, in their analysis of 3,219 posts from six self-injury (e.g. cutting) discussion boards with the average self-described age of members ranging from 16.4 to 23.9 years, Whitlock et al. (2006) found teenagers or young adults more open to talking about their problems on the Internet. Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes (2004) analyzed a 30-min conversation from a teenager online chat room and found that online chat rooms provide safe places for teenagers to discuss “embarrassing topics” such as sexuality (e.g. premarital sex or abortion) and family problems (e.g. parent-children relationships or domestic violence). In Bradley’s study (2005), one 17-year-old girl indicated that she felt intimidated discussing her sexual orientation in face-to-face communication, however, she found support in chat rooms, where she could talk to others and learn about her sexual identity. McKenna and Bargh (2000) argue:

People have a need to present their true or inner self to the outside world and to have others know them as they know themselves. . . . The Internet makes it much easier for an individual to express these important aspects of identity without the risk of upsetting the balance of their offline relationships. (p. 63)

Before continuing to discuss the feelings of safety a person finds in the Internet environment, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of “inner self” in this quote. The “Inner self” refers to *personal values and character*. It represents, especially in this quote, an individual’s self-concept with emphasis on the roles or personas that the individual thinks he or she possesses, in contrast to what the individual shows to the outside world. Empirical studies, which mostly focus on the benefit of greater self-disclosure emanating from online chat rooms, often explore the nonmainstream chat spaces centering on topics such as self-injury and homosexuality, it is then reasonable to assert that the inner self refers to personal problems that one is reluctant to reveal

to friends and family. Seeing inner self in this way, however, leaves out the spiritual component of human nature that has been advocated by holistic education (see Froebel, 1890; J. P., Miller, 2005; Pestalozzi, 1912). Holistic educators argue inner self is the sacred power that creates human lives and the divine element that resides within human nature. This view emphasizes the spiritual aspect of human life, the interconnection between human beings and Nature. This is distinctively different from the dimension of inner self, the values or character, on which McKenna and Bargh (2000) focus.

In the discussion of the Internet, especially communication between strangers, researchers are inclined to use the term “self” or “inner self” to categorize what an individual is expressing about him or herself to other anonymous people (in my opinion, to emphasize the perception that the Internet enables a person to reveal what he or she hides *inside*). It is essential to remind readers the meanings of inner self vary in research as some might focus on personal attributes and some see it from a spiritual angle.

Going back to the topic of greater self-disclosure on the Internet, McKenna et al. (2002) dub this phenomenon “strangers on a train,” similar to people sharing fairly intimate information with their anonymous seatmates. However, this term focuses only on the content of what is disclosed. Content itself could only represent one element and one dimension that affects or defines a person’s online interaction with other people.

Bakardjieva’s (2005) analysis of how her participants interact with other anonymous people in online chat rooms or newsgroups, indicates that online communication is multidimensional. She argues there is a “public-private-intimate continuum” (ibid., p. 185) in people’s online communication. The degree of openness, privacy, or intimacy is influenced by three components: (a) the forum, or space of gathering; (b) the content of the communication; (c)

the action taken after the communication. The data in this particular research provides an array of *positive* online interactions from pure information exchanges (public) to more interpersonal socializations (intimate). It also shows how a person takes appropriate *actions* to “translate” (ibid., p. 176) his or her online interactions to meet the needs or solve the problems in his or her real life. For example, Sandy, whose main reason for going to online chat rooms is to meet people and have fun talking to them, reveals her troubled marriage and finally regains her self-confidence with encouragement from her online friends. Ellen, a housewife diagnosed with a rare disease, finds an online support group that not only enhances her knowledge of the disease empowering her to deal with her doctor, but also provides sympathy for her difficulties in real life (ibid., pp. 181-183). These two examples not only illustrate people’s need for a safer environment to express their true identities but also reinforce the perception of the real-life consequences of online relationships some researchers discuss.

In reviewing the influences of interaction within marginalized newsgroups (e.g. homosexual, sex bondages, and sex spanking), McKenna and Bargh (1998) conducted a survey with 152 Internet newsgroup users (ages between 18 and 68, with an average age being 37 years). They found the more support that an individual received from his or her newsgroup friends, the more likely the individual would accept his or her sexual orientation and reveal it in real life. Leung’s study (2006) on college students’ ICQ use suggests the more honest and revealing a person is within ICQ conversations, the better online interaction he or she would have and the less likely the person would feel lonely in the real world. These studies show there is a positive and direct effect of the greater online self-disclosure on a person’s offline life. These researchers’ endeavors to examine online communication with strangers from the angle of self-disclosure, are generally uncommon within the empirical studies. Taking Whitlock et al.’s study

(2006) as an example, these researchers found teenagers who were involved in self-injury were more revealing about their problems and also received more social support within online discussion groups. Whitlock et al. expressed concern that online support might lead to the normalization of self-injury in the teenagers, however, did not investigate how the online support would carry into these troubled teenagers' lives.

In general, researchers tend to focus on finding the causality between online friendships and one's well-being (see Gross et al., 2002; Kraut, Patterson, et al., 1998; Kraut, Kiesler, et al., 2002). Although a few of the scholars do explore how online friendships are transferred into the real world (Katz & Aspden, 1997; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Parks & Floyd, 1996), they are inclined to make comparisons between the qualities of online friendships and offline friendships. Since greater self-disclosure is a critical element that attracts people to adopt the Internet to fulfill their needs, how it plays in the real-life consequences of online relationships should be further examined.

***Identity experimenting.*** Role playing or identity experimenting, is not uncommon on the Internet as again the Internet is an anonymous social context (Bradley, 2005; Gross et al., 2004; Turkle, 1995; Young, 1998). Suler (1999) argues that role playing on the Internet fulfills an individual's need for "an altered state of consciousness" (§ 12) in which he or she experiences the reality from different perspectives. Bradley's participants confess lying about their identities online, especially their ages (often they pretend to be older), and feel that "[this] is part of the fun [online]" (2005, p. 64). In Gross et al.'s study (2002), half of their 175 respondents (7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders) reported to pretend to be someone else. An interesting finding in this study is that half of those who pretend to be someone else often do so in the company of a friend. They also indicated how much they enjoy playing pranks on their friends.

Whether role playing is for fun or for one's experimentation, "[t]he Internet provides the opportunity for individuals to engage in greater identity and role construction than is possible in the non-Internet world" (McKenna & Bargh, 2000, p. 62). Sherry Turkle's personal experience and observations while studying MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), are documented in her book—*Life on the screen*. Turkle shows how easy it is for an individual to sample multiple identities on the Internet, especially with the aid of the windows technique. She comments:

The development of windows for computer interfaces was a technical innovation motivated by the desire to get people working more efficiently by cycling through different applications. But in the daily practice of many computer users, windows have [*sic*] become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple, distributed system. The self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings at different times, something that a person experiences when, for example, she wakes up as a lover, makes breakfast as a mother, and drives to work as a lawyer. The life practice of windows is that of a decentered self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time. (Turkle, 1995, p. 14)

Turkle's insight as she explains and comments on how using 'Windows' changes the definition of self, space, and time on the internet and how it assists in multiple role-plays in online chat rooms is useful. In her book, we see how the windows technique is used (or more accurately, misused) on MUDs. There is Doug who is engaged in a variety of roles at the same time in MUDs (see Chapter 1, p. 10). There is also an incident in which a conversation between two MUD players turned into a virtual rape at the end (a role played off-track). Although Turkle indicates and expresses her concern about the negatives occurring on MUDs, she mainly regards MUDs as "laboratories for experimenting with one's identity" (*ibid.*, p. 12). She adopts this virtual phenomenon to strengthen her major purpose in her book that we are living in the age of postmodernism in which "the one can be many and the many can be one" (*ibid.*, p. 17). In other words, she believes that role playing on the Internet is simply a reflection of reality.

Most researchers share Turkle's stand toward "identity experimenting" on the Internet but few researchers raise concerns over its potentially negative consequences. Chou, Condron, and Belland (2005) warn that people might have difficulty in "logging off" from their online personas. Chou and Peng (2007) caution teenagers of the danger of online predators. However, many researchers simply ignore all negative consequences. For example, Bradley (2005) talks about teenagers' moral development on the Internet. However, from a constructivist's perspective, she sees the behaviors of playing different roles as ways for teenagers to understand, learn, and experience morality. She does not seem to recognize the negative impact. Her writing not only justifies the teenagers' intentions, but also romanticizes their pursuit of different roles or identities on the Internet.

Dreyfus (2001) asserts that the identity experimenting on the Internet portrayed by empirical studies as "people . . . develop[ing] new and exciting selves" (p. 82), will lead to the state described long ago by Kierkegaard: "As a result of knowing and being everything possible, one is in contradiction with oneself" (as cited in Dreyfus, 2001, p. 82). Dreyfus' argument against identity experimenting suggests that he sees a human life as a unity, just as holistic educators say when they declare that a child is a whole person needing to be cultivated harmoniously in body, mind and soul. In his viewpoint, "identity experimenting" creates conflict within one's self and brings no "firmness, balance, [or] steadiness" (Kierkegaard, as cited in Dreyfus, 2001, p. 82), which are the needed strands if one wishes to reach a harmonious and solid inner self.

Discussions of identity construction are, unfortunately, at the superficial level, even with Dreyfus' insight. I have found most researchers are in the dark when discussing this topic. They don't see a human life as a unity with various aspects (physical, psychological, spiritual, etc.) as

the strands, interwoven into the whole fabric. Instead, they see a human life as a fragmented entity that is composed of values, character, or intelligence. Identity experimenting in this sense, is merely a way for an individual to express these disconnected aspects inside him or herself, which causes no conflict within the already-fragmented self. In this line of thought, how the practice of identity experimenting would affect the spiritual side of the individual seldom receives attention or interest from researchers.

### **Another Way to Look at Internet Activities**

Greenfield and Yan (2006) imply that the Internet is a new field of inquiry in developmental psychology because it is a new social environment where universal adolescent issues, such as identity, sexuality, and the sense of self-worth are played out (pp. 391-392). In the previous sections in which I review empirical studies on Internet activities (mostly IM systems and chatting in online chat rooms), the substantial importance of online communication in adolescents' social lives is evident and the influences of online communication on adolescents are abundant. Researchers suggest IM systems increase young people's mobility (Grinter & Palen, 2002; Livingstone, 2002). Teenagers are found socializing with their peers, arranging events, and sometimes helping each other with homework over IM without leaving their homes (or while confined at home). There are also researchers reporting that teenagers are finding new friends in online chat rooms. For some teenagers, often categorized as marginalized Internet users, online chat rooms have homey atmospheres and provide them with support they do not always have in the real world.

IMing with friends and chatting with strangers or online friends is not only a part of teenagers' Internet activities but also a part of their everyday lives. The roles these activities play

in adolescents' lives mean more than increasing mobility, maintaining or expanding friendships. Researchers warn online communication may lead to the isolation between adolescents and their families and the loss of study time (Chou & Peng, 2007; Tsai & Lin, 2001, 2003). Specifically, IM systems are seen as a distraction while studying (Fox et al., 2009) and disruptive at workplace (M. L., Cummings, 2004). Online chat rooms are found to be places where harassment is more likely to happen, especially to shy or depressed people (Ybarra, 2004). News reports on sexual predators, scams, and dating frauds connected to online chat rooms are common (Chou & Peng, 2007; MSNBC, n.d).

Whether it is positive or negative, researchers are exploring the role of Internet activities in teenagers' lives. Researching angles in the literature, however, see the Internet as an external entity to teenagers. Research tends to focus on finding patterns in teenagers' Internet use and evidence correlating between teenagers' Internet activities and their social lives and/or psychological development. There are subtle nuances that researchers should explore, such as the transcripts Subrahmanyam et al. (2004) obtained from a teen chat room. In these transcripts, one user, named FoxyR, sent a message, "any body wanna chat with a hot chick press 1234" (p. 662) to everyone in the chat room. Immediately, another user, named DEREKH01, typed "1234" which indicated interest in chatting with FoxyR. Subrahmanyam et al. (2004) concluded new codes of communication were developing within teen chat rooms. In the case between FoxyR and DEREKH01, "1234" is apparently the code that Subrahmanyam et al. referred to. While I share Subrahmanyam's and her colleagues' observation, I feel the message "any body wanna chat with a hot chick," worth investigating. Why did FoxyR describe him or herself as a hot chick? What did chatting with DEREKH01 mean to him or her?

In this study I advocate a different way to look at Internet activities. It is essential to look into how a child presents him or herself within the virtual social context. It is also necessary to understand the essence of online interaction that the child experiences and how it is related to his or her growth. Communications between two (or more people) on the Internet (either IMing or chatting), according to Doug, the participant in Turkle's study (2005), could be in a quick "open-and-close windows format." Does this form of communication strengthen the connection between people, or does it make people feel more isolated because of the transient (and sometimes fake) relationships? Bowers (2000) argues the "deep sense of sacred unity and interdependency . . . is totally absent from culture of cyberspace" (p. 43). Nie (2001) emphasizes "Whatever wonderful things the wired and wireless will bring, a [real] hug is not one of them" (p. 434). In other words, the interactions on the Internet are devoid of the genuine whole person encounters that can truly touch and connect people. When Mander (1991) argues against technology, he begins by relating his own childhood stories where he enjoyed close interpersonal relationships with his family, community, and nature. Mander's sympathy toward the ways people interact and communicate with people and nature is very close to my own mindset. It is the relation between human and human as well as human and nature that holistic education emphasizes that inspired the direction of my study. Would the generation that grows up with computers, the Internet, IM systems, chat rooms, blogs and so on, understand or appreciate a life in which technology is not a dominant force and where the atmosphere around people is more humane with whole-natural-environmental tastes?

Healy (1998) contends that computer technology "stir[s] up old questions of how best to raise and educate our young" (p. 42). In a way, the Internet resembles the environment that holistic education hopes to create—a person enjoys tremendous freedom to express his or her

self and interact with what is around him or her. However, holistic education emphasizes a caring relationship within a whole-natural-environment context. The freedom (or safety) in a holistic education environment comes from the genuine care and love within the interpersonal connections. In a whole-natural-environment, freedom represents the idea of “People know me and care for me. I am competent and I can achieve what I decide to accomplish.” In the context of the Internet freedom means “No one knows me and I am engaging in the fantasies of my mind” (anonymity). The dynamics and meaningfulness of human interaction and human action on the Internet and in face-to-face communications greatly diverge. However, the literature rarely looks into Internet activities from the perspective of authentic human contact. In Chapter 1, I talked about the spirit of holistic education (and Taoism) and how I was inspired by them to express my concern over children’s development as a whole person in the context of the Internet, stressing the importance of analyzing children’s Internet activities from this viewpoint. It is the goal of this study to understand children’s Internet activities (more specifically, IMing) with the spotlight on what a child is going through at heart, how a child appreciates the relationships on the Internet, and what the influence of such interactions on him or her might be.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

In the section of “Educational Philosophy Inspirations” (see Chapter 1, pp. 12-19), I explicitly mentioned four philosophies – Eric Erikson, *Bildung* theory, holistic education, and Taoism – I used to frame this study. It is important to note that I was sensitive to these educational philosophies while conducting this study (in data collection and data analysis). However, this research is not a theory driven study, where a researcher tends to use research data to verify theories. This is a grounded theory oriented dissertation that seeks to find new concepts or theories from the data. To some extent, it will let the research data (the participants) lead the study. Because of the orientation of this study, I adopted a particular grounded theory methodology, the “participant as ally —essentialist portraiture approach” (Witz, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Witz, Goodwin, Hart, & Thomas, 2001).

In this chapter, I first articulate my understanding of this research methodology, the rationale for choosing it for this study, and how I will incorporate it in the research. Then, I present a discussion of the overall research design and procedures.

#### Essentialist Portraiture Approach

The purpose of this study is to obtain an in-depth understanding of a child’s experience in using IM and his or her perception of IMing, as well as the role IMing plays in a child’s life. I aim to capture the essence and nature of the child’s subjective experience, feelings, attitude, and development when IMing is (or was) a part of his or her life. The essentialist portraiture approach is suitable for the needs, goals, and nature of this study. Witz (2006) explains:

[The essentialist portraiture] methodology . . . is especially sensitive to deeper aspects in the individual, such as sources of inspiration and higher aspirations, and to subtler levels in experience and consciousness. [It] doesn’t stop at the phenomenology of subjective

experience but endeavors to understand this experience, with empathy and sympathy as part of the larger unity of the person of whom this experience forms a part, and to communicate this understanding in carefully constructed portraits. (p. 246)

The distinctive nature of the essentialist portraiture approach is clearly the insistence on “seeing” the participant as a “unity,” as a “whole.” A researcher is not just to understand the investigated phenomenon (in this study, a child’s IMing practice, experience or history) but also to explore how the investigated phenomenon ties up with other aspects of the participant’s life (e.g. why a child’s is keen on IMing? How is this tendency related to the child’s family structuring or social life?). Every portrait (the report of the research findings) is interwoven with the researcher’s sympathetic understanding of the investigated phenomenon *in* the participant that is beyond the public stereotypic categories.

To reach the goal of presenting a participant (or participants) in the manner of the essentialist portraiture approach, a researcher has to go through two phases: (a) interviews in the spirit of participant as ally and co-contemplator; and (b) constructing the portrait (Witz, 2007b, pp. 89-90).

**Participant as ally and co-contemplator.** Aesthetically speaking, interviewing is the choreography of how the interviewer and the participant “walk” together on the path of exploring (on a larger scale) the participant’s life. Witz (2007b) maintains that the investigator is constantly in touch with the participant’s feelings and thoughts, where the researcher is “half turned toward” the participant and at the same time he or she is seamlessly leading the direction of the walk “half a step ahead” of the participant (p. 91). To have a walk with a coherent pace and direction, a mutual trust between the researcher and the participant is indispensable. The participant needs to recognize (or even identify with) the researcher’s motivation for doing the research (or initiating the walk) (Witz, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Witz et al., 2001). Witz (2006) points out:

If the participant is to become an ally in the research, the investigator needs to feel that the research topic is important in a large scheme of things and to share with the participant from the very beginning the thrust of the research and the larger societal, disciplinary, or human concerns that motivate it. If the participant recognizes that the investigator is serving a larger cause to which the participant is at least somewhat sympathetic, the participant will feel that he or she can bring in freely whatever feelings, values, and past experience are important to the topic at hand (within limits of course), and cooperation will tend to develop between them in a natural way. (p. 248)

What Witz describes is the way (and essence) of transforming a participant into a researcher's ally. I believe the communication between the researcher and the participant, whether explicitly or implicitly as Witz says in the quote above, to some extent, is between two adults. In this study, where the participants are children, I still want my participants to become my allies and co-contemplators. However, it is certain that I need to develop my own approach to achieve this goal.

My experience in an earlier pilot study taught me that it is important to create a safe atmosphere in which the child sees me as a friend who wants to become familiar with him or her (or wants to be there to listen to him or her) rather than another adult who is there to judge what he or she is doing on the Internet. I let my participants know that I was there to learn from them - that I needed them to "teach" me (e.g. where to find online games; popular words or terms in IMing; functions of IMing; popular TV stars or singers). I also learned that it is critical to create a caring relationship between the participant and the researcher. I often shared my personal experiences (almost every aspect of my life) when doing interviews with my participants. Of course, as a researcher, I am still responsible for guiding the interview and posing questions to the participant. However, within the safe atmosphere and the caring relationship that I built between the participant and myself, the participant had "tremendous freedom to develop the topic in question" (Witz, 2006, p. 249); and I responded to the participant "more deeply and with less distortion" (Witz et al., 2001, p. 223). Months after completing the pilot study, my study

participants and I were still in contact with each other, either through phone calls or IMing. Our conversations sometimes were about their studies, problems with friends or my studies (in their words, “What are you doing in the United States?). It is reasonable to say that my approach (of creating a safe environment and building a caring relationship) bridges the gap between those young children and myself, assisting me to enter the inner worlds of the children and to transform the participants into my allies.

**Constructing the portrait.** The portrait is a literary presentation of the vivid image of the participant that a researcher sees, hears, and feels during the course of interviews, the process of transcribing the interviews, and the journey of composing the portrait. The narrative of this vivid image does not come from the researcher’s imagination. Rather, it is gradually built from the spiritually intimate connection between the participant and the researcher, especially when the researcher is transcribing the interview. The researcher pays attention to things brought up by the participant and the times where the participant is more lively (alive) or more tuned in to the conversation (Witz, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Witz et al., 2001). Witz (2006) emphasizes that:

the alive passages and subjective aspects that one has identified (augmented by distinctive expressions, resonances, etc.) become one’s initial isolated islands of subjective understanding, the initial indications of what the forces and sources in the subjective experience, consciousness, and world of the participant might be like. Next, one tries to get an idea and a feeling of how all this might fit into some kind of larger picture of the participant’s experience. (p. 252)

The natural way to “paint” the participant is through the “alive passages.” The researcher “unpacks” the unity within those passages to give a full picture of how these passages exist in the participant’s internal world. “Unpacking” does not mean putting those identified passages into existing categories. Rather, it means that the researcher has intimate contact with the participant and allows the participant to awaken in him or her the essence of the meaning, so that he or she is able to “bring out the exact quality, shape of the feeling, consciousness [of the participant]”

(Witz, 2007b, p. 94) that speaks in the passages. This process of “unpacking” is by “sympathetic introspection” which is advocated by Cooley (as cited in Witz, 2006, 2007a, 2007b) and adopted by this methodology. Witz (2006) suggests researchers use time diagrams to see the interconnection among passages and identify themes or strands signified by passages. I always plot passages with more revealing meanings on a timeline. During the interview, the timeline is a reference for things that I need to explore. Gradually, the timeline becomes a map with important units and elements that need to be presented in the portrait.

A portrait is usually written chronologically and in the fashion of “excerpts and commentaries.” It contains sections that the researcher organizes and connects with his or her commentaries. A well-structured portrait is more aligned with the spirit and techniques of impressionism, where readers do not need much help from the artist to understand the painting. Portraiture methodology would not be like surrealism art, where the interpretation of the painting relies heavily upon the artist’s individual perspective. A good portrait gives a crisp and tranquil image of the participant and requires very little clarification from the researcher. All readers of a portrait will have a similar reaction to it.

## **Research Design**

**A unique educational culture in Taiwan.** In 1997, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan launched plans for curricular reform called Grade 1-9 Curriculum. After several developmental stages including establishing a special panel, researching, formulating and revising the guiding principles of curriculum design, the Ministry of Education released the 2001 Educational Reform Act and implemented the Grade 1-9 Curriculum Integration in the elementary and junior high schools. A quite noticeable change in this new curriculum, especially in the elementary education level, was that moral education was no longer a subject. It was integrated into what

they call, life curriculum (2-3 learning periods a week), which includes social studies, arts and humanities, and science and technology. However, information technology education, though also a part of 'life curriculum', is in a category by itself, a stand-alone subject in the new curriculum designated to have one learning/training period (40 minutes) per week at grades 3 to 7. Qualitative studies completed in Taiwan suggest that in-service teachers believe moral education to be indispensable in a child's character cultivation and so believe the reduction of learning hours for moral education impedes a child's moral development (Chiang-Hsieh, 2003; Huang, 2006; Ke, 2005). In S. J. Yang's study (2002), where she surveyed 73 directors of student affairs at the elementary schools in Kaohsiung City, determined that 49.3 percent of the directors indicated that moral education is at risk of being deleted when it is not given designated learning periods in the curriculum schedule. With a stronger emphasis on implementation of information technology education, the reduction of moral education is not the only issue that concerns teachers. In the same year the curriculum reform was instituted, the Ministry of Education (2001) released the blueprint of information technology education in elementary and secondary education with its associated slogan – *Ban Ban You Dian Nao* [Every classroom is to be equipped with an Internet ready computer]. The Internet activities are no longer to be a child's after-school activity - the Internet is now to be an integral part of the classroom.

Facing the strong (and almost uncontrollable) force of the Internet, teachers (especially home-room teachers) expressed their concerns over the Internet's negative influence on their classrooms and their students (Chou & Peng, 2007). However, the contact book (or daily log) that assists teachers in communicating with students' parents or guardians daily, provides teachers a medium they can use if necessary against the powerful Internet. Anecdotal data show home-room teachers are inclined to have students write down scripture or scripture-equivalent

quotations in their contact books. The scripture or quotations usually include Still Thoughts (see Appendix E), San Zi Jing [Three-Word Chant] (see Appendix F), and Analects of Confucius that are highly regarded by the Taiwanese general public and academia for enriching a person's inner nature (Ferng, 2001; Ho, 1999; Lau, 2003; B. S. Wang, 2006). Because the contact book is read (and is supposed to be signed) by the students' parents or guardians every day, the scriptures or quotations in the book affect not only the students, but to some extent, the adults, too. Chinese language research literature suggests that scripture-reciting in schools has profoundly influenced promotion of scripture-reciting in families (Lau, 2003; M.C., Lee, 2002). Historically, grass-root scripture-reciting groups in Taiwan (for both adults and children) have been functioning since 1994 (Ko, 2002; Lau, 2003). In 2008, there were 1,220 registered scripture-reciting groups or classes in Taiwan (College of Wha-Shan, 2008), with an average of 50 scripture-reciting classes for each county. Scripture-learning has gradually become one of the after-school activity choices for children, though the choices are still dominated by subject-matter learning, especially English and Mathematics (College of Wha-Shan, 2008; Global Scripture-Reciting Educational Foundation, 2008). Although 67.69 percent of the whole Taiwanese population are Internet users and expose themselves to possible negative influences from the Internet, there are forces advocating more spiritual cultivation and human contact in both education and society. This unique educational culture of Taiwan cannot be ignored in my study. I anticipate learning more about the influence of non-official curriculum (the contact books and the scripture-reciting, etc.) on Taiwanese children, during the interviews.

**Research site.** After conducting my pilot study where I talked with elementary school students in three different schools, I found Tai-Young Elementary School (pseudonym) more ideal than other schools for conducting my dissertation research, especially in terms of recruiting

research participants, because they include Yahoo! Messenger in their fourth grade computer curriculum. Tai-Young Elementary has its own culture, just as all schools have their own unique cultures, so this study's findings might not apply to other schools. Compared with schools in the metropolitan areas, like Taipei City and Kaohsiung City, Tai-Young Elementary presents a "moderate" atmosphere in terms of parent-teacher, student-teacher, and student-computer relationships. In the whole picture of Taiwan's elementary education, Tai-Young Elementary is representative of the average elementary school culture in southern Taiwan.

Tai-Young Elementary School is located in the suburban area of Kaoshiung county in southern Taiwan. Due to the land use re-planning, the area where Tai-Young Elementary is located was transformed from farms to an industry and commerce region in late 1980s. Its newer housing developments, with less expensive homes as well as the proximity to Chen Ching Lake, a fairly famous tourist destination in Taiwan, attracted many residents from near-by districts. In 1992, Tai-Young Elementary was built to handle the rapidly growing population. Different from other schools in this area, where families of students have lived for many generations, the students enrolled in this school are a mixture of the local families and the immigrants from larger cities. The social-economic status of Tai-Young Elementary parents range from lower to middle class.

Tai-Young Elementary School is classified as a medium sized elementary school with 47 regular education classes (currently every grade has 8 classes except the fourth grade which has 7 classes), 1 self-contained special education class, and 1 resource class. The school is known for its English education, local dialect education, and soccer and badminton teams. Like every public elementary school in Taiwan, its curriculum is guided by the Grade 1-9 Curriculum policy. The information technology education curriculum designates one training period (40 minutes) a

week. The curriculum is designed by the head computer teacher at Tai-Young Elementary and is shown in Table 1. During my interviews with my participants, I found the fourth grade computer class covered the topic of Instant Messaging systems. More specifically, computer teachers teach students how to use Yahoo! Messenger (which currently is the most popular Instant Messaging system in Taiwan) including downloading the software, applying for a Yahoo! Messenger account, and using IM. Some of my participants in the fifth grade who didn't have IM experiences prior to fourth grade, indicated that they learned and began using Yahoo! Messenger because of this particular unit on Yahoo! Messenger. This makes Tai-Young Elementary a more ideal site to recruit participants compared with the other schools I visited.

Table 1

*The Curriculum of Information Technology Education in Tai-Young Elementary School*

Grades	Semesters	Knowledge/Skills	Associated Software
3	Fall	Operating System	Windows XP
3	Spring	Graphic Design (Basic)	Print Magic 6
4	Fall	Word Processing	Office 2003 Word
4	Spring	<i>Internet</i>	Internet Explorer
5	Fall	Graphic Design (Advanced)	Photo Impact 11
5	Spring	PowerPoint Presentation	Office 2003 Power Point
6	Fall	Web Site Design	Namo 2006
6	Spring	Data Processing	Office 2003 Excel

**Pilot study.** During my pilot study, I talked with 20 students in third through sixth grades either in small groups or individually. I found the third and fourth graders were less likely to use IMing. In fact, most of them played online games with only a very small percentage of them

having IMing other players. On the other hand, the fifth and sixth graders were using IMing widely with their friends, families or online friends. At the same time, I found fifth and sixth graders were more articulate in sharing their feelings, ideas, perceptions, or things in general than the third and fourth graders. With the purpose of this study in mind, exploring a child's perception, experience, and ideas of IMing, I then believed it would be better for me to recruit participants at the fifth or sixth grades.

### **Original Design and Expansion of the Original Design**

Originally, this study was designed to interview fifth and/or sixth graders with intention of understanding children's perception of IMing, the evolution of IMing in their Internet activities, and the role of IMing in their social lives, either online or offline. I recruited nine fifth graders from a class identified by the pilot study and selected five of the participants as my focal group (more information about the selection and recruitment of participants is provided in the following sections).

After conducting most of the children interviews, in looking at the data, I found myself emailing their homeroom teacher, Teacher Huang. Then unexpectedly, I had a brief conversation with one of the participant's father using Yahoo! Messenger (see Jane's portrait, section "*The Father*" for the details, pp. 107-109). Through the email exchanges with Teacher Huang, I pieced together his thoughts about the character and study habits of the children involved in the study, as well as to what peer groups the children belonged. The conversation with the parent mentioned earlier gave me some insight regarding child-parent relations. I felt there was a strong connection between the children and their parents that heavily influenced the children in almost everything. An assumption, that these children might be reflecting some of their family's nature

and values, started to develop in my mind. I began to contemplate interviewing the parents and the home-room teacher as well.

There is no doubt that I could obtain a certain degree of understanding of the role of IMing in a child's life by merely interviewing the child, but, there were aspects or elements in the child's life that I needed to investigate through these other perspectives to obtain a more authentic understanding. I discussed my preliminary findings and the idea of expanding the research plan with my dissertation director – Dr. Witz. He encouraged me to interview the participants' parents and homeroom teacher to explore my assumption.

Hence, half way through the study, I revised the original research plan. I recruited the parents of the children in my focal group, their homeroom teacher, Teacher Huang, and their computer teacher at the fourth grade, Teacher Lee. It seemed to me that having the voices of parents and teachers would ensure validity in my findings. At the same time, it enlarges the research purpose. I look at these children not only in the class, on the Internet but also how they are with their peer groups and within their families.

### **Selection of participants.**

*Selection criteria of the children.* The first criterion for selecting the student subjects was that the child had to be either a fifth or sixth grader. Additional selection criteria were that the child had used Instant Messaging System with friends or families or the child had experienced IMing in online chat rooms. There was no limit as to how often or how long the child used IMing. As long as a child had used IMing either in Instant Messaging systems or online chat rooms, he or she was qualified to be a research participant for this project. It was important to note that potential participants for this project did not have to use IMing at the time that I

interviewed him or her. I was looking for children with experiences in IMing at any point of time in their lives.

***Selection criteria of the parents and teachers.*** The selection of the parents and teachers was limited to the children identified in my focal group. Only these children's parents, homeroom teacher, and computer teacher were recruited.

**Recruiting participants.** Due to the revision of the research design, there were two sets of participants in this study: (a) Children; (b) Adults: Parents and Teachers. Since the purposes of recruiting them for the study were different, I filed two IRB applications as required (and suggested) by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Illinois. Consequently, different recruiting materials were sent and different recruiting procedures were followed. In this section, I discuss how I recruited these participants including the difficulties I faced in the procedures, and how these two recruitments might affect the research findings.

***Recruiting the children.*** To gain access to Tai-Young Elementary School, I first contacted the principal and explained my research project to him. The principal gave me permission to recruit participants from the school and provided a classroom for me to use for interviewing students. Meanwhile, I contacted my college friend who has worked at this school for 10 years. She assisted in sending out recruitment materials to classes (including parental consent letters and children assent letters). I sent out recruitment materials to three fifth and sixth grade classes. Students' and parents' responses varied. There were merely two students from the sixth grade that indicated interest in being my research subjects. On the other hand, one particular class in the fifth grade appeared more enthusiastic about the study, having the most students wanting to participate. (This was the class in which I conducted my pilot study.) The homeroom teacher of this class, Teacher Huang, was willing to let me interview his students not

only during the noon recess but also during the free-activity classes. Due to the time constraint involved with my data collection, his allowances would greatly help with the whole interview process. I then decided to recruit all my subjects from this class (which to some extent, made the research group homogeneous). I recruited nine participants from this class, some of them having participated in my pilot study. I selected five who were more responsive during the interviews as the focal group for the data analysis.

***Recruiting the parents.*** I sent out recruiting materials (including a letter explaining my study and the need for interviewing parents and the consent letter) to parents of the five children in the focal group through Teacher Huang. Either of the parents could participate in the interviews, in fact, I encouraged both parents to participate in this study. In the beginning, however, I encountered some difficulty recruiting parents. Most of the parents worked and didn't have spare time for me to interview them. Although they were supportive in letting their children participate, they seemed to hesitate in becoming participants themselves. With some persuasion and help from the homeroom teacher and the children, I was able to recruit several parents (at least one parent from each of the five children).

***Recruiting the teachers.*** I sent out consent letters to the homeroom teacher and the computer teacher. The recruiting process of these two teachers went smoothly. Both of them recognized the importance of this study and felt sympathetic with my endeavoring to understand the children.

In Table 2, I have briefly listed the demographic data of the five children in my focal group as well as their parents whom I interviewed. Because the children came from the same class having the same homeroom teacher and computer teacher, I didn't list these two teachers in the table.

Table 2

*Descriptions of the Participants and Their IM Demographics*

Name	Gender	Age	Rank in the family	Parent/s interviewed	Ownership of the computer	Internet service	Years of IMing experience	Online games; Net-Friends
Jack <sup>4</sup>	Male	11	Youngest child; Has one older brother	Mother	Shared with the family	ADSL	3	No
Jane	Female	11	Oldest child; Has one younger brother and one younger sister	Father	Personal own	ADSL	1	Yes
Kevin	Male	11	Oldest child; Has one younger brother	Both parents	Shared with the family	ADSL	1	No
Peggy	Female	11	Youngest child; Has one older sister	Mother	Personal own	ADSL	3	Yes
Wendy	Female	11	The only child	Mother (Divorced)	Shared with the family	ADSL	3	Yes

<sup>4</sup> I used English names to accommodate readers who might not be familiar with Chinese.

## Data Sources

Data sources include in-depth interviews with the children, informal observations of the children in their classrooms, interviews with the parents, and interviews with the homeroom teacher and the computer teacher. In this section, I explain how I conducted the interviews and how the data sources complement each other. I also show how the data sources altogether enrich this study.

**In-depth interviews with the children.** I conducted three to four, one-on-one interview sessions with each participant. Each session lasted around forty minutes, although some were an hour. There were five days between interviews to allow data analysis and follow-up question preparation. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission.

The purpose of this study was to understand a child's perception of IMing and their experiences with IMing, especially in the social and moral context. Although IMing was a practice on computers and the Internet, its role in a child's life (or its influence on a child) predictably, crossed space, time, and human subjects. I wanted to explore not only the child's IMing use but also how IMing connected to other aspects in his or her life. As the research methodology emphasized, the researcher should understand how the subjective experience is related to the participant as a whole. The interview protocol, contained mostly, but not exclusively, the following topics: Family, School, and the Internet.

1. Family: relationships with family members; parents' influence; critical or important memories regarding family; expectation (or pressure) from parents; parents' relationships with each other; parents' careers; siblings' education; parents' arrangement for the child's after-school activities; parents' attitude towards scripture-reciting.
2. School: relationships with classmates and friends; issues related to learning (favorite subjects; disliked subjects); feelings about going to school; feelings about teachers.
3. The Internet: history of using the Internet (including IMing, online games, and other activities); motivation of using IMing; the content or essence of online conversation; time

spent on IMing; ideas and concerns about Internet; parents' attitude towards Internet use; parents' supervision of Internet use; parents' Internet use; siblings' Internet use; computer equipment at home (software and hardware).

**Informal observations of the children.** During the period I conducted interviews with the children, I would discuss interview scheduling daily with the homeroom teacher. To avoid causing inconvenience for teachers and students, we mostly scheduled interviews to coincide with the noon recess. I often went to the school a half hour earlier, during the school's lunch break. During the lunch break, students were required to carry their dishes from the kitchen to their classroom, wait in line to receive their lunch (their peers would take turns distributing food), and then clean the classroom afterwards. During this period, I observed how the children participants interacted with their peers and the homeroom teacher. I also had opportunities to chat informally with them and their peers. Although conversations were very casual, they shed light on my understanding the children (how students in this particular class were in general). These informal chats stimulated ideas and questions for interview protocol. When I was doing the data analysis and writing the portraits of the participants, these informal observations and conversations sometimes inspired my depictions of how the children.

**Interviews with the parents.** I interviewed one or both of the parents of each child, individually. Each interview lasted between forty minutes to an hour. Before interviewing parents, I already had rough images of the participants developed in my mind. I often started the interviews from sharing how I felt about the children and then expanded our conversations to what the children had said about their family life. A lot of the time, parents confirmed my instincts about the children. This seemed to provoke further talk about how they parented their children with almost every one of them reflecting on the way they grew up. The interviews with the parents enriched my preliminary finding of the connection between the children and parents.

I was able to understand the children in the larger picture – family. The idea that children reflect the images of their parents was gradually developed.

**Interviews with the teachers.** I conducted one interview with the homeroom teacher, Teacher Huang, and one interview with the computer teacher, Teacher Lee. The interview with Teacher Huang lasted approximately an hour. It was mostly centered on the five children in the focal group. Teacher Huang shared his impressions of the children with me including their character, their peer groups, and their study habits. When he talked about his students, he always used real incidents illustrating who the children were so that I would have more vivid images of the children.

As a homeroom teacher, Teacher Huang had the most contact not only with the children but also the parents. He communicated with parents through daily family log books, occasional phone calls and sporadic home visits. He made sure parents were aware of how their children were progressing at school sometimes being a bridge between the children and the parents. During our interviews, he also reflected on his observations regarding the various parenting styles and how this related to the development of his students. With his illumination, I obtained a deeper perception of who the children were, and I glimpsed a larger picture of the parents' role in their child's life.

The interview with Teacher Lee was strictly about the computer curriculum. Since he was the designer of the computer curriculum at this school and was the teacher that taught Yahoo! Messenger to my participants during their fourth grade year, I was particularly interested in learning his rationale of teaching Yahoo! Messenger and his plan for this specific topic in the future. Specifically, I was interested in whether he would teach students to use the microphone and web camera to have audio and video communication with other people.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis started from the moment I began transcribing interviews and ended at writing the individual portraits and the cross-case discussion. In the transcribing process, listening to the audio clips helped to refresh my memories of the interviews and to engage myself once again with the participants' expression, emotion as well as the interview questions. I was able to identify the significant events and experiences existing in the participants' recordings. One particular technique that I used was plotting the participant's identified events and experiences on a timeline (Witz, 2006, p. 250). The purpose of using the timeline was twofold. Because transcribing the interviews proceeded simultaneously with conducting the interviews, the timeline was as a reminder of the topics or periods that I needed to explore in the following interviews. As more and more interviews were done and transcribed, I drew diagrams to connect events on the timeline illustrating their connections to one another in reference to tone or spirit, etc. Eventually, themes appeared on the timeline becoming major elements in the participant portraits.

Because the interviews were conducted spontaneously in Taiwanese and Mandarin, I was not only transcribing but also translating the interviews. Language in general can be extremely tricky to interpret, so in order to translate the interviews into English without distortion or confusion, I painstakingly considered the whole of what each participant said before transcribing the recordings.

## **Individual Portraits**

I wrote individual portraits for the selected five participants in my focal group: Jack, Jane, Kevin, Peggy, and Wendy. The approach to fashion the portrait, as I articulated in the

section of “Constructing the Portrait” (see pp. 58-60, above), was dictated by the spirit of the research methodology, seeing the participant as a whole. In other words, the portrait should present the subject in a unified picture that not only shows the investigated phenomenon but more importantly how the investigated phenomenon exists in the subject. Although the studied phenomenon is IMing, my analysis of the participant didn’t merely focus on the IMing. Instead, during the interviews, I dug into the participant’s internal world where the participant had enormous freedom to reflect on his or her IMing use and other things surrounding him or her. The interviews with the parents and the teachers were also critical in painting the children’s images. I was able to see the children in a variety of contexts: family, school, peer groups, and individually. I portrayed how they were in these contexts as a whole making stronger and more unified images to present the essence residing in them.

The goal of these portraits, in my opinion, is to show a picture of what a child looks like when IMing is a part of his or her life. When reading the portraits in Chapter 4, readers will find IMing is certainly an indispensable element that threads through the whole presentation of the child, however, the whole child is still the core of the portrait.

### **Cross-Case Discussion**

The individual portraits of the participants provide the foundation for the cross-case discussion. Witz (2007) suggests that “a cross-case discussion should be discussion in a spirit of ‘now that I have looked deeply at these individual cases, what general issues, phenomena, and perspectives emerge from this with respect to the phenomenon studied?’” (p.90). In writing the cross-case discussion, I looked for essential phenomenon in the individual portraits. There were two aspects in my analysis: IMing use and the nature of the individual participant. I identified

patterns and themes in the children's IMing use and also reviewed the development of IMing in their Internet activities in the context of the school's curriculum design. In addition, I looked into the development of each child and the strong connection between the child's individuality, the family, and the peer groups.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Portraits**

This chapter presents individual portraits of the five participants in this study. Within each portrait, I depict not only the IMing experience of the child but also other aspects (the family, social life, studies, and personal interests) in the child's life. IMing is not an isolated element in a child's life. Rather, it is intertwined (or fused) with the larger image of the child. To really understand the effect of the IMing, one has to see IMing as a part of the larger whole in ways that are not suspected as is the case in most studies on the same topic. The portraits are crafted with this goal (or spirit) in mind. The portraits also have two distinct emphases in their structure. One is directly related to the child's IMing experience. The other is related to the development of the child.

#### **Kevin**

While some of his classmates show signs of puberty – having pimples or acne, growing taller, showing voice changes and wearing longer hair, Kevin retains a boyish appearance. He wears a short high haircut, a pair of glasses with a typical student-look-metal frame and always tucks his shirt in. His child-like voice softens his words. His innocent face doubles the gentleness of his thoughts. The first impression that he gave me was nothing but pure and obedient. Gradually, he radiated his maturity and intelligence that won him compliments and admirations from his peers and teachers. When we grew more familiar with each other, he sometimes surprised me with a touch of sarcasm in our conversation, which is a pretty mature sense of humor rarely found in 11-year-olds. During the course of our interviews, I often found him articulate and sensitive. Observing his interaction with his peers, I always felt he was caring and

sincere. Once, while I was taking a break from interviewing my participants, he came to me and proposed to recruit some of his classmates for me because he felt it was a privilege for him to spend time with me and he believed that his classmates should have the same opportunities he had. His words were simple but his thoughts were genuine.

Kevin was the only child in his family until he was ten, the year his younger brother was born. Before his brother's birth he enjoyed the full attention of his parents and spent most of his free time with his mother. His mother, an art-major college graduate, opened a boutique in her home, which enables her to take care of her family while earning a stable income. Kevin used to stay at the boutique to do his homework after school. His mother always carefully reviewed his assignments and helped him with his study. Occasionally, he helped decorate the shop. His mother was always encouraging and delighted at his interest in art. Although being with his mother at the shop was sometimes disturbed by the customers, it was fun, warm, and a consistent safe place for him.

Kevin's father came from a family that provided no privileges that higher income and education bring. Instead of pursuing a bachelor degree, he joined the workforce immediately after he graduated from the junior college where he majored in architecture. After years of hard work, he owns a small construction company. When I interviewed him, he repeatedly used "independent" to talk about Kevin – "I hope he can be independent" and "I train him to be independent" (Mr. Chen). It is clear to me that his expectation of Kevin and his parenting are close to his own growth. However, in his rational tone of portraying his relationship with Kevin and humble voice of talking about his career, the love he has for Kevin and his family is substantial. His laughs when he talked about the family trips and weekend activities are still vivid to me.

I often feel Kevin's attitudes toward things are greatly related to his strong tie with his family, especially his mother. When we talked about his use of Instant Messaging with his friends, he indicated "I never talk about my personal stuff when IMing my friends" (2-6). I thought his family rather than his friends was the major outlet of his feelings. However, at one point he also said "Memories fade with time whether they are good or bad" (3-3). This remark is a constant reminder to me that there are deeper sides to this young boy. By looking into his relation with technology – IMing - and his attitude toward family, friends, and learning in general, a picture of his way of thinking and being is woven through the following topics: *A Period of Changes*; *A Period of Changes: A New Role at Home*; *A Period of Changes: New School, New Me*; *Yahoo! Messenger*; *Knowledge Source*; *Memories Fade With Time*.

**A period of changes.** A new color, a new object or a new subject whether it is a red flower, a green tree, a blue sky, a grey cloud or a yellow bike change the dynamics, the depth, the meaning of a painting even with all other subjects or objects remaining at their spots. A drop of new paint dripped to the canvas on which Kevin was painting his life (during our interview) – "my brother is very 'sticky'" (1-25). From that moment on it was not possible for us to continue without occasionally having a glimpse (or a gaze) at that particular drop of paint (Kevin's brother) as it began to spray on the canvas.

Kevin's brother was born in the year he turned 10. It was the year that his family moved from the city to the suburb where they could afford a newer and bigger house. It was also the year when he transferred to *Tai-Young* Elementary School. His family portrait had been sitting calm and motionless for a decade until this new drop of paint appeared. His school life was like one unpleasant film after another playing in his life until he entered the new school. Changes began to surface in his life both at home and at school. The story starts from where his heart is.

**A period of changes: A new role at home.** In March 2006, Kevin's brother was born. A couple of months later his mother closed the boutique and became a full-time homemaker to take care of his brother. "*Di Di*<sup>5</sup> was a lot of work. I used to have my own business selling clothes. Then, I closed my shop to take care of *Di Di*" (Mrs. Chen). His father purchased a house to provide a bigger space to accommodate the family needs. In June 2006, his family moved to the new house.

*Di Di* was never a term used in Kevin's family until his younger brother was born. After the term was added to his family vocabulary, he received a new title *Ge Ge*. When his parents began to make changes in their lives because of the new-born baby, he started to understand the meaning of *Ge Ge* in an indubitable way.

For Kevin, going home had always meant going to his mother's boutique, finishing his homework, sharing what happened at school with his mother, helping out at the shop and watching his mother deal with the customers. Summer vacations had always been full of activity, fun and hanging out with his mother. The summer vacation of 2006 was the first one that he spent with his brother. As for the idea of going home, it started to include hearing the baby cry and being helpful with the baby in addition to doing his homework. Hanging out with his mother seemed to become scarce in the family's schedule. By the time I interviewed him, he had been in this new family life for more than a year. The little baby was able to walk, although unsteadily. He was getting used to his brother mumbling *Ge Ge*. Every morning his mother accompanied by the little boy said goodbye to him before he left for school. Occasionally he received a sweet and quick peck on the cheek from his brother. When he reached home, he knew his mother and his litter brother would be waiting for him. He became a playmate and a part-time baby sitter for his

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<sup>5</sup> *Di Di* means "younger brother" in mandarin. In contrast to *Di Di*, *Ge Ge* means "older brother."

brother. I once asked how he liked the role of being a brother. He smiled and uttered – “I like my brother” (2-5). In his expression, the gentle touch of his mother kept in the recesses of his heart seemed to emerge. This was not, however, the response to his brother he had in the very beginning.

[1] Kevin was not happy in the beginning because he felt he was ignored. He would say “Father and mother don’t love me or don’t care about me anymore.” I always explained to him that the baby was so little that he needed more care and attention from us. And when he was a little baby we took care of him in the same way. (Mr. Chen)

Although there was ten month preparation for the new situation, whether it was excitement or anxiety, the reality just began to sink in when the baby was born. Kevin’s response to the situation initially was discomfort but he soon changed. As his brother began to know the world, he started to develop a new role. “My brother and I shared a bedroom. I sometime make milk for him at night” (2-5). His father “taught him to do the dishes, help around the house, and take care of his younger brother. I told him that he had to take care of himself and his brother because his mother and I were busy” (Mr. Chen). It didn’t take long for Kevin to adjust to his brotherhood. Still, the evolution of this brotherhood did not provide the companionship that his mother used to give him (and he used to cling to). “Kevin is like a baby sitter for his brother. They are not like buddies because the age difference between them is too big” (Mr. Chen). There are times in which his brother is a reminder of the loss of his close relation with his mother rather than the gain of his brotherhood.

[2] Wanju: Do you share your feelings with your parents?

Kevin: I sometimes do. Only with my mother though. [Why?] People say that we were in mothers’ tummy for ten months before we were born. So, we are closer with mothers.

Wanju: Does your mother work?

Kevin: No, she does not now. But, she worked before. Since my brother was born, we spend less time together. My brother likes to stick to my mother. He is so sticky.

They stick to each other all the time. *Ru Jiao Si Qi* [They stick together like the glue].

Oh, no. I use the proverb in a wrong way. It is to describe the relationships between husbands and wives. (Laugh) (1-25)

There may have been a touch of pain, sorrow or loss in Kevin's description in [2] of his relation with his mother. The laugh seemed to dissolve some of these feelings, but his tone could not hide them nor did his facial expression. The sweet memory of the time he shared with his mother appeared in the laugh on *Ru Jiao Si Qi*, quickly fading away as he realized life was different now. Rarely did he spend time alone with his mother. He could only enjoy his mother's company on their way to the scripture-reading classes on Monday evenings. He, as his father expected, became more independent and more helpful in taking care of his brother and himself, although he sometimes experienced emotional battles within himself. Changes in his life after his brother was born did not only happen at home. After his first summer vacation with his brother, he started his school life in a new school.

**A period of changes: New school; new me.** Before Kevin transferred to *Tai-Young* Elementary School, he reported that he was suffering in a class in which the homeroom teacher was too old to teach and too absorbed in his interests to care for his students. His classmates were too aggressive and made him feel unsafe in expressing himself.

[3] Kevin: My third grade teacher was sixty five years old already when he taught me. He was so old that the school principle even asked him to retire. Once he drove two hours to buy two pots of Christmas flowers and left us in class without any supervision. My classmates cursed, yelled, fought and hit each other. I covered my ears and sat quietly at my desk. I was one of the few students who tried to stay away from those behaviors to fight for our survival in that class. The class was the worst one in the third grade. It was a *battle field*. My classmates were *bombing* each other with abusive words all the time. (1-30)

With the words 'battle field' and 'bombing', the daunting and intimidating environment in which Kevin was situated can not be clearer. He, in the vivid image that he portrayed, was withdrawn, was hiding and to some extent was oppressed. However, there seemed to be a force assisting him in facing the rough situation. "My mother told me not to fight back even when my classmates hit me" (4-7). The intimate picture of him and his mother talking to each other at the boutique came

to my mind. The air smelled warm and sweet, and seemed to fill with the comfort and encouragement from his mother. In the midst of the battle, fighting to preserve his pure nature, I saw him stand strong rather than compromise himself, to stand alone within the majority of his class.

In a much relieved tone, Kevin went on in [3] to talk about his fourth grade teacher in the new school. “My fourth grade teacher was very strict. But, you know, some of his former students got into Kaohsiung Senior High School [the best senior high school in Kaohsiung city] and they left messages on his web site to thank him for his guidance” (1-31). The new environment apparently carried a different image – a younger teacher and a better structured class. At first he didn’t see these advantages. “The first time I went to the class [in the new school] was on the returning-to-school day<sup>6</sup> during the summer vacation. My classmates were playing together but no one talked to me. (in a sad and low tone) I felt very lonely. I just looked around the classroom and sat at my desk” (4-1). What came to his eyes were the posters on the walls, the announcements on the blackboard, and some strange eyes around him. The benefits of this class on the returning-to-school day did not reach him. Before he loaded his backpack with the new textbooks for the new semester, his mind and heart were already loaded with a question: ‘How can I become friends with my classmates?’ Nevertheless, he was not intimidated by this question. He recalled how he felt after he went to the new school and met the new class, “I wanted to change” (4-7) said Kevin in a stern and determined voice. Looking back at his third grade, he knew he was given a second chance to have a better school life (and to have better relations with his peers). A force of change started to penetrate in his heart.

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<sup>6</sup> In Taiwan, elementary school students are required to return to schools for a half day during the summer vacation. The day is called returning-to-school day and is often scheduled in the middle of the summer vacation. Teachers usually distribute textbooks or check students’ summer vacation assignments.

When the new semester started a month later with the returning-to-school day, he began to build friendships with his classmates. “There were five new students including me in that class. I talked to them in the very beginning since we didn’t know anyone in that class. Then, I started to talk to other classmates. When I had questions about the homework or the studies, I would ask them” (4-1). However, he did more than chatting and asking questions.

[4] Kevin: I got that notebook in the beginning of the fourth grade. Most of our classmates subscribed to the daily delivery service of goat-milk-in-carton. The vendor gave each of us a notebook as a gift. You need a code to unlock the notebook. Some of my classmates used their notebooks as sketch books. They drew on their notebooks. After they were done using the notebooks, they threw them away. I felt it was wasteful to use the notebook in that way. I shared my notebook with my classmates. I suggested they write in [my] notebook. They wrote whatever they wanted. Some of them wrote their secrets or gossip about our classmates in it such as someone likes or dislikes someone. (4-2)

In fact, some of Kevin’s classmates “even drew voodoo dolls in that notebook to get his or her revenge on other people. They felt better afterwards. My classmates always said the notebook was our class treasure because it held so many secrets about our class” (2-6).

In [4], Kevin is open, he is reaching out and he is changing. The more inward and withdrawn image of him that he showed in the third grade (in the old school) seemed to change. He was more open in the fourth grade. When asked why he shared his notebook rather than used it in the way as his classmates did, he responded “it would enhance my relationship with my classmates” (4-4). Indeed, he wanted a school life that had no bullets of abusive words and no battles among his peers. At first I thought he was just keen on making his wish come true, but this was not the main aspect. There is in [4] a certain sincerity. “My classmates wrote so many things in that notebook. I didn’t know what to do with the notebook. Finally, I tore those pages filled with their secrets and I used duct tape to seal the notebook before I threw it to a dumpster. I could not let anyone read those secrets” (4-3). In the way he reached out to his classmates, he

acted in his own inner truth. I saw in that reaching out the maturity and the delicacy that he showed when he was with his brother and when he took care of him.

From the city to the suburb, the space that surrounded Kevin expanded not only physically but also psychologically. He was no longer the oppressed child who needed to fight for his survival. Like a seedling, he unfolded to allow the world see him. He was blossoming (budding). And the strength inside him made his colors brighter and more vibrant.

**Yahoo! Messenger.** After one semester of being with his classmates, the tag of transferred-student that Kevin was carrying in the first semester gradually dissolved. He blended in with his classmates and became close friends with some of them. His school life was peaceful and pleasant. Even so, after one computer class, his social life began to change in ways he had no idea it could. In that particular class, an unexpected medium (Yahoo! Messenger) and a new way of communication (IMing) appeared in Kevin's life.

[5] Wanju: Do you think IMing enhances your friendship?

Kevin: Yeah, I think so. I think I became closer with my classmates. I transferred to this school when I was in the fourth grade. I didn't know anyone and had no friends in the very beginning. I started to talk with some of my classmates in the school and I also chatted with them on Yahoo! Messenger after school. I began to know them better and we became good friends after a while. (2-12)

Yahoo! Messenger apparently gave Kevin more time and opportunity to interact with his classmates. He added both his close classroom friends and his acquaintances to his Yahoo! Messenger buddy list. As he enhanced his friendship with his close friends, he also crossed the barrier between himself and those with whom he was not so familiar through IMing (4-6). [5] sounds like he never thought that one computer class could change the landscape of his social life. His computer teacher would never know that he provided Kevin a new way to get in touch with his classmates. IMing then became one of Kevin's activities on the Internet in addition to searching for information and emailing (1-10 & 2-5). His father thinks "children have very little

discipline for computers, gaming and the Internet so I have some computer rules for Kevin” (Mr. Chen). Kevin was only allowed to use computer on weekends after he finished his homework, His time on the Internet was limited. Once in a while he logged in to his Yahoo! Messenger account to chat with his classmates.

- [6] Wanju: What do you chat about with your friends on Yahoo! Messenger?  
Kevin: Daily stuff. . . . We talk about what happened in the school. You know, gossiping. (laugh)  
Wanju: How about your stuff?  
Kevin: No, I never talk about my personal things when IMing my friends. I keep those things to myself. I merely talk about other people.  
Wanju: Whom do you and your friends talk about?  
Kevin: Those cool or bright kids in our class. As for those quiet or average kids, I rarely talk about them. There is nothing special about them.  
*[Kevin changed the subject. He began to talk about the secret notebook he had when he was in the fourth grade which I quoted in [4], see p. 8].*  
Wanju: So, the notebook is a place for your classmates to release their feelings.  
Kevin: Yeah. It feels so good afterwards. (laugh)  
Wanju: Do you feel Yahoo! Messenger is like the notebook that provides you a space to release your feeling or talk about secrets?  
Kevin: I feel as if I have kept those things inside me for too long and I need to release them. I will explode if I don't. However, I don't talk about secrets of the person whom I chat with on Yahoo! Messenger. The person will feel weird or awkward when we meet at the school if I talk things about him or her. I also don't talk about my personal stuff. (2-6)

[6] indicates there is a desire to gossip and a need of releasing one's feelings or emotions among Kevin and his classmates. Yahoo! Messenger and the notebook apparently provide venues to fulfill these needs.

Beyond the temptation of gossiping was served by Yahoo! Messenger, I saw a line between Kevin and the outside world as he kept brushing it over and over by saying that he didn't share his personal feelings or emotions with other people. IMing apparently was not the outlet for his emotions. In fact, in terms of time his involvement in IMing was much less compared with his classmates. “I don't set a date or time to chat with my classmates. If my

classmates have time to chat when I am online, then I chat with them” (1-8). The emotional and personal aspects of it also seemed to paint a similar picture.

[7] Wanju: Some of my friends and relatives usually use the space of display name on Yahoo! Messenger to express their feelings such as “Freshman orientation! Yay!” Do you do this?

Kevin: (quick response, in a defensive tone) No, I don’t. It is very personal. I don’t let other people know my feelings. I don’t feel comfortable sharing my feelings with my friends. If they push me for that then I would feel even more uncomfortable. (1-15)

In Kevin’s quick response and tone, I envisioned him erecting a wall around himself. At first glance, this wall made him look vigilant and wary. It reminded me of the time when we talked about Internet safety. He is always on the alert for computer viruses, net-friends, online predators and schemes. “I don’t play online games. It is so easy to get viruses” (1-21). “Yahoo! sends out junk mail to urge people to buy this and that. I simply ignore those messages” (1-9).

However, a stronger message was coming out from behind his wall. It sounded like the voice of Kevin’s father saying “independence.” Kevin appears not to rely on the externals. IMing with his friends apparently was not his searching for comfort. It was just a way of getting to know his peers. “I was not familiar with some of my classmates. However, I came to know them better after chatting with them on Yahoo! Messenger” (4-6).

Kevin’s social life was being woven expanding his social connections in the computer class. His thoughtfulness led him into his classmates’ worlds. His talent earned him recognition. In the second semester, he was elected to be the art officer by his classmates. “My classmates always praised my paintings. They often said I was good at drawing” (4-8). His status in the class was apparently getting higher. His new school life was no longer carrying the unpleasant images he used to face in his former school.

**Knowledge source.** When Kevin was in the fifth grade (which was a new start because of the school system) facing the new class, he was as courageous as he was when he came to the

school for the first time a year earlier. “When my classmates were passing notes around, I wrote short stories on those notes. I created conversations between two people. For example: A: How are you? B: I am fine. [and the story went on]. I also made up stories about my classmates and showed those stories to them” (4-5). He did not wait for his classmates to discover him, rather, he put himself on the stage for them to see him.

[8] Wanju: Your classmates told me that you are very knowledgeable. It seems to me that they think highly of you.

Kevin: (laugh) Well, what I know is just common sense.

Wanju: Is that right? They told me that you had a nickname: bookworm? How do you like it?

Kevin: It is not bad actually. [in a confident tone] In fact, it is better than “sweet potato” or “lemon” [sweet potato, lemon, and the following, pig and raccoon are nicknames that Kevin made up]. I think “bookworm” is better than those nicknames. It is not like “pig” or “raccoon.” (suddenly pained) Ahh. Besides, I don’t use my knowledge well. So, I am just a bookworm. The things that I know are common sense. And everyone is supposed to know those things. Knowledge is something that a person doesn’t have to know. However, we should know all common sense. For example: Water can extinguish fire. This is common sense not knowledge. If a person doesn’t know common sense then this person might be retarded. (3-1)

[8] shows both sides of him. On the one hand, he was critical or even a touch of disappointed with his disability. At the same time, he was confident in his abilities and actions. He was not afraid to sound his voice. He was not scared of showing his talent and intelligence. He was always the first choice when there was a group competition in class. He was spotted to perform in a play by his art teacher. With all of these recognitions and in the face of people’s compliments, he remained sensible. He was aware of his abilities. He told me that he was not good at mathematics and music, but, he did pretty well in social science and in Chinese literacy. He understood what he could offer to the class and what his peers expected from him. He was never too stingy to provide help. He was never too vain to take on tasks beyond his reach. To some extent, his image seemed to be as static as his nickname “bookworm” suggested. However, once in a while, the nutty fairy inside him would come out to add some funny colors to his

images. “Kevin is very good at Chinese literacy. When I ask him to share some Chinese idioms with the class, he likes to give some difficult ones which intimidate the class. He seems to have a blast seeing his classmates groan and moan” (Teacher Huang).

It was more than a year after Kevin came to the new school (and his brother was born) when I interviewed him. On his choppy and innocent face and in his still child-like voice, I felt there was buried an incredible amount of strength and determination. What I saw in him and heard from him was cohesive with what he said when he faced the new school and the new class, “I wanted to change” (4-7). He had been through many difficulties and (more importantly) had managed to conquer them in a short period of time. Although there were changes that he sorrowed over and responsibilities that he wished to avoid, his world broadened and became more colorful. In school, he had good relationships with his classmates and was able to express himself more freely. At home, he understood his role as an older brother and was able to show his love for his brother.

**Memories fade with time.** Changes in Kevin’s life did not just bring a better school life or a brotherhood. There seemed to be a bigger change inside him. I did not realize this until I reflected on my observations of him (interacting with his classmates) and took a closer look at the way that he depicted himself in our interviews. Even though his kindness and caring towards other people was splendid and genuine, I sometimes felt there was a distance between him and the outside world. Rarely did I find him vulnerable or searching for support from other people. I wondered what force was assisting him.

[9] Wanju: How do you feel if you are not allowed to use the computer?

Kevin: It is fine. There must be a reason why I cannot use the computer. I will gradually detach myself from the desire of wanting to use the computer. Sometimes, my dad needs to use the computer. So, I cannot use it. I have to get used to this situation. Otherwise, I would always want to use the computer. . . .

Wanju: You don’t get upset easily, do you?

Kevin: No, I don't. I feel upset only when there are things *really* upsetting me. For example: my brother threw my books to the floor and tore my workbooks. I felt so angry that I wanted to hit him. But, I couldn't because my mother would scold me. So, I let it go. *Memories fade with time*. Those things are like sand. What you need to do is to wash them away. (in a very light tone and hand gesture) They won't bother you afterwards. Besides, there is really nothing that I need to worry or might feel upset about. I am not at the age of adolescence. I am not like junior high school students. They worry about relationships with boyfriends or girlfriends all the time. (1-24)

If it weren't for his baby face and soft voice, I would have mistaken Kevin for a much older man. He sounds rational and even stoic. I feel like there is a calm self permeating [9]. Although "memories fade with time" appeared several times in our interviews and he sometimes used it in light-hearted ways, the tranquility I sensed in him might come from a mystical and powerful force at his heart. His diary was a thread running through my search.

[10] Wanju: Do you keep a diary?

Kevin: Not really. I keep my diary on and off. . . . When I felt extremely bad, I wrote down those bad feelings in my diary. However, I ripped off those pages so that my diary looks neat and clean [Why?] I wrote those things long time ago. When I opened my diary, I said to myself "Wow, I wrote this in June." It is impossible for me to remember what happened after the day I wrote those things. Besides, I don't want to be bothered by those things. (3-2)

Kevin's neat and clean diary with signs of pages being ripped out is an echo of his message – "memories fade with time."

At the end of Kevin's story, I went back to where he and I began. We started our conversations on Yahoo! Messenger, stopped by his rough third grade, went through his fourth grade experiencing the biggest changes in his life, and finally came to his current stage observing his maturity and independence. Through our interviews, his tone towards Yahoo! Messenger was as flat as when he was describing his music classes (however, with no agony). IMing was not an outlet for emoting or letting off steam. Keeping a diary seemed to be mechanical. Memories fade with time, he said. Happiness, sorrow, bitterness come to him but does not stay. Like tree leaves

fall, branches move when wind blows, flowers bloom when it is warm, he always responds in a state of harmony with whatever situation he is dealing with. This is the biggest strength assisting him in facing all the ups and downs in his life.

## **Jack**

Like a white knight in fairy tales, Jack is cute, charming, and smart. When he speaks, his voice sounds tender with a mature, grown-man like tone. When he is in the sports field, his quick movements and tall and fit build always puts him in the spotlight. During his English class, his fluent English often causes his classmates to gaze at him with admiration. To add a romantic touch to his charisma, he received a surprise gift from his secret admirer on his birthday. His appearance and achievements make him stand out in crowd. Even so, his charm is beyond what people see on the surface. He is articulate. His responses to my questions were often in a rational tone and were well-structured. He is critical. He often sees things from an angle that carries more weight or seriousness than his peers (although it sometimes makes him appear to be argumentative or even arrogant). Occasionally, I heard his peers say “It is hard to win an argument with Jack. His comments make it so difficult to respond.” He was the only child that asked why I was interested in doing this research. After I answered, “Well, I am interested in children and the Internet” and quickly changed the subject, he immediately said, “Wait, you haven’t answered my question yet” (1-27). He is a tenacious kid who would not let his question go unanswered. There are also times that he appears to be emotional or soft. His blog, where he talks about his feelings, leads people to this sensitive side of him. His hands that stir fry vegetables, make soups for the family dinner and massage his mother’s exhaustion and tension

away, reveal the tenderness hidden beneath his often-strong image. In some way, he appears to be perfect.

Jack is the youngest child in a family of four. His father is a successful businessman in the restaurant industry. His mother is a busy accountant. His brother, two years older than Jack, does well in studies and sports and is always being praised as an outstanding student. When Jack talked about his family, he often used words such as “great” or “cool.” “My father is so great. He is really good at mathematics. Whenever I have questions in mathematics, he always solves my questions in a flash and shows me how to do them” (3-15). “My mother cycles to work. We are stunned because it is really far. But, she does it every day. It is amazing” (3-16). “Do you know how good my brother’s English is? He can surpass his classmates on exams easily simply by his English. How cool!” (3-13). Jack’s wider and sweeter smiles and the excited, high tones in his voice gave away his feelings of pride in his family as he shared his family’s greatness with me. He seemed to say how critical and essential his family was to him in most of his mentionings of family members.

Jack’s parents provide their children an environment that is rich in love and support. When Jack showed interests in basketball, his father was the one teaching him the skills and practicing with him. When there are events at the school, his parents attend even in the midst of their busy schedules. Their home always has a cozy and intimate atmosphere flowing. “Once in a while, I say to Jack, ‘my shoulder is sour or something.’ He then massages my shoulder. We get to talk to each other. I really like this kind of feeling and enjoy interacting with my kids this way” (Mrs. Liu). His brother, who sometimes appeared in our interviews, shares similar interests with Jack. They both write personal blogs, use Yahoo! Messenger and love playing basketball.

When I asked if he was going to drink the beverage I prepared for him, he answered “I wanted to save it for my brother” (1-5). The bond between the two brothers is evident and appreciable.

The close connection Jack has with his family as well as the attention, care, guidance or even the pressure that he receives from family members are all over our interviews. In his way of being, whether it is on the Internet or in the real world, footprints of his family are easy to find. It is inevitable that I begin his story with the unique spirit found in his family, “Try and Learn” and “Being Creative.” These two sections are followed by “Comfort and Frustration on Yahoo! Messenger” and “Strong Feelings and Rules,” when the story is geared to his IMing experience. Finally, the portrait concludes with three images that Jack exhibited, not only on the Internet but also in the real world “Pride, Pressure and Dreams.”

**Try and learn.** The first English word that I heard Jack say was “try.” It was when I asked him why he had a blog. “I read some people’s blogs. I found those blogs quite interesting. So, I *try*” (1-19). “Warned” by his classmates that he could converse in English, I was not surprised to hear him say *try* in English rather than in Mandarin. I found many children following the trend of the Internet, using Yahoo! Messenger, writing a blog, making online friends and so on, but very few would categorize the activity as “trying.” I never thought “try” could be the major aspect in his life. It was not until I talked to his mother that I began to understand this word from another perspective.

[1] Mrs. Liu (Jack’s mother): I think it is unnecessary to talk to children in a way as if they are just children. When I talk to my children, I don’t talk to them as if they don’t know anything. You know, when my first son was only one year old, he went to Hong Kong with me and people were so surprised that he could use a spoon on his own. Although he kind of made a mess, it was really good for him to be able to eat on his own. I always believe that if my children could be more independent then my job as a parent would be much easier. It all depends when you want to train the kid. If you teach the kid earlier then he or she learns/knows how to do things earlier. When the kid is curious about things, you should teach him. If you miss the opportunity then it would be more difficult for you to teach him or her in the future. Our [Jack’s parents]

attitude is that as long as they want to learn we will teach them. We are quite patient. They probably won't do the thing perfectly. They probably would make a mess or something. I think it is just the process.

[1] says much about the parenting in Jack's family and to some extent it tells of a wish that a mother wants to see her children become independent. Jack seems to be quite independent in taking care of himself and sometimes his family. "Recently, my leg were injured. My mother dropped me off at the hospital. I went through all the tests, X-ray and CAT scan, by myself" (3-16). "Jack is now quite good at cooking (laughing & proud). He takes over the cooking whenever I need a break" (Mrs. Liu). Going back to [1], in Jack's mother's soft voice, I feel there is a strong belief in Jack (and his brother) on the part of his mother and an enormous trust building between them. His father's voice on nurturing a child's independence, too, was loud and strong. "My father rarely scolds me for not doing well in studies. He scolds me when I make mistakes. For example, when I forget to bring my homework to school, he blames me for being irresponsible" (3-20). The freedom, support, encouragement or the timely correction from his parents seem to cultivate the image of being independent and accountable in him while he enjoys a bigger space to understand himself and explore the world.

[2] Jack: We (Jack and his brother) are quite free. I joined the school band, the flute team and the track-and-field team. They (his parents) never stop us from doing something that we enjoy. My father is very supportive, especially when I wanted to join the track-and-field team. A lot of people think what we need to take care of is the studying, but my parents never think this way. They let us try everything. They always say "Learn more." (3-32)

This resonates with and amplifies [1]. The impression was that there was a unique spirit threading through this family – the spirit of freedom to expand a child's world in the direction of developing more confidence and competency. This spirit was pervasive in the parents' words and their discipline for the children. It is also found in the child. "Learn more", Jack did. Instead of staying in his comfort zone (playing basketball or other physical activities), he reached out. He

joined the weekly journal team in his class to polish up his writing. He sometimes read *Wu-Xia* novels [Chinese martial literary] to enhance his Chinese literacy and his knowledge of history. Opening his photo albums, one can find him playing drum in the school band, sprinting on the track, frowning at the camera when discussing the newspaper with his teammates. His footprints in many fields were deep and easy to recognize.

[3] [Dialect continuation of [2]]

Wanju: I truly feel your parents are very supportive and open-minded.

Jack (quickly:) My father grew up this way. He began to make money when he was in the high school. He paid his tuition fees and other expenses. He was on many sports teams, basketball, volleyball, table tennis and dodge ball. He also did very well in his studies. He was always in the top ten students at his school. When he failed to obtain admission at National Taiwan University (the best university in Taiwan), he decided not to go to college. Instead, he joined the workforce immediately. (3-33)

To some extent, I feel Jack is continuing his father's legacy – being independent in pursuing his education and career. So, “try” came to his mind when the learning opportunity appeared. He learned to enrich his world and extended his reach to the unknown possibilities.

**Being creative.** During the period which I conducted interviews with my participants, I found a consistent comment on Jack from his peers – he is very knowledgeable. He seemed to be an encyclopedia to them. Although one could sense Jack, to some extent, intimidated his peers, I felt he gained a certain degree of respect from them. When I talked to him, he sometimes surprised me with things that I was totally unaware of. “My brother and I really like ‘streetball<sup>7</sup>’” (4-15). When I told him I recently received several offline messages on Yahoo! Messenger from people who were not on my buddy list, he quickly responded “Oh! I know why you got those offline messages” (1-8). He was full of surprises. His world seemed pretty broad.

[4] Jack: I don't like to hang out with people who always follow certain rules or do things according to strict schedules. It is not creative. I like to *Gao Guai* [doing something

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<sup>7</sup> Streetball (or "Half-Court") is an urban form of basketball. Usually only one side of the court is used, but otherwise the rules of the game are very similar to those of professional basketball.

as a spoof or parody]. One of my classmates cut his eraser into half and carved one half of it into a personal stamp. No one has ever thought about doing something like this. This is what I want to be. Being creative. (4-16)

Later in our interview Jack gave an example of what he thought was *Gao Guai*. “I always wanted to try bungee jumping” (4-18). It may not sound creative. Nevertheless, it indicated he was inclined to do things that would surprise people in a positive way. Underneath his serious and stern expression it seemed, was hiding a soul that refused to be confined in a box. For example, although his wardrobe was mostly plain black, white and red, there were unique designs with interesting graphs – some were scary and some were funny. His images were as dynamic as his wardrobe.

I thought about my first interview with Jack. We were talking about online games and he started to sound a bit negative.

[5] Wanju: Do you play online games?

Jack: hmm. Not really. I cannot say I have never played online games. I did. But, I don't think online games are fun. There is nothing special about those games. . . . Most of them are very violent. It is all about (raising his tone) killing the beasts, advancing to another level, and making money [in the game]. It is boring. (looking up out of the window; staring at the big wide sport field) I like to play [real] volleyball. It is my major recreation. Well, I also like to watch TV but I rarely do it now. I watch Discovery channel, some TV shows on “DIY” [do-it-yourself] or something about creativity. (1-21)

At that particular moment when Jack sat staring at the sport field, I felt he was impatient with the games that most of his peers were fond of. His expression said ‘dismay’, ‘dislike’ or even ‘annoyance’. He seemed to say that the street activities were more real and more creative. I guess the free spirit within him avoided confined spaces where imagination was unnecessary and things were more or less predictable. No wonder when we talked about online games he sounded negative.

When Jack talked about computers, his attitude appeared to be a bit more excited but was not far from how he felt about online games. “The computer is for chatting and music. It’s all. Sometimes I just stare at the screen doing nothing on the computer but thinking of things” (4-1). However, he gave his twist in the way of he used the device. When he used Yahoo! Messenger, he IMed, listened to music, shared photos with his friends while most of my participants used its basic function - IMing.

**Comfort and frustration on Yahoo! Messenger.** The first Instant Messaging system that Jack was aware of (or used) was MSN. His cousin who lived in Taipei and whom he met once a year at the family gathering during the Lunar New Year, told him about it. “We live far from each other. It is not easy for us to share what happens in life with each other. My cousin told me about MSN” (1-1). Immediately, he found MSN efficient to help him keep in touch with his far away relative. When his computer teacher in the fourth grade taught Yahoo! Messenger in class, he already knew all about it. After that particular class, he had a new IM account and his buddy list was expanded. His cousin who is five years older than him became a high school student and was occupied by school work and student activities. Among those 20 people on his buddy list (including his relatives and classmates), he found himself IMing with his classmates more often than his relatives (1-2).

In the beginning of our interviews, Jack’s reflection on his IMing experience was neutral – “We [Jack and his classmates] talk about everything. It is like chatting with them at school” (1-7). However, later in the interview, a different image of IMing appeared.

[6] Wanju: Do you find it difficult to express your thoughts when you IM your friends?  
Jack: I dooooo. I sometimes have typos. And sometimes I don’t know how to type the words. Ahh. It is troublesome. Also I have to type a lot to express my feelings or thoughts. My friends always complain that I type too slow. They are crazy about online games. They type much faster since they IM with their online friends all the time. In their eyes, computer time is like money and it is so precious to them. They

want to make the best use of it and they want to spend most of their computer time on playing games. They are not happy with me when I cannot reply their messages in time. They always say “Why do you type so slowly? Faster!” It is difficult to have conversation with them under this circumstance. (1-16)

Jack rarely experienced being cut off in face-to-face interactions with his peers. I always remember the eye contacts he received when he was talking in a group. In [6], he sounded discouraged and looked hurt. He withdrew himself from this type of situation and turned to his friends who allowed him more time to chat. “I usually talks to girls. Because boys are so into gaming, they have no time to chat” (2-11).

It seems evident that Yahoo! Messenger, a medium that requires the user to type out his or her thoughts and feelings, seemingly changes the flow, rhythm and scope of the user’s interaction with his or her friends. As Jack’s experience indicated in [6], sometimes he had no autonomy over the communication. Sometimes, he battled with the text messages and struggled to understand his friends. “One of my classmates loves to use acronyms. And she always has typos in her messages. I often have hard time understanding her when we IM” (2-4). However, there were times that his needs were fulfilled on Yahoo! Messenger.

When Jack and his friends were willing to spend time and put effort in engaging with each other, the image of their conversation on Yahoo! Messenger was different from [6]. “We talk about daily stuff . . . I sometimes check my homework with my friends but not often. I chat with them most of the time” (1-8). Besides talking about daily things, there were times he would have more intimate and personal talks with his friends.

[7] Wanju: Do you confide to your friends on Yahoo! Messenger?

Jack: I sometimes do, especially when I was scolded by my parents or when my parents faulted me for something that I did not do.

Wanju: How do you feel after releasing your emotion to your friends?

Jack: hmm. I felt better. My friends give me comfort, more or less. I trust them more and feel closer to them.

Wanju: Do you feel awkward when seeing them in school after the conversation?

Jack: No, I don't. It is all right. I will tell them those things in person as well. (1-11)

Most of the time when Jack talked about his parents he often sounded positive and excited. Rarely did I sense a disagreeable feeling in his tone or his facial expression. When he did complain, he would add "it is how I feel" (2-6) and would smile to shrug off the unpleasant feelings. Sometimes technology came to his aid and provided him alternatives to express his feelings as [7] showed. It seemed apparent that IMing with his friends uplifted his emotions. He and his friends found comfort from each other, "I share my feelings with my friends. So do my friends" (1-10) through this particular form of communication in which interactions are carried out in written texts. However, the nature of what happens on Yahoo! Messenger was not always positive and he had to do something to avoid it.

**Strong feelings and rules.** Probably due to his family, Jack seems to be a natural with computer technology. His older brother uses IMing and writes a blog. His mother makes doctor appointments and searches for information on the Internet. His father, tech savvy as he is, sets up the family computer in the living room and uses the TV for the computer screen (2-3). From the way his family uses the computer (or the Internet) to the hardware of the family computer, he was situated in a technologically rich environment. Compared with the participants that I interviewed, he was more sensitive to technological problems (such as hacking, Spams, identity theft), more knowledgeable on computer (operating systems, time-delay), and more familiar with the functions embedded in Yahoo! Messenger. In addition to IMing, he also used Yahoo! Messenger for other purposes. "Last summer I went to Japan with my parents. I used *photo sharing* on Yahoo! Messenger to show my friends the pictures I took" (1-15).

During our interviews, Jack always responded to computer technology naturally. He could initiate talks on computers such as how to install Yahoo! Messenger on the school's

computers or explain why the school computers were slow. My conversations with him touched upon more technological issues than with the other participants. These technology talks were venues where he opened up his world to me.

[8] Wanju: You know there is a function in Yahoo! Messenger that you can use if you find someone annoying. (Immediately, Jack finished my sentence – *adding the person to the “ignore list.”*)

Wanju: Exactly!

Jack: (quick response) I use it quite often. I add some of my friends to the ignore list so that they cannot send me messages; however, they are still on my buddy list.

Wanju: Why did you put them on the ignore list?

Jack: It is so easy for a person’s Yahoo! Messenger account get hacked. Some of my friends’ accounts were hacked. I often receive Spams or messages that were dirty jokes or pornography from them. I don’t like to see those messages. The only way that I can avoid that type of message is to add my friends to the ignore list. (1-12)

I was impressed by how proficient Jack was with Yahoo! Messenger and also how he could always elaborate a bit further when responding to my questions. At the same time, I was surprised by his reaction in [9]. While most of my participants indicated being bothered by such messages, he was the only one who chose to end his suffering. Although, it did seem a rather draconic measure to put his friends on the ignore list.

[9] Wanju: Do you initiate conversation with your friends?

Jack: No, I don’t. If my friends have time and I am also free then I will chat with them.

Wanju: How do you know if they are free?

Jack: Their status on the display name. [tone up] *It explains everything.* It is impolite if I IM them when they are playing games. . . . I check their display names. If they put “playing games” on their display names then I won’t IM them. If I IM them, then there will be a pop-up window opening on their screen. It will interrupt their games. Sometimes this could cause them to lose a game. They may lose the game because I IM them. It is intrusive.

Wanju: Do you also indicate your status in the display name?

Jack: When I am in a bad mood, I don’t want to chat with anyone. I would type “Don’t IM me!”

Wanju: No one bothers you afterwards?

Jack: Most of them don’t. Some of them still IM me. I yell at them. My status says it clear that I don’t want to chat. I feel they are rude. Seriously, I yell at them. They ask for it! (remains muttering) (4-6)

At first, Jack seemed to be talking about the function of “display name<sup>8</sup>”, but then he became emotional and showed his frustration over the unexpected (or unwanted) messages. He put his friends on the ignore list when he received inappropriate messages from them; he would not IM his friends when they were not available; he felt upset when his friends were not supposed to IM him. He subscribed to certain rules which he applied to others and had strong feelings about IMing etiquette.

Jack’s classmates saw him as he saw himself. When some of the children asked me who was the most special child in this study, rather than answering their question, I asked who they thought was the most special. “Jack”, they said. Their reason was that he was always confident and had strong opinions. My impression of him was similar. He was never too shy to express his opinion. When his classmate was dragging too long in finishing his comments on a movie, Jack did not hesitate to interrupt saying, “What is the key point, exactly?” He would not back down even when the majority were on the opposing side of his argument. He often retained an image that carried a certain amount of confidence, ego or even stubbornness. He never toned down this image, even when he was on the Internet.

[10] Wanju: Do you feel IMing affects your friendships?

Jack: I do. One of my classmates likes to use abusive words in her messages. The thing I hate most is that someone uses abusive words in their text messages. It is all right when she IMs with other people since I wouldn’t see those messages.

However, I cannot bear it when she sends messages to me with those words. It upsets me whenever I see that kind of messages. I sort of ignore her these days.

Wanju: At the school?

Jack: No, on Yahoo! Messenger. (2-9)

Jack never compromised his principles either in the context of an online community or in a relationship.

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<sup>8</sup> Display name is a technique embedded in Yahoo! Messenger which assists a person in knowing whether his or her friends were available to chat (see pp. 39-40 for the details).

**Pride, pressure, and dreams.** Considering Jack as a whole, it seems to me that he drew a circle around himself to protect his mind and soul, and set up barriers to protect himself from abuse. His teacher once remarked:

[11] Teacher Huang: He [Jack] might have no one to talk to if his friends are absent from school. . . . The reason why he is so arrogant is because his family puts a lot of pressure on him. He has to let the stress out. You know, the oppressed sometimes turns into the oppressor. The only place he can feel good about himself is when he is with people who he thinks are inferior to him.

As Jack's teacher suggested, he was arrogant and a bit aloof. My observation of him reflected a similar image. Compared with his classmates, he appeared to be more polite which I sometimes found rather polished. He often insisted his way was the right way which in consequence harmed his relationship with other people. There seemed to be a force behind his rigid and strong character. "Recently I learned a new English term 'Be Myself'. This is the rule that I am following now. I don't think I need to worry about other people's comments" (4-18). It looked like there existed unconscious pride in his way of presenting himself and judging other people. However, he showed a different image when he was acting under family pressure.

One day his classmates were excited to tell me their birthdays in the hope that I would buy them birthday gifts. Jack however uttered "My mother said I should not ask gifts from other people" (and then he deliberately stepped few feet away but remained gazing at us). At that moment, I felt an uneasy feeling coming out from his look. It seemed to me that his mother's rule (or his parents' rules) carried a certain amount of pressure or constraint. This pressure to some extent separated him from his peers and created a twist in his image. In his mind, there exists a proper way of being, as his parents suggested or from what he observed in them. He often judges himself and other people according to these same standards.

However, Jack is not always carrying his heavy character around. Did I mention that Jack named his blog “A Feather of a Dream”? “Dreams”, he explained, “are expectations, goals that one wants to achieve” (4-8). His dream is to travel around the world, to know different cities and learn different cultures. He talked about his art teacher in a tone of awe. “My art teacher really teaches nothing. Her class is boring. But, I really envy her because she spends her winter and summer breaks in different countries. She has been to so many places around the world. Don’t you think it is nice to visit places that we see on TV, calendars or movies?” (4-10)

Seldom did Jack take off his strong image and show his soft spots. When he did, he talked without his successful parents or his outstanding brother in mind. He talked like a feather that clung to nothing but was letting the wind carry it away.

## **Jane**

With a slim build, a plain look and dark skin, often wearing her hair down covering half of her face, and dressing in black, Jane is a girl who, because of her appearance, rarely receives notice from people. She never attempts to get people’s attention. She wins people’s hearts by her sincere nature and diligent attitude towards friendship and her studies. She took one of her friends home on a bike simply because it was too far and dangerous for her friend to walk back home alone. She gives warm and timely comfort or help when her friends are in need. One of her classmates said “Jane is really important to me.” Another one said “Someday Jane would be cut into half because everyone likes her and everyone wants to be with her.” She also inspires and counsels. At one meeting, she stopped an upcoming argument between two of her classmates. “It is all right. [putting her hands on her peer’s shoulder]. We all think differently. Let him express

his opinion” (unrecorded conversation). Her teacher praises her as a student who puts her best effort into what she does and always seeks help and advice to improve herself.

My observation of this 11-year-old girl through in-person interviews, Instant Messaging, and repeated readings of the interview transcripts, gives me a feeling of her that surpasses what her teacher and her classmates say about her. There is a lot more inside this down-to-earth and sometimes quiet and shy girl. She is sharp and decisive - “It is so obvious to me that my teacher was reckless when he assigned the homework” (2-10). She is reflecting and articulate - “But (pause), IMing is not really an effective way to let people know how I feel” (2-11); “Actually, Yahoo! Messenger is not the best place to find my friends” (2-11). I didn’t expect to see all these beautiful characteristics when I first met Jane – a winter afternoon in a small classroom where her dark skin looked darker and her skinny body seemed more slender. As we began to talk she lit up quickly and her emotions and feelings radiated out into the room. At one moment, she was excitedly talking about the fun she had on Yahoo! Messenger. At another moment, she completely detached herself from the joy of IMing and talked critically about the limitations of IMing. When I began to transcribe the interviews, I was quickly drawn into her unique character which I found difficult to find a word for. Every word of her reflection on IMing, every comment she made about people and things around her carry the essence of her. Her uniqueness permeated through our interviews. I sensed it vividly even though I could not find where it came from. She was a mystery to me until I talked to her father.

**The father.** It seems cliché to say that talking to Jane’s father was a surprise on a normal day. But, it was truly a surprise for both Jane and myself. When Jane and I were using microphones to chat with each other on Yahoo! Messenger, her father overheard “the noises” we made. Out of his curiosity he entered the room and found his daughter talking to a person

overseas on the Internet. He told Jane that he wanted to talk to me. Then, he introduced himself to me and praised me for being able to connect with a fifth grader despite the age difference. It was a late Friday evening. He didn't talk much but managed to give her daughter's new friend a warm message. I took this for an invitation to talk further with him. It also gave me a sense that he was interested in his child's social life and Internet activity.

After this brief "meeting" with Jane's father, I tried to create a picture of him and began to pull his image from my memory. My mind quickly went back to the first time Jane talked about her father. It was about the computer rule she followed at home.

[1] Wanju: When did you start using Yahoo! Messenger.

Jane: When I was in the fourth grade, the computer teacher taught us.

Wanju: So, it is because of the computer class that you learned about Yahoo! Messenger.

Jane: Yeah. I mainly played online games and ignored Yahoo! Messenger before that.

Wanju: When did you start playing online games?

Jane: It was when I was in the third grade. My father believed it was important for me to build a good foundation for my studies during the first and second grade. So, I could not use computer before the third grade.

Wanju: Did you have computer at home then?

Jane: We did have a computer but my father forbade me from using it. He said if I studied hard in the first and second grade then I wouldn't have too many difficulties in studies in the future. (2-4)

Jane sounded calm and objective when she talked about her father's rule – no computer before the third grade. There was no sign of resentment or rebellion in her tone. Her comprehension of and obedience to the rule are clear and loud in [1]. Knowing her grades have always been good, I guess she sees and understands what her father meant by "building a good foundation for her studies." However, her good grades seem insufficient to explain her attitude. I went back to the origin of this rule, her father.

My second talk with Jane's father was casual, however, it proceeded with a pinch of seriousness from both sides. Our conversation, though mainly about Jane, touched upon his idea

of being a good father for his three children, his idea of being a middle-class-family bolster, and his idea of being a filial son.

When I mentioned the particular computer rule to Jane's father in our interview, he explained:

[2] Mr. Tsai: Jane was afraid of going to school when she began elementary school. I was trying to help her to build confidence in herself. You know, to make her feel more comfortable at school. Most importantly, I thought it was essential for her to know she had become an elementary school student who needed to start spending more time with her studies not toys or games. (Mr. Tsai)

In his words, I found his rule was not strictly about setting a time for study, a time for computer or a time for entertaining. Rather, it was promoting and shaping an attitude, a direction in life. More than setting a rule, he was advising his child of an attitude – knowing your role and giving your best to it.

Jane's father gave me a typical impression of the southern Taiwanese – enduring hardship to provide a good life for his family, but shy of expressing his love and care for the family. When I asked why he moved his family to a new place, he only said, 'My wife would be closer to her work and Jane could go to a good school and have a decent environment within to grow up.' He never complained of having been relocated around Taiwan for his job and never mentioned his three-hour round-trip commute every day. When he talked about his two younger children, Jane's younger sister and younger brother, who live with his mother in another city, it sounded as if he felt guilty, however, in his voice there was a determination that seemed to say he would soon bring them back together.

In Jane's father's words, I see continuity, hope, struggle, compromise, and sacrifice that he and the family endure. I find him a man with a big heart for his family. In a huge way, I find

him a role model of his own rule – being a good father and persevering to bring a good life to his family.

**Reflecting the father’s image: Being the oldest child.** Jane never directly talked about how she was influenced by her father. Nevertheless, in the way she conducted herself, there were evident signs of her father’s philosophy – being true to your role. She seemed to be very clear and insightful regarding her role within every context and she carried herself accordingly. At home, she was an obedient child. When asked what her dream was in life, instead of talking about what she wanted, she talked about her mother’s expectation of her. “Hmm. What I want to do? My mother hopes that I will become a lawyer or a doctor when I grow up so that I can take care of the family. I guess I would become a lawyer or something that my mother would like” (3-7). When she was with her two younger siblings, she never took her role recklessly.

[3] Wanju: How do you feel like being a big sister?

Jane: Hmm. A lot of responsibilities. My mother says that I am the oldest child at home so I have to be a role model for my younger sister and brother. She always says ‘go to do this or do that for your sister’ or she would say ‘show them how to do that’. My parents are busy so I have to take care of my siblings. When my sister and brother are home, I remind them to clean their rooms, make sure they brush teeth before they go to bed. Sometimes I have to break fights between them (laugh). . . . During the summer, my sister lives at home. I watch YoYo TV<sup>9</sup> with her [tone up] every day! Ugh. I feel like I have become retarded after watching those shows.

Wanju: Why do you have to watch TV with her?

Jane: I have to keep an eye on her all the time. I am afraid that she will break things around the house. Last time, she had a fight with my brother. She was so upset. She went to my brother’s bedroom, made a mess, and broke my brother’s alarm clock. Ugh. I was shocked when I saw the room. I hid the clock so my mother would not know what had happened. Ever since that incident I don’t let her out of my sight! (laugh). (3-8)

In those interesting vignettes in [3], Jane was truly a role model and a big sister that looked after her siblings. She took her parents’ expectations seriously although she had to undergo some

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<sup>9</sup> YoYo TV is a Taiwanese TV cable channel, specifically designed for young children. It has programs such as SpongeBob SquarePants and Teletubbies.

sacrifice. In her description of how she was with her sister, I felt her father's image was evolving. Both of them never stressed the compromises or difficulties they faced. Rather, they all gave an impression that they were meant to be like who they were, especially in their laughs coated with sweet feelings towards their responsibilities (the family for Mr. Tsai; and her younger siblings for Jane).

Being accountable was not only what Jane maintained at home. At school, she was a diligent student. Her teacher praised her – “Jane is a child who needs no teachers' worries. She takes care of her studies well and knows what to do best” (Teacher Huang). On the Internet, she acted appropriately and responsibly just as she did at home and at school.

**Yahoo! Messenger and the computer time.** As her father promised, Jane began to use computers when she was in the third grade. The family computer became hers and was moved to her bedroom. Her studies, as always, remained the top priority in her life. However, she could use the computer on weekends. By the time I interviewed her, the computer had been a part of her life for two years. Her computer activities had changed from the beginning where she only played online games, to a stage where IMing was her first and major activity on the Internet. “When I turn on the computer, the first thing I do is to log in to the Yahoo! Messenger to see if my friends are online” (2-6). This transition in her computer activities, as she indicated in [1] (see p. 107), was because she began to adopt Yahoo! Messenger after her fourth grade computer teacher taught it in class. In addition, there was a trend of using Yahoo! Messenger among her peers (presumably due to the particular computer class). “Some of my classmates also started using Yahoo! Messenger when they were in the fourth grade. They were so fond of using it and wanted to add people to their buddy list” (2-5). This transition created a new dimension, *social*, in Jane's activities on the Internet.

[4] Wanju: How many people are there on your buddy list?

Jane: I am not sure. I have never counted.

Wanju: Do you put them into different categories?

Jane: Yes. Close friends, So-So friends, Not-Good friends. But, there are very few in the category of not-good friends because I rarely add those people who are not my good friends to my Yahoo! Messenger buddy list. They sometimes ask me to add them but I sort of ignore them. Don't want to add them to my buddy list.

Wanju: Do you initiate conversation with these not-good friends on Yahoo! Messenger?

Jane: I rarely do that.

Wanju: What do you do when they IM you?

Jane: I greet them - *Ang Ang*<sup>10</sup>. Then, I would tell them that I want to play games. And I close the chat window. I usually spend more time IMing with my close friends. I often chat with them for a while before I play online games. . . . There were times I wanted to finish conversations with my friends but they popped up messages to me right before I was about to close the chat window. (laugh) I have to respond to their messages. So our conversations continue and get longer. (laugh) (2-7)

It was evident that Jane's relationship with her peers on the Internet mirrors what her relationships were like in the offline world. She was reluctant to add people whom she was not close to on her buddy list, however she would spend more time IMing with her close friends. In the picture of her interaction with her contacts on Yahoo! Messenger that she portrayed, especially the contrast between the flash-like greetings and the not-so easy-to-end IMing conversations, she seemed to say – 'my time on Yahoo! Messenger is to have fun and it is meant to be shared with my close friends.'

Clearly, [4] is more than just about Jane's social life. It reveals her idea about Yahoo! Messenger and her perception of computer time. First, Yahoo! Messenger is a place that she only wants to share with her close friends. Second, computer time is a good time. "I always say to my online friends: 'Yay! I finally escaped from the childcare center! I can use the computer now.' I always feel high when I use the computer" (2-8). These two ideas echo with each other as a coherent whole. She stratified her friends into different categories according to their friendships

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<sup>10</sup> *Ang Ang* is a common greeting term especially among teenagers in Taiwan. It means good morning (*Zao Ang*), good afternoon (*Wu Ang*) and good evening (*Wan Ang*).

to help her organize her Yahoo! Messenger buddy list. She prioritized her activities in her free time around her computer activities.

[5] Wanju: What do you like to do when you have free time?

Jane: Well, it depends on my physical condition.

Wanju: Assuming that you are pretty high

Jane: Then, my first choice would be using the computer. The second choice would be watching TV. The first thing I do on the computer is to log in to my Yahoo! Messenger. The second thing is to play online games. . . . After I have a great time in playing games, I sometimes go to watch TV. If there is nothing to watch on TV then I read. If I find reading boring then I go to sleep. The second half of my evening is quite boring. (2-16)

To some extent, [5] is a shared image of evenings among Taiwanese children. It is a stereotypic situation in which Taiwanese children face the pressure to be good at school and wish to spend the rest of their time letting off steam. On the one hand, this quote illustrates Jane is subjected to this situation. On the other hand, it reassures us that she regards computer time is a good time.

Nevertheless, looking back at the way Jane dealt with the pressure (or the trend) of adding her peers to her Yahoo! Messenger buddy list in [4], it was obvious to me she cared a great deal about the essence of the time she spent on the Internet. She constructed herself a buddy list in which she was sure she would be able to share her free time with people she liked. She restrained her interactions with her online friends whom she regarded as just acquaintances. “I only talk about game stuff with my online friends” (2-9). She also kept some of her IMing conversations within the boundary of “hi and bye.” From the way she designed her buddy list to the way she IMed with her peers, she was clear on what she was going through and didn’t let her time slip away on the Internet.

**Dual images of IMing and sharp eyes.** Yahoo! Messenger blended into Jane’s life smoothly. It soon became a new place for her to hang out with her friends. “We [Jane and her friends] talk about stuff. I sometimes ask my friends, hmm, for example: ‘what did you do

today?’ Or, questions like ‘are you done with the homework?’ And I talk about gaming stuff with my online friends most of the time” (2-9). It caught my attention when she mentioned “homework.” I could not help but pursue it further.

[6] Wanju: Can you talk more about how you discuss homework with your classmates on Yahoo! Messenger?

Jane: [Sigh- agonizing expression] My teacher [tone up] never pays attention to the homework he assigns. Once he required us to finish the first chapter in the Chinese workbook. I found the last section of the chapter was to write an essay. I didn’t know if the essay was included in the homework. Anyway, it was obvious to me that my teacher didn’t check the content of the workbook before he assigned the homework. [Normally, writing an essay would not be assigned along with other tasks in one set of homework because it takes a longer time and more effort to finish.] So, I IMed my classmates and discussed with them whether we had to write the essay or not. (2-10)

In [6], Jane argued how her teacher being negligent in assigning the homework in a confident and clear way. My mind simply went beyond the point that Yahoo! Messenger could be a referencing tool and I was quickly drawn into this solid side of hers. She gave me an impression that was different from the typical image that I had observed in most Taiwanese children who were inclined to completely accept what their teachers assign them. Nevertheless, she was neither rebellious nor arrogant. Rather, she endeavored to make sense of her teacher’s homework assignment in a more sophisticated manner – she observed, contemplated and then reflected. I found myself looking at her with a new outlook. She is sensitive, sharp and decisive.

After [6], Jane continued to share her IMing experience with me. We laughed when she talked about her “daunting” experience – “There was a time that I IMed with many people at the same time on Yahoo! Messenger. The chat windows were all over my monitor. [tone up] They were all over. It was full! Then, the computer froze [laugh]” (2-11). We felt frustrated when she complained the way her friends use Yahoo! Messenger – “I would appreciate it if my friends would indicate their statuses [when we IM]. If they are not available to chat or step away from their computers then they should let people know their status. I find it [tone up] *stupid* to IM a

person while the person is away from the computer” (2-12). Her feeling about IMing was rolling. When we talked about the role of IMing in her social life, we hit the fundamental issue of IMing – interacting with other people through “text messages” without visual, audio, and direct human contacts. She began to reflect on the two different flavors of IMing – sweet and bland (if not sour) – she tasted.

[7] Wanju: Do you feel IMing enhances your friendships with your classmates?

Jane: (quick; tone firm) Yes.

Wanju: Can you explain more?

Jane: hmm. When I have a fight with my classmates at school, it is embarrassing for me to apologize to that person [face-to-face]. However, I can apologize to the person on Yahoo! Messenger when he or she is online. I feel less embarrassed apologizing to my classmate this way.

Wanju: Your classmate might feel a little bit embarrassed if you apologize to him or her in person.

Jane: That could be embarrassing. (laugh) *But (pause), IMing is not really an effective way to let people know how I feel. The text messages might not convey my thoughts or feelings clearly.* It could be read ambiguously by the person with whom I IM.

Sometimes my classmates asked me what I meant on the Yahoo! Messenger when we met at school. I felt [tone up] *a little bit* embarrassed to explain what I was trying to say to them in person.

Wanju: Do you feel less embarrassed because you already explained to the person on Yahoo! Messenger?

Jane: Yeah. I felt less embarrassed to talk about the thing in person because the person already had a general picture of what I was trying to say. . . . *There are things such as personal feelings or emotions that you simply have to say in person to make them clear to other people.* (2-13)

The beginning of [7] presents a positive and an exciting image of IMing – an alternate and a less intimidating way of expressing one’s emotions, feelings and thoughts. However, when Jane began to reflect on her IMing experience in which her messages were not understood or interpreted correctly by her friends, the excitement that she felt about IMing enhancing her friendships gradually faded away. She started to talk in a slower pace and began to recall her other IMing experiences which led her to the conclusion that IMing was insufficient for

conveying her feelings and face-to-face interaction was indispensable in maintaining a relationship.

[7] as a whole goes far beyond the disadvantages or advantages of IMing. The way Jane explained how she felt about adopting IMing in her relationships showed an important side of her. She was self-reflective. She corrected herself initially to clarify her thoughts. Although she seemed to answer my questions without fully thinking through the whole thing in the very beginning, she processed through the information she had as we talked and corrected herself when necessary. The way she reconstructed her ideas about IMing in her personal relationships reminded me of [6] in which she talked about her teacher's careless homework assignment. She was able to see the details and put herself in a position where she detached herself from the fun over Yahoo! Messenger to give a rational judgment about IMing.

When I shared my observation of Jane with her father, her mighty observations and the ability to express herself tranquilly, he gave me a smile that seemed to say he recognized the quality I described about Jane. He then shared a recent talk he had with Jane that reflected what I saw in Jane.

[8] Mr. Tsai: [chuckle] Jane is not afraid of speaking her mind. [pause] Let me give you an example. A few weeks ago, she came home and told me that she needed a flute for her music class at school. I thought a cheap one would be good enough for the music lesson at school. Nevertheless, she told me that she wanted to buy a better one. She explained to me that she was not only going to use the flute for the music class but she hoped to learn flute in the future. She sounded very persuasive. Finally, we decided to buy a better one.

Wanju: Do you always discuss things with Jane?

Mr. Tsai: I normally do. I ask for her opinions.

Wanju: What do you do when Jane has different opinions?

Mr. Tsai: Well, it depends. If I have already made up my mind then I will insist on my decision and she just has to accept my decision. I think I am still quite traditional (laugh). (Mr. Tsai)

Although Jane's father described his role in his children's life as quite traditional, it was evident in [8] that he reserved a space for Jane to express her opinions and thoughts before he weighed in and made the final decision. The space for Jane to express herself and the time that Jane and her father both spent in talking and listening to each other in fact, enabled Jane to see things from different perspectives. Generally, she was more accommodating with different opinions. "We all think differently" was the remark that she used to keep her peers from arguing with each other. In [6] and [7], she did not take the things at surface level, rather she looked into them and made her own judgments. In her father's description [8], she with a clear mind knowing what she wanted, delivered a persuasive argument to make her point. An important note is that Jane was later recruited to the school's flute band.

In retrospect, facing the magnetic excitement and joy from the Internet, Jane was no different from other children. She quickly attached herself to it. The Internet became the background of her free time. What was significant and precious was her capability of retaining a clear vision of her computer activities and her role within this particular context. Being the oldest child in her family and the only child currently living with her parents, she received significant attention and involvement from her parents, especially her father. I asked her if she always turned to her father for advice. She answered in a confident voice, "My father often says 'You have grown up. You should try to deal with your problems on your own'" (3-10). For Jane, this quote represented the recognition, encouragement, and also expectations of her father. In this portrait, it is clear she was like her father who always gave his best to fulfill his role. Like her father, Jane fulfilled her roles to her best, whether it was as a daughter, an older sister, a friend or a student. In the big world of the Internet whether it was to IM or play games, she kept a sensible

distance with the Internet, retaining a rational attitude towards what was around her without getting lost in the fun.

### **Peggy**

Her black, office-lady-like eyeglass frame gives her a mature look that matches her expression when she talks about her relationship with her older sister. Her easily-turning-red face, her liking to lean on other people's shoulders and happily skipping in the hallway, retains the shy and sometimes nutty side of her young heart. Peggy is an eleven-year-old girl embarking on the journey away from her innocent childhood into a world where she begins to explore the differences between boys and girls and worries about her appearance, especially her weight and her relationships with her friends.

Compared with her classmates who are involved in my research project, Peggy rarely talks about her studies and has a schedule that is not as busy as that of most fifth graders in Taiwan – attending grammar school to enhance study, enrolling in a language institute to learn English or having private piano lessons. Her parents' frequent business trips and overseas travel leave her life nearly devoid of daily adult supervision and intervention. The care and guidance that a child hopes to receive, especially from adults, is scarce, though material goods are substantial. Her sister who is five years older than Peggy is emotionally distant from her and goes to school in another city. This pretty much makes Peggy the only child in her family, not just physically but also psychologically. Quite often the adults she is surrounded by are nannies who she has difficulty talking to and who she prefers not to interact with. The feeling of loneliness is evident and strong during the course of our interview. "My mother is going to travel next week. (Sighs) I have to live with the nanny again" (2-16). She hopes there is someone to

turn to when she is ready to talk about the boy that she is attracted to, or when her annoying classmates call her “Fatty Girl” or when she is frustrated with her school work. “When she [Peggy] comes home, she talks about what happened at school. She does not stop until I ask her to” (Mrs. Wu). “Whenever I need to go out, Peggy keeps asking ‘When are you coming home?’” (Mrs. Wu). Although she wished her mother could be there for her, the replacements she finds close by are the television, Nintendo Wii, and the computer. The one she often shares her feelings with is her diary.

When Peggy and I first met, she was enthusiastic, sharing with me her experiences of IMing. She was completely tuned into our conversation. She was energetic. She was full of life, just like the color she loves. “Red is my favorite color. It looks so passionate and alive” (4-5). Over the course of our meetings, I gradually realized that her role in IMing conversations has always been that of a listener or receiver. She said to me “Keeping a diary is like talking to myself, however, IMing is all about other people’s stuff” (2-3). She was indifferent towards something that most children were fond of. “Don’t you think it is simply a waste of time to use computer?” (4-2). The first thing she did after school was to take food to the street dog, not to go online.

It seemed to me that beneath Peggy’s big smiles and her giggling there existed deeper and more sophisticated aspects of herself. She had a unique way to deal with her feelings and a novel view towards life. Tracks to her world were emerging from her tones, emotions, gestures, and responses to my interview questions. A whole image of Peggy, her perception of IM and the transition of IM in her life will be told in the following sections: Bridging the Distance; A Real Hug Relies on . . . ; Say it Clearly, Say it Right; and, My World.

**Bridging the distance.** Peggy was separated from her parents and older sister when she was six year old. She lived with her grandparents for a year until she needed to enroll in the primary school. In that particular year, her interaction with her family was entirely over the telephone. “My mother called me almost every day but I didn’t see my family for a year” (1-20). Her family was almost missing from her life except for her mother. “I drew two eyes and a mouth on my pillow and pretended it was my mother’s face. When I missed my mother at night, I talked to the pillow as if I were talking to her” (1-20). It was a scene where a little child tried to comfort her lonely heart.

It was a new world when Peggy returned home. She had to reconnect with her family. The person she found to be a virtual stranger was her sister. “When I returned home, I felt there was a distance between my sister and me. I didn’t quite know her” (3-1). Another thing she didn’t know (or didn’t expect) was that a new way of talking to people on the Internet – instant messaging (IMing), would assist her in understanding her sister. Peggy didn’t know what IM was until her father bought a computer for her sister, a frequent Yahoo! Messenger user<sup>11</sup>. This happened when Peggy was in the second grade. How would this machine change her world?

Partly because of her curiosity about IMing and mostly because of her desire to get to know her sister, Peggy’s journey to IMing began immediately after her sister showed her how to text message people. With her clumsy typing skill she started to IM her sister – then the only contact on her Yahoo! Messenger buddy list. Not being able to see or hear her sister, she found this way of interaction created a safer or less intimidating atmosphere for her to express her mind.

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<sup>11</sup> Peggy’s sister is a junior college student. She has more than 300 contacts on her Yahoo! Messenger buddy list. According to Peggy, she is always on Yahoo! Messenger except when she has classes.

[1] Wanju: Where did you learn Yahoo! Messenger?

Peggy: My elder sister taught me to use Yahoo! Messenger when I was in the second grade. None of my classmates or friends did IMing at that time. I could only IM my sister. I chatted with her when she was at her friends' place or in the library.

Wanju: Why did you IM her instead of talking to her on the phone?

Peggy: [tone up] It cost money to chat with her on the phone.

Wanju: Is this the only reason?

Peggy: [immediately, her tone was down.] Well, it was also because I felt more comfortable talking to my sister on Yahoo! Messenger. It seemed awkward to say things to her in person.

Wanju: Are you saying that you felt more comfortable talking to your sister when you didn't see her?

Peggy: Right. Don't you feel the same? How would you tell a boy that you like him? Would you IM him? Or, would you tell him in person? [tone up] Of course, you IM him. You feel less shy (or embarrassed) this way! (2-1)

Indeed, a lot of people use IM simply because it is more cost-effective<sup>12</sup>. I was not surprised when Peggy gave me that answer. Still, I knew there was more to this obvious reason as to why she used IM in re-building her relationship with her sister. The analogy she used to explain how she felt when talking to her sister on Yahoo! Messenger a few years ago showed she had more intimate conversations with her sister on Yahoo! Messenger than in person. What is more from this analogy, was that she regarded IMing a better way to express a person's feelings towards other people. This is her perception of IMing. This perception about IMing is apparently across the time spectrum, especially when one compares what she said about IMing with her sister and IMing to a person that one is attracted to. She felt this way about IMing before and she felt about it the same way after few years. Obviously, Peggy's perception of IM was formed by the way she interacted with her sister years ago.

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<sup>12</sup> Almost every student I interviewed for this project thought Instant Messenger system (such as Yahoo! Messenger or MSN) was a free medium for them to talk to other people until I reminded them of the cost of Internet service and the computer.

However, more human contact (or intimate interaction) between her and her sister on Yahoo! Messenger was not for her to express how she felt about her sister. To a great extent, it was for her to reassemble the image of her sister.

[2] Wanju: You talked about that you were separated from your family in last interview.

Can you talk about how you felt when you returned home?

Peggy: When I returned home, I felt there was a distance between my sister and me. I didn't quite know her.

Wanju: What did you do when you knew you could chat with her on Yahoo!

Messenger?

Peggy: I asked her questions that I would not come up to her in person. For example: what does she like to do? what are her interests? Or, what she does not like?

Something like that.

Wanju: Basically, you wanted to get to know your sister, right?

Peggy: [nodding] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I wanted to know her! (3-1)

Seeing Peggy repeatedly nodding her head in agreement to what I said, it became apparent that she truly hoped to know her sister. In addition to this point, [2] also shows her relationship with her sister was redefined on Yahoo! Messenger, especially when she asked the kind of questions that most of us would in order to get to know a new friend. As she admitted that she rarely talked about herself when IMing her sister, her sister was more like a new friend and Peggy didn't know if the new relationship could thrive.

Although IMing helped Peggy know more about her sister (3-1), it didn't enhance her relationship with her sister in the real world. She repeated the following statement during our interviews when talking about her relationship with her sister: "My sister is five years older than me. It is the worst age difference between two sisters!" (3-2). Today their conversation either in the real world or on Yahoo! Messenger rarely exceeds two lines (e.g. "Dinner is ready." or "Are you coming home?"). IM is now the medium for her sister to inform the family whether she is coming home on the weekend or not. And Peggy is the messenger updating her sister's status for her mother – a fairly routine task for both of them.

Peggy once said to me “Being on Yahoo Messenger and in school with friends are two different things. They are two different worlds” (2-2). When I connect this comment to what happens to her relationship with her sister, she seems to say that IM is a way of knowing other people, but, it doesn’t necessarily enhance people’s offline relationship.

**A real hug relies on . . .** Peggy’s sister remained her solo contact on Yahoo! Messenger until she was in the third grade when some of her friends started to IM. She also began playing online games and became net-friends<sup>13</sup> with some game players. In addition, in the elementary school that Peggy attends, students learn the use of Yahoo! Messenger in the computer literacy class in the fourth grade. Every student creates his or her own Yahoo! Messenger account in the section on IM in the computer class. Whether a child IMs at home depends on his or her family’s access to a computer and an Internet service, and most of all, their parents’ permission. In Peggy’s class, only one student’s family doesn’t own a computer so this student doesn’t IM at home. The rest of the class of around 30 students are able to IM at home when their parents (mostly mothers) allow them (when the parents give their consent).

Peggy’s buddy list on Yahoo! Messenger grew longer as her social life expanded in both online and offline worlds and more of her peers learned to use IM. Since she adds every person who wants to be on her contact list to her IM account (whether he or she is a close friend or is merely an acquaintance), the number of contacts she has on her buddy list increased much faster than I expected.

[3] Wanju: How many friends do you have on your Yahoo! Messenger buddy list?

Peggy: I have 69 friends on my buddy list!

Wanju: Really?!

Peggy: Is 69 people a lot?

Wanju: Of course. It is a lot. Did you put them into different categories?

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<sup>13</sup> Friends whom a person knew on the Internet are called “net-friends” in Taiwan. Net-friends are often more distant from each other.

Peggy: Yeah. One is: My close friends. The other one is *You Da* [This term has no meaning in Mandarin. Peggy learnt it from her older sister.] which includes my friends in different classes or grades in the school. But we all attend the same school. In all, there are 69 people in this account. So I am merely one short of 70. I have *another* IM account only for my net-friends. I rarely use this account though.

Wanju: How many contacts do you have in this account?

Peggy: Around 30 something. If I add these two accounts together, I have more than 100 people on my buddy lists. Am I awesome? Ha Ha (2-2)

Immediately after [3], I said to Peggy: “I believe I also contributed to your success of your having more than 100 people on your buddy list.” She laughed out loud because she had asked for my IM account and added me to her buddy list a few days before this interview. Seeing her so excited about the number, either 69 or 100, I could not help thinking whether her IM contacts were only numbers to her. What do all of them mean to her, and, do they mean the same to her?

[4] Wanju: Do you have net friends?

Peggy: I have a net-friend with whom I often play Mazes of Lions [an online game]. He is very nice. He helps me advance to the next level of the game.

Wanju: What do you usually chat with him?

Peggy: We mainly talk about the game. That’s all. For example: where should we go? What should I do? It is all about the game.

Wanju: No personal stuff.

Peggy: No. Not even a little bit.

Wanju: How about in We Do [an online game, meaning ‘We Dancing Online’]? What do you say to your net-friends in We Do?

Peggy: I would ask: What are you doing? Or, I would like to know their ages. Something like that.

Wanju: So, it is a bit different. More like friends?

Peggy: Yeah. [she responded immediately, tone up] *However, we never talk about our private stuff.*

Wanju: Why?

Peggy: Well. They are just net-friends.

Wanju: Do you feel there is a distance between you and your net friends?

Peggy: Well, it just doesn’t feel right. I am afraid that they might lie to me. If the person is a boy, however, he might pretend to be a girl in the game so that I may share my secrets with him. I worry that the person will reveal my secrets. This is not right.

Wanju: Do you believe what they say? For example: where they live or how old they are.

Peggy: They can say whatever they like *as long as they don’t hurt me.*

Wanju: Do you trust them completely?

Peggy: No, I guess I believe 80% of what they say. I have never met them in person. . . . I don't really know them.

Wanju: Do your net-friends share any personal stuff with you?

Peggy: Yeah. They sometimes talk about their personal issues.

Wanju: How do you respond to them?

Peggy: *I merely listen to them. [tone up] What else can I do? You cannot ask them to shut their mouths.* (laughs) . . . .

Wanju: How do you feel about your relationship with your net-friends?

Peggy: It is just at the superficial level.

Wanju: Even though they are nice to you.

Peggy: Yeah. We only play games together. We are just acquaintances. I don't necessarily trust them. (2-8)

At the first glance, [4] is only about Peggy's interactions with her net-friends and to some extent her interpretation of her net-friendships. What makes it significant (or crucial) in understanding her view on different forms of relationship is the element that she repeatedly comes back to in her definition of *real* friendship – trust, a quality that sustains people's relationships. In the way she interacts with her net-friends, trust is barely seen. She is a passive listener who shows no thoughtful conviction in offering help to her net-friends. She is also a wary listener who does not believe that such online friendships can advance to a higher level. In contrast to her being standoffish with her net-friends, the way she interacts with her close friends in the real world depicts a very different picture.

[5] Wanju: How do you respond to your friends when they share their secrets or problems with you on Yahoo! Messenger?

Peggy: I give them some advice. If they tell me they like someone, I sometimes suggest that they write letters to the person. I would say 'do you want me to write the letter for you' [laugh]. (1-2)

Two almost identical situations, however, result in two very different responses from Peggy.

Although in [5] she describes her interactions with her close friends on Yahoo! Messenger in a light vein, the care she has for her friends is truly genuine. She not only listens to her friends but also offers to help them. The comparison between [4] and [5] indicates there is a clear line between Peggy and her net-friends because of the lack of trust and she has two separate Yahoo!

Messenger accounts to stratify different groups of people in her (social) life. Compared with teenagers or adults who tend to disclose their personal feelings in the anonymous online communities or regard online friendships as real, if not better, as their offline friendships, she shows her wariness towards this type of interaction and highlights the importance of in-person contact in building genuine relationships. It seems to me that the reason why she has such a rational view of Internet friendships is her independent character. And this character is apparent in the way she composes her text messages.

**Say it clearly, say it right.** Ever since Scott Fahlman created the original smiley face : - ) with a colon, a hyphen, and a parenthesis in 1982, it has been a common practice for people to use such paralinguistic cues to express their feelings or emotions in written communications (post-it notes, letters and email). Instant Messaging systems with more advanced techniques and fancier features provide its users with animated paralinguistic cues to transmit their facial expressions and meaning. In fact, Asian IM users, according to my personal experience, enjoy a better database of animated icons and use them more often when IMing. However, Peggy had a different opinion about these emotional icons.

[6] Wanju: Do you use emotional icons to express how you feel while IMing?

Peggy: I do, but rarely.

Wanju: Why?

Peggy: [in an agonized tone] It takes time to find the icon in Yahoo! Messenger. My friends might have sent me [tone up] hundred lines of messages and I could be still looking for a *suitable* icon to express my feeling. (2-5)

I was surprised when Peggy said that she thought using animated icons to show how she felt when IMing her friends was simply a waste of time and delayed her conversation with her friends. She obviously didn't want to replace her thoughts with a symbol that probably, at its best, captures part of what she means (or, at its worst, presents her in a wrong way). And she did not wish to give the person who received her message the freedom to interpret what she meant.

In her eyes, those symbols, though most of them resemble human's feelings quite well, could not present her in an authentic way. She wanted to be her own speaker. [6] already showed how much Peggy cared for sending out her messages correctly. The following quote pushed it to a higher level.

[7] Wanju: In our last interview, you mentioned it was difficult to let another person know what you really mean or think in text messages. Can you explain it a little bit more?

Peggy: [high tone, gasped] This is a super big problem. If I IM you something, you might misunderstand my text messages and think that I am mad at you, when in fact, I am merely making it up. Even if I use parentheses to make myself clear, what I try to say to the person might still be vague. For example: I say something blah blah. [a sentence] then I put (*I am angry*) to indicate that I am mad at the person; however, I am not mad at all. So, I put (*I am joking*) right after (*I am angry*). I use two parentheses to explain what I really mean. *Two parentheses!* This is really weird.

Wanju: Can you give me a real example?

Peggy: Once my friend was playing online game while on IM. I was bored and wanted to chat with her. So, I IMed her: *Chat with me*. She replied: *No, I don't want to*. Then I replied: *Forget it! (I am angry) (Just Joking)*. (2-5)

As a veteran IM user, I have never seen anyone IM in this way. When I asked Peggy if she learned it from her friends or her sister, she answered, "No, I invented it!" – an idea came to her after she found that her friends had difficulty understanding what she meant or tended to request her to be more specific in her text messages. In a context where emotions are almost invisible and can only be seen through texts, she does have a way to make herself clearer to other people.

Seeing quotation [6] and [7] together, it was apparent that Peggy did not wish to express her feelings through emotional icons and did not want her messages to be distorted. She IMed in her own way and had an original view towards IMing. As I applauded her for being creative and innovative, I sensed in her a strong individuality. I thought about the way she responded to her peers who were excited about the newly released Harry Potter book. "Why do you want to have more stories of Harry Potter? How come you never ask why the author cannot finish the whole story in one or two books?" (unrecorded conversation). She was able to see things from a

different perspective. And she was never shy of expressing her views even if she knew she had different opinions from other people. In my eyes, she was sensitive and sharp. More importantly, she paid attention to the details. I myself have experienced this aspect of her. During a meeting I had with some participants, she suddenly got up to close the curtain, then turned to me and said, “I noticed that you were trying to avoid the sunlight” (unrecorded conversation). Feeling touched by her gesture, I thought to myself, ‘Here is a girl with great sensitivity and strength to act on her own.’

**My world.** Interviewing Peggy was an experience full of surprises. Besides her unique ways of IMing, the way she interacted with me was very different from other kids. She was never shy in correcting me when I made inaccurate assumptions or interpretations about what she had said during our interviews. She always contemplated before answering my questions. Her body, voice, and mind were united in the course of our conversation. I found the totality of Peggy in the way she composed her thoughts towards other people on Yahoo Messenger (see section, “Say it Clearly, Say it Right,” pp. 127-129). However, her willingness to open her world to me was not as conspicuous in her IMing with her friends.

[8] Wanju: Do you complain to your friends on Yahoo! Messenger?

Peggy: Yeah. I sometimes do. Not often though.

Wanju: Do you feel better afterwards?

Peggy: Not really.

Wanju: At least, you talk it out.

Peggy: [in an unenthusiastic manner] hmm. Yeah. Sort of.

Wanju: IMing your personal feelings is kind like writing diary, isn't it?

Peggy: [in an excited tone] *Diary?! I write diary. No. No. No. It is nothing like keeping a diary.*

Wanju: What is the difference between keeping a diary and IMing?

Peggy: [tone up] Oh, please. There is a great difference between them. IMing is mostly about other people's stuff (affairs). People won't ask my stuff. And, I rarely talk about myself. On the contrary, keeping a diary is like talking to myself. I ask myself questions. For example, I ask (or write to) myself: “How are you doing today?” Then, I answer: “I am so bored today.” Or, “there are so many things

bothering me.” Something like that. When I IM my friends, it is mostly about other people and very little is about me. (2-3)

In Peggy’s contrasting responses, I began to sense the wall between her and the outer world on IM. What discourages her from opening her world to other people? The comparison she makes between IMing and writing a diary, though on the surface talking about two different kinds of subjects (other people’s stuff vs. personal stuff), sharply discloses the major element distinguishing the two mediums – *the depth of a person’s inner engagement*. In her description of writing her diary, Peggy shows how she closely interacts with her inner world through reflecting on her days, expressing her feelings or comforting herself.

In contrast with her diary writing, Peggy’s conversations with her friends on Yahoo! Messenger are mostly centered on the topics of who is seeing whom or who is attracted to whom – “I often ask my friends who they like” (1-2). “My friends share their secrets with me” (1-2). In addition, in the context of IMing where messages are short (and the exchange of messages is fairly quick), human contacts sometimes tune into ordinary (bland). A lot of time an IM user usually has more than one chat window open at the same time. In other words, a *pure* one-to-one conversation on IM is inconceivable, let alone the fact that an individual could be engaged in other tasks when he or she is IMing. How much (energy or time) would individuals, in this case, Peggy and her friends, have for each other? The nature of the dialogue and the level of the inner connection between her and her friends is certainly incomparable with the intenseness and closeness she experiences when communicating with her true self while writing the diary. Less of her is involved in her dialogues on IM, although to some extent, she benefits from it as she is able to deepen her friendships with her IMing activity, and in particular, perhaps create better connections with her sister.

As I re-examine what Peggy said about writing in her diary and IMing with friends “they [=writing a diary and IMing] are very different” (2-3), I am convinced that “the depth of personal inner engagement” increases the distance between her and IMing. She does not rely on IMing to expand her social life (see section, “A Real Hug Relies On”, pp. 123-127). She does not believe IMing can solve her problems (see quote [7] above). She does not depend on IMing to enhance her real life relationships (see section: bridging the distance). Yahoo! Messenger (or IMing) is not the place she hangs her heart. Her diary, instead, is that sacred place.

Peggy logged in to Yahoo! Messenger two to three times a week at the most. She usually stayed online for one to two hours. She once did not go online for three weeks. Under the conditions where she had absolute freedom using the Internet, it was surprising that she could detach herself from this medium so easily. In my mind’s movie theater, Peggy appeared in scenes of her jumping and laughing to see the street dogs she adopted; quietly writing notes in her diary; chasing and playing with her peers happily. To her, life exists in the dimension of direct contact with genuine touches. This is how IMing dwells in a person with considerable maturity and higher morals.

## **Wendy**

Judging from her body build, one could easily mistaken Wendy, a fifth grader, for a third grader. She is tiny and short. (In a way, she is like the young children in the lower grades.) When she smiles, her two little dimples add abundant charm to her expression. When she talks, her soft voice, tone and the rhythm make her answers or responses sound more tender. She reminds me of the young Taiwanese children that usually start their sentences with “My mother said” or “My teacher said.” She often said “I will ask my mother” in a slow and soft tone with her head

nodding and her eyes staring at me sincerely. Whenever I went to the school to interview my participants, she liked to lean on me and listen to me talk with her classmates. To a certain degree, she was shy and introverted. She was like *Thumbelina* in the fairy tale that one thinks will retain the simple and innocent character forever. Her mature features (eyes, lips, and long hair) and her intense engagement in the Internet (IMing, playing online games, and making net-friends), however, say that she has come to a period when she is beginning to search for intimacy and more personal relationships, both online and offline. My first impression of Wendy was puzzling and filled with mixed feelings - hearing a baby-like looking child speak her more teenage-like stories.

Wendy comes from a single-parent family. "My father left us (Wendy and her mother) when I was only two years old. I was six years old when I saw him for the first time. I saw him less than ten times in my life . . . I just saw him last week. I didn't like the feeling at all. I don't want to see him anymore" (3-3). With no father and no siblings, she grew up with her mother. Although her aunts and her cousins of her age provided her with some companionship and attention, her mother was and is the major adult (and to some extent her main companion) in her life.

Wendy's mother looks young. She does not look old enough to have an 11 year old daughter. She and Wendy are more like sisters. They resemble each other in the way they talk, look, and sound. "People often say that we look alike and sound alike. My teacher and classmates often mistaken my mother for me when they call" (3-1). I was very impressed on how closely Wendy's mother imitated her during the interview. The similarity between Wendy and her mother reflected the close relationship they had. The way her mother took care of her, however, gave more subtle leads to this relationship. Having had a poor education that did not

enable her to deal with her daughter's education, she sent Wendy to the after-school program to assist her with her studies while she worked hard to provide a moderate income for the family. When she came home and put Wendy's favorite cakes on the dining table, the smile on Wendy's face revealed the strong tie between them and also the love her mother had for her. In a relationship in which the two only rely on each other, sometimes the care and love is detrimental to a growing soul.

In Wendy's portrait whether it was about her character or Internet activities, the relationship between her and her mother is critical and evident. It was her mother that took her to the Internet. It was also her mother that bought her the first online game. However, the heavy weight and the strong color of her mother in her life began to fade away as Wendy's journey on the Internet took off.

**A new playground.** Before Wendy started using computer, besides her mother, the television was her major companion at home. Then, the computer, a gift from her aunt, came when she was in first grade. Though it was a used one, it was good enough for her to play computer games on the CD-ROM. In a short period of time, the computer replaced the television on her companion list and the influence of the computer on her life continued to expand. Not long afterwards, she found out her cousins had an Internet service at their home, so the family computer was wired to the Internet, her wish recognized and granted by her mother – "My mother said it would be very convenient to have the Internet at home. We could find information easily and we could also play online games" (2-2). Ironically, the cause for them to subscribe to the Internet service, enjoying the convenience for information search, was rarely the reason they engaged in Internet activities in both Wendy's and her mother's cases. Throughout the course of

our interviews, playing online games and chatting with her online friends were the major Internet activities that she liked to share with me.

Before the computer was wired to the Internet, one could find Wendy in two places besides her home – the school and the after-school childcare center. The computer with the Internet service led her to a world that was exciting. New and old companions were often within the distance of the greeting text message – “*Ang Ang*”<sup>14</sup>(1-4). With a very lenient rule, “I can use the computer as long as I finish my homework. I always finish my homework at the childcare center. So, I have nothing to do when I am home” (2-5), she spent most of her after school hours on the Internet. On weekends, she dedicated her time to online games – “I can be really crazy about playing games on weekends . . . I sleep for few hours and play online games for the rest of the day” (2-11). Now, the new place (or the third place) that one could easily find her was the Internet.

[1] Wanju: Can you use the computer on weekdays?

Wendy: Yeah. I can.

Wanju: As long as you finish your homework, right?

Wendy: Yes, I can use computer when I finish my homework. *Well, (tone up) I should have said that I can use computer when I return home.* I attend after-school childcare center so I always finish my homework before I go home. I have nothing to do when I am home. The first thing I do is to go online. I stay on Yahoo! Messenger from 6:30 pm to 7:00 pm. Then I play online games until 9:00 pm or later.

Wanju: So, from 6:30 pm to 9:00 pm you are [pause]

Wendy repeated and completed the sentence: From 6:30 pm to 9:00 pm, I am *Wan* [playing]. (2-5)

The term, *Wan*, Wendy used to describe the time when she was online, has both positive and negative meanings. It can mean “enjoying one’s time.” It can also mean “vegging out.” By describing the time she spent on the Internet in that particular term, she seemed to be saying that the Internet was a playground to her. She came to this playground every day. On school nights,

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<sup>14</sup> *Ang Ang* is a popular greeting term that people use in IMing in Taiwan. It means good morning, good afternoon or good evening.

she would be here from 6:30 to 9:00 pm. On weekends, she stayed here except those few sleeping hours she needed to recharge herself to get back to the game. One could find her in the corner of Yahoo! Messenger having more intimate (or personal) IMing conversation with her friends (either online or offline) or families. One could also find her in the area of online games playing games and occasionally IMing with game players in the gaming chat rooms. One thing needing to be clarified is that she didn't play online games and IM on Yahoo! Messenger at the same time. She arranged her time on the Internet into two different sectors: IMing on Yahoo! Messenger from 6:30 pm to 7:00 pm; and online gaming from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm.

**Going to the Internet with her mother.** In the real world, children often go to playgrounds with their parents or friends. I could not help wondering how Wendy found this virtual playground where she liked to linger. There are times an individual finds his or her own way to the Internet. There are cases where a person is led to the Internet. Wendy's adoption of her Internet activities falls into the later category. "When I was in the third grade, my mother's colleague told my mother and me about Jin-Wu<sup>15</sup> [an online dancing game] . . . [and] she also told us about Yahoo! Messenger" (2-3). In a way, it was the colleague of Wendy's mother opening the door to the virtual community on the Internet for her. It was her mother that sustained her Internet activities.

Wendy and her mother played the same online game – Jin-Wu, made friends with players they knew in this game and they both enjoyed using Yahoo! Messenger to chat with friends. The Internet use in their house ran in the way of a relay, "I play games until 9 pm. Then, I log off because it is my mother's turn to play" (2-12). Their Internet usage resembled each other's with

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<sup>15</sup> Jin-Wu is a popular online dancing game among teenagers in Taiwan, originally released in South Korea in 2004. It is called Audition Dance Battle Online in the United States (Audition Online, 2009).

the pattern being – staying up late to play games on weekends and staying on the Internet until bed time on weekdays. They even competed with each other in Jin-Wu – “I am on my mother’s friend’s list in Jin-Wu. When she is at her friend’s house playing Jin-Wu, she sometimes IMs me and invites me to dance with her in the game” (2-15). None of my participants talked about IMing or playing online games with their parents. I asked Wendy’s mother about this when I interviewed her. “We only have one computer. It is impossible for me to play Jin-Wu with Wendy at home. [in a light tone] So, I play the game with her when I am at my friend’s place” (Ms. Liu). Both of them made no mention of explaining how or why they played games with each other. In the scenes where they played games together, her mother was a friend and a game partner. Her mother’s indifferent attitude seemed to suggest that beneath this unique relationship was a free pass for Wendy’s Internet activities. This free pass seemed to be the force that drove Wendy deeply into this virtual playground.

Occasionally, Wendy would be on the Internet together with her mother. Most of the time, she was accompanied by her online friends.

**A special place for her online friends.** There are several ways that a person can communicate with other people on the Internet, through text – instant messaging by a keyboard, voice – audio conferencing by a microphone, or voice and visual – video conferencing by a web camera. Each of these ways of communication represents different degrees of disclosure of a person and different levels of a relationship, especially when examining relationships among strangers on the Internet. For Wendy, IMing was the way that she communicated with other people on the Internet. Wendy “talks” to other people (friends in real life, online friends or strangers) on the Internet. As different methods of communication indicate different kind of relationships, the place where the IMing happens, to a certain degree, defines the relationship as

well. When Wendy's social life expanded and evolved in two different places on the Internet, online public chat rooms in the gaming system and Yahoo! Messenger, the distinct meanings of these two places in her mind became obvious and apparent.

[2] Wendy: My mother and I shared a Yahoo! Messenger account in the very beginning [when we started using Yahoo! Messenger]. However, it was kind of troublesome to share the account with my mother. Both of my mother and I play Jin-Wu and we all have online friends. If I added my online friends to the buddy list in that Yahoo! Messenger account then I had to disclose my mother's account name to my online friends. Therefore, I signed up for my own Yahoo! Messenger account. Before I played Jin-Wu, I didn't have any online friends so I shared the account with my mother.

Wanju: Who are on the buddy list of the Yahoo! Messenger account that you shared with your mother?

Wendy: Friends that we both know.

Wanju: How about your own account? Who are on your buddy list?

Wendy: Friends at school, my relatives, and I have one category, Dancing Friends, for my online friends. (1-2)

In the beginning, Wendy explained why she was reluctant to give away the joint Yahoo! account she shared with her mother. It was an obvious sign of her wanting to protect her mother's privacy. As she continued to talk about her own Yahoo! account in which the additional category compared with the old one was "Dancing Friends", the meaning of the new account was more about her personal privacy than her mother's. It seemed to me that her online dancing friends were the primary cause behind her desire for having her own Yahoo! Messenger account. I first took this transition in her way of communicating with her online friends as her intention to have a space of her own; however, the need for privacy, which is the major message that [2] indicates, seemed insufficient to explain why she signed up for another Yahoo! Messenger account. On the one hand, she didn't need Yahoo! Messenger to chat with her online friends. In fact, she could IM with her online friends in the chat rooms built in the online game. On the other hand, she had more than 50 online friends, however, only 21 of them were added to her Yahoo! Messenger

buddy list. [2] tells just a part of the story of why she signed up for her own Yahoo! account, but it was mostly for the cause of privacy.

I remember Wendy once said “I sometimes stay on the Yahoo! Messenger IMing with my friends and don’t want to play the game at all” (1-5). My intuition told me there should be a more personal reason behind her signing up for her own Yahoo! Messenger account. After [2], Wendy continued to talk about online friendships. When I asked her how she made friends in Jin-Wu, the more personal reason for having her own Yahoo! Messenger became clear.

[3] Wanju: You have talked a lot about online friends. I am really curious about how a person makes online friends. What should I do if I want to make online friends?  
Wendy: Well, you first dance with the person. You may feel that the person can become your friend. If you like the person then you can add the person to your friend list in Jin-Wu. After a while, you may become more familiar with the person and become online friends with him or her. Then, you ask for the person’s Yahoo! Messenger account. (1-4)

Although making online friends still largely depends on a person’s instinct and other unexplainable variables, Wendy delivered a systematic image of how an online friendship evolved according to her experience. An online friendship starts from a gaming chat room, a *public* space. Gradually it moves to the most private space, Yahoo! Messenger. [3] echoes what [2] indicates, Wendy’s perception of Yahoo! Messenger, is a fairly *private* communication arena. However, by comparing these two different levels of online friendship, there seems to be an essential characteristic difference between being friends only in online gaming chat rooms and being added to the Yahoo! Messenger buddy list. Yahoo! Messenger is more private and intimate whereas the chat room in the online game tends to be more public and distant. Her feelings for these two different contexts (online chat rooms and Yahoo! Messenger) certainly came from the collective behaviors and interactions she had with people.

**“I am Mad. Don’t IM me!”** When Wendy played games in Jin-Wu, she occasionally had brief text message exchanges with other game players. These IMing conversations with game players (most of them are strangers) in the online gaming chat rooms were often centered on the game. It could be some comforting words “Once I lost a game, one game player IMed me – ‘Don’t take it too seriously. What really matters is that you have fun’” (1-4). Nevertheless, the text messages among game players could have some hurtful words. This aspect of online gaming had never surfaced in our conversations until I asked Wendy whether she adopted a popular way of showing a person’s feeling on Yahoo! Messenger.

- [4] Wanju: Some people type in their feelings in the space of display name on Yahoo! Messenger, e.g. “I am so excited that I am going to Japan!” Do you also do this?  
Wendy: [quick response] I do. When I feel upset, I type “I am mad. Don’t IM me!” in the display name. . . . My *Gan-Jie* [older sister] is always the first one IMing me when I am mad.  
Wanju: What is it that upsets you so much that you don’t want to talk to anyone? Is it something that happened at school?  
Wendy: No. My mood is always affected by the online game.  
Wanju: Why?  
Wendy: When people call my name in the game, I log off from the online game immediately. Then, I log in to my Yahoo! Messenger account and I type “I am mad. Don’t IM me!” in my display name. And I stay there.  
Wanju: People call your name? Why?  
Wendy: There are some gaming modes that you have to team up with other players. There were times that I teamed up with some players to compete with other teams. When we lost the game, some of them accused me for making mistakes during the game and faulted me for the loss of our team. Some blame other players for losing games but some don’t. (tone down) *I don’t do that*. . . . When someone said something bad to me, I stay on Yahoo! Messenger for a while not wanting to play the game. (2-17)

Before this conversation, Wendy always talked about Jin-Wu in a delightful way. She made good friends in Jin-Wu. She had fun playing those games. Here, she painted a picture of Jin-Wu that gave me an opposing taste of Jin-Wu. The pain and hurt she had from those game players was strong and tangible when she murmured “I don’t do that” in a soft and low tone to finish her description of how people name-calling or finger-pointing each other (or her) in Jin-Wu.

Although I was sympathetic with her feeling bad about the name-calling, I also found that her immediate reaction to the situation in which she was name called showed that she tended to avoid problems or even refused to face problems. She could have defended herself or admitted her mistakes (if she did make mistakes during the game). She did neither but chose to hide herself in a place where she was sure to receive comfort instead of pain. She refused to give herself a chance to grow up.

Wendy's complaint about how other people bullied her or spoiled her game in Jin-Wu was reminiscent of what her teacher said about her, "Wendy seems to be a bit self-centered. She likes to make complaints about her classmates, especially those boys. But, she rarely reflects on her own acts. She is just like a *Da Shao Jie* [a little princess]" (Teacher Huang). Her teacher suggested her behavior or attitude towards people and things was because she is the only child for her single mother. In Teacher Huang's words, "She is spoiled by her mother."

Contrast this to the unpleasant experiences she has had in Jin-Wu, Yahoo! Messenger as she sketched in [4] seemed like a cozy harbor for her. I looked into the group of people she clung to on the Internet and felt her social life on the Internet was a replication of her life in the real world in which she tended to indulge herself with easily obtained kindness, care, and attention. The person who made her feel that Yahoo! Messenger was a warm and caring place was her *Gan-Jie*.

**Gan-Jie.** In our interviews, I noticed that Wendy constantly referred to some of her online friends in Jin-Wu as her *Gan-Jie* or *Gan-Ke*. In Mandarin, *Jie* means older sister and *Ke* means older brother. If one adds *Gan* before a sibling term, it means these two people are not biologically or maternally related, but they regard each other as siblings. In Taiwan, it is not an

uncommon practice for a person to become *Gan-sibling* to other people, especially when the person has no biological brothers or sisters.

Wendy had five *Gan-Ke* and one *Gan-Jie*. Most of them were the same age as Wendy, only a couple of them were a few years older than her. Through Wendy they began to be acquainted with each other and established a “sibling network” (or a family) on the Internet. They played games together in Jin-Wu. More often they IMed each other on Yahoo! Messenger. When they chatted on Yahoo! Messenger, it was like “*a strong wave erupting in a calm sea*” (1-10) when Wendy found it challenging to respond to her friends’ messages in time. Although she has never met any of her virtual siblings in person, she maintains a good relationship with them. However, the depths of their individual relationships varied and the ways of their interactions differed. Gender seemed to play a major role in this regard – “I talk about my personal stuff with my girl friends. However, I only talk about games with boys” (1-5). Her *Gan-Jie* certainly was the girl with whom she shared most of her feelings and sometimes personal problems.

When I asked Wendy how she felt about having online friends, she responded “[pause a few seconds, in a deeper voice] hmm. If there are things that I don’t know how to deal with then I can ask advice from my *Gan-Jie*. For example: my personal stuff or daily stuff. My *Gan-Jie* often tells me how to cope with those things” (1-8). In her eyes, her *Gan-Jie* was the source of valuable advice and a great comfort (as shown in [4]). As she sometimes referred to her by *Jie* instead of *Gan-Jie*, it seemed apparent that she saw her *Gan-Jie* as her real sister. In fact, her *Gan-Jie* was the only person she really wished to meet (1-7).

In reviewing Wendy’s interaction with people on the Internet, *Gan-Jie* seemed to be the symbol that represented her online friendship that always gave her a feeling of genuineness and kindness. In this particular relationship, she was looked after as a little sister. In the real world,

she had several close friends with whom she also shared her personal feelings. But her temper to some extent, drove her peers away. “Wendy is very emotional. I sometimes don’t know what went wrong when she was upset” (unrecorded conversation). Contrast this to the full attention she received from her online friends and the closeness she felt with them, her peers in the real world are less attentive and tolerant; and they are less competitive than her online friends. “I rarely chat with my classmates on Yahoo! Messenger. I greet them when they are online. That’s what I do most of the time” (2-5). Her time on the Internet was almost solely for those who gave her the feeling of *Gan-Jei*.

**A brief moment of confession.** Ever since Wendy began to play Jin-Wu, made online friends, and formed a group of online siblings, she had become more and more engaged with the Internet. Her world was dominated by the Internet. Even with her mother’s warnings and concerns, she continued to spend her time online playing games or chatting. “I was not happy when I saw her grade report. She dropped out of the 10th place. I told her not to play games for too long. But, it didn’t work” (Ms. Liu). “My mother told me not to subscribe to those games and the gaming accessories. I just ignored her” (1-3).

When Wendy was so attached to the Internet, changes in her life were inevitable. Besides expanding her social life and gaining more attention from other people, there were changes that she did not want to see in her life.

- [5] Wanju: Do you feel playing online games has made changes in your studies?  
Wendy: [Gaspd] Of course. It makes a huge impact on my studies. (tone down)  
Before I became so obsessed with the game, I was ranked the seventh in my class. In the latest exam, I dropped to the thirteenth place . . . My mother told me not to be so addicted to the game. But I cannot help it. I feel I become more and more addicted to it. . . . And sometimes I want to log off from the game but my friends keep asking me to play it with them. (2-13)

Wendy saw her grades drop and understood that her gaming was deteriorating her life. Still she said “I cannot help it” in [5]. And another time, she said “I play Jin-Wu every day. This is why my studies are getting worse” (1-5). She was obviously a smart girl as her teacher described, who was capable of taking care of her studies. I have seen her talk about her studies in an enthusiastic way. “I really like mathematics. Some of my classmates even copy my homework. But, it doesn’t matter because I enjoy doing mathematics” (3-8). Nevertheless, when her attachment for the Internet was controlling her and the external parental guidance was not working (or sometimes missing) in her life, she needed her inner strength more than her intelligence. At the end of [5], she again mentioned her online friends in explaining her being addicted to Jin-Wu. It says to me that she tried to move away from the problem as she did to those bully online gamers (see section, “I am Mad. Don’t IM me!”, pp. 139-141). She refused to face her problems and kept indulging herself with the fun, excitement or attention at the cost of losing her ground in her studies or life. If the essence of her life, lacking external guidance, searching for companions from strangers and vegging out in the online games, remains the same, the confession in [5] might not only be brief but also meaningless.

## Chapter 5

### Cross-Case Discussion

In this chapter, I aim to present several themes embedded within these five children's portraits. In resonating with the goal of the portraits, which is to illustrate how IMing exists in a child's life including the child's IMing experience and how it is related to other aspects in his or her life, I categorize my findings into two major parts. In part one, "patterns observed," I focus on the participants' IMing experiences from which I identify five themes: (a) Getting to know Yahoo! Messenger, (b) Being in the Yahoo! Messenger, (c) Yahoo! Messenger as a social tool, (d) IMing malfunctions, and (e) Everyone uses IMing in a different way.

In part two, "a larger image of the child," I look into the development of the five participants and present individual sketches for each of them. I suggest the sketches resonate with Cooley's "primary group consciousness." Cooley (1909) argues that primary groups such as family, children play-groups, and the neighborhood or community group of elders are critical in nurturing and forming the social nature and ideals of the individual (pp. 23-24); however, he also indicates a child's individuality ("natural freedom" or "self-assertion" in his words) is also retained through the interaction between the child and the primary group (ibid., pp. 32-50). It is essential to understand both the tremendous presence of the primary groups in the child's life and the individuality of the child to obtain a complete picture of how the child's nature is shaped (or develops). In this part, through each sketch of the participants, I aim to give an image of how the child's individuality permeates his or her way of being in primary groups (the family and peer groups) as well as how the images of the child's primary group are projected through him or her. I will also look at how these two aspects are reflected in the way he or she uses Yahoo! Messenger.

## **Part One: Patterns Observed**

**Getting to know Yahoo! Messenger.** There are two entities through which the participants in this project knew Yahoo! Messenger and began to use IMing: (1) family members; and (2) the computer class at the school. Jack, Peggy, and Wendy belong to the first category. Kevin and Jane fall into the second one.

**Family members.** Peggy learned Yahoo! Messenger from her older sister when she was eight years old. For Jack, who was also eight years old the first time he became acquainted with IMing, it was his cousin, five years his senior, who told him about “the new and quick way of getting in touch with each other while living apart” (Jack, 1-2). Wendy began using Yahoo! Messenger with her mother and in fact, shared a Yahoo! Messenger account with her mother after her mother told her about it. She was nine years old at that time. It seems that for participants who had older siblings, relatives are more likely to learn IMing at a younger age. Wendy’s case also suggests that a family’s computer use plays a role in a child’s Internet (or computer) activities. Kevin and Jane didn’t know Yahoo! Messenger until their computer teacher taught it to them. Both of them are the first child in their families. Neither Kevin nor Jane has siblings or relatives that are about their age who are also interested in computer technology, or more specifically, the Internet. Their parents merely use the Internet for information and have never used Yahoo! Messenger. Both of them have less influence from their families on their Internet activities than the other participants. Therefore, the computer class at the school is more critical for them in learning new computer technology.

**The computer class on Yahoo! Messenger.** I conducted this project in an elementary school that includes Yahoo! Messenger as a lesson topic in its fourth grade computer curriculum. All of my participants were fifth graders when I recruited and interviewed them and all of them

had the formal computer class of Yahoo! Messenger taught by the same computer teacher when they were at the fourth grade in this school. Kevin didn't know Yahoo! Messenger until this computer class. Jane began to use it after this class. Jack, Peggy, and Wendy who knew it before this class began to IM with their peers and later spent more time IMing with their peers than their family members. It seems to me that this computer class has several symbolic meanings. It *introduces Yahoo! Messenger to 11-year-olds. More importantly, it creates a trend of using Yahoo! Messenger among the students and consequently alters the image of the students' Internet activities.*

Although Jack, Peggy, and Wendy started using IMing one or two years earlier than Kevin and Jane, at the time of this study, all of the participants had similar, equivalent knowledge or familiarity in regards to the functionalities embedded in Yahoo! Messenger. In other words, there is no direct relation between their technological knowledge or skills of IMing and the length of time they had used IMing. One possible explanation of this phenomenon is the content and the requirements of the particular computer class, Yahoo! Messenger. "The computer teacher requested us to apply for a Yahoo! Messenger account on our own. I kept trying and trying to apply for an account online until I had my own account" (Kevin, 2-11). The computer teacher also indicated that "The class is not merely to teach students about Yahoo! Messenger or how to IM. Students have to know where and how to download it [Yahoo! Messenger] and they have to be able to install it on a computer" (Teacher Lee). Apparently the computer class put every student, whether he or she was an early adopter or a late comer to IMing, at a decent (and may be a similar) IMing skill level.

**Being in the (context of) Yahoo! Messenger.** The computer class of Yahoo! Messenger brought these participants and their classmates altogether to the context of Yahoo! Messenger

even though these five participants began to use Yahoo! Messenger at different ages. Peggy could finally IM with her peers after using Yahoo! Messenger exclusively with her older sister. “My elder sister taught me to use Yahoo! Messenger when I was in the second grade. None of my classmates or friends did IMing then. I could only IM my sister” (Peggy, 2-1). Instead of IMing with his cousin, Jack indicated – “I IM more with my classmates [after the class]” (Jack, 1-2). There exists an obvious transition in these children’s IMing “community” due to this particular computer class. A trend of IMing with peers developed among students in this school and prevailed. Since most of students have computers at home<sup>16</sup>, *IMing has become one of their after-school activities*. Yahoo! Messenger seemed to become an alternative backyard playground for the students. In this section, I discuss several questions about these participants’ behaviors on Yahoo! Messenger including: (1) When do they IM?; (2) Whom do they IM?; (3) What do they IM?; and (4) How do they feel about IMing?.

**When do they IM?: Computer rules.** In 2009, Symantec Corporation (2009), mostly known for the Norton AntiVirus software, surveyed 9,000 online adults and children in 12 countries<sup>17</sup> about the impact of technology and Internet usage on relationships, parenting, and security. Their report, “Norton Online Living Report 09,” showed that children, ages between 8 and 17 of years, in the United States, had the largest average IM use at 10 hours a week with friends and family, whereas children surveyed for the report from all 12 countries on average spent 3 hours a week IMing. 62 percent of the adults believed children spent too much time on the Internet. 38 percent of the children felt they were wasting their time when they were online. In addition, 7 in 10 children had rules for using the Internet at home. Although this report did not

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<sup>16</sup> “Almost everyone in my class has a computer at home. Only one girl does not have a home computer” (Peggy, 1-8)

<sup>17</sup> The 12 countries include the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, China, Japan, India, Australia, and Brazil.

specify what the rules were, whether they were more about the time children spent online or the safety issues regarding the Internet, the report implied that parents acknowledged the importance of guiding their children's Internet activities. The portraits of the participants in this study also reflect similar parental concerns. Participant parents created computer rules for their children, going beyond the categories of the questionnaire and issues in the Norton report. In this section, I focus on the computer rules regulating the time that children spend online.

Most participants in this study share computers either with their parents or siblings. Jane is the only child who has her own personal computer at home. When using computer at home, these children have computer rules to follow. These rules, however, are not for allocating computer time or scheduling time for family members. Most participants and their parents in this study indicated that these rules are to prevent children from spending too much time on the Internet. To some extent, the computer rules are to ensure that children have enough time for study. "I think children have very little self-control. So, I lay down rules for Jane to use the computer" (Mr. Tsai). "My mother prohibits me from using the computer on weekdays. She worries that I would become addicted to it" (Jack). This to some degree, reflects the conditions of using the computer at home, at least among the professional parents in Taiwan.

I put the computer rules into three categories: (1) Weekends only; No computer on weekdays: Jack and Kevin; (2) After completing homework: Jane and Wendy; and (3) No rules at all: Peggy. Wendy can use the computer as long as she finishes her homework. She stays on the Internet either playing online games or IMing with her friends from 6:30 to 9:30 on weekday evenings. On weekends she is online nearly 24 hours. Peggy can use the computer whenever she wants. Ironically, she rarely uses it and even feels that using the computer is a waste of time. Jack also has the same attitude towards computer. Jane uses the computer like background

music. She often logs on to Yahoo! Messenger after school but busies herself with other things. Unlike Wendy who stays online and focuses on either playing games or IMing, Jane checks her Yahoo! Messenger occasionally and replies to her messages when needed.

When looking into these participants' computer rules and their ways of using IMing (especially Peggy's and Wendy's cases), apparently computer rules have no direct effect on the duration and frequency of IMing. The five children do not have the relationship with the Internet (or the computer) as the computer rules might suggest.

***Who do they IM?: The buddy list.*** Researchers indicate that Instant Messaging systems have become one of the major (and favorable) spaces for friends and family to stay connected with each other (Barker, 2009; Bradley, 2005; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Grinter et. al, 2006; Livingstone, 2003; Symantec Corporation, 2009). According to the Norton Online Living 2009 report, 1 in 4 children add their parents to their buddy lists and 10 percent of the surveyed children use new technologies such as IMing, texting, emailing and so on to connect with their grandparents. This report shows while online friends occupy a portion of one's IMing time, friends and family are still the prominent recipients of IM. Grinter and Palen (2002) interviewed 16 teenage IM users (age from 14 to 20; the majority were 17-year-olds). They suggest both high school students and college students IM with their real life friends. College students living away from home also IM with family and distant friends.

Some of the findings in the quoted research above are illustrated in my study. Three of my participants IM with net-friends. Of the children in the study, Wendy is the only child that IMs with her mother and none of them have ever IMed with their grandparents<sup>18</sup>. For the five children, friends and classmates are the two main groups with whom they IM. Despite these

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<sup>18</sup> The discrepancy between my observation and the general report could be a future study on issues of generation gap, promotion of computer technology.

research findings, it's insufficient to report a child's IMing activities by looking merely at two categories, since this study aims to obtain a deeper understanding of the child and how they integrate IMing into their lives.

To know more about who my participants interact with on Yahoo! Messenger, I pointedly looked at their Yahoo! Messenger buddy lists. There seemed to be a consensus among the participants as to whom to add to their buddy lists. For those who knew Yahoo! Messenger through their siblings or relatives such as Jack, Peggy and Wendy, they created their buddy list initially with their siblings or relatives. Jack's cousin was the first person he added to his buddy list; Peggy added her sister to begin with; Wendy began her buddy list with her mother. Nonetheless, after the first computer class on Yahoo! Messenger, their buddy lists began to develop differently. They added their classmates and peers to their buddy lists. They started from the core of their social life, their close friends, and then extended the list to their acquaintances. They usually took the initiative to ask their friends for their Yahoo! account and then added them to the buddy lists. Since using IMing or having a Yahoo! Messenger account is a common thing among them and their peers, they were also approached by their peers for their accounts. They hesitated to add peers with whom they were not familiar. "I rarely add those people who are not my good friends to my Yahoo! Messenger buddy list. They ask me to add them but I sort of ignore them. [I] Don't want to add them to my buddy list" (Jane, 2-7). Kevin adds: "I wouldn't ask people whom I am not familiar with for their Yahoo! Messenger account. They don't ask me, either" (Kevin, 2-10).

The way these participants compose their buddy lists seems to suggest: (1) Yahoo! Messenger is a more personal space that they only want to share with selected people whom they trust; (2) *to a great extent, their buddy lists echo their social lives in the real world.* This

observation is coherent with the findings in Grinter and Palen's study where they indicate for most of their participants "IM peer group reflected . . . real space relationship" (2002, p. 24). Considering the findings of both my study and Grinter and Palen's, IMing seems to be closely related to an individual's real world social life for children and teenagers.

Another observation on the buddy list is that as the participants' social lives expand, their buddy lists become larger. On average, these participants have 25 people on their buddy list, with the exception of Peggy having more than 100 people on her list. Peggy has two Yahoo! Messenger accounts; one is for her friends in the real life and the other one is for her online friends. When we were talking about her buddy list, she excitedly said, "If I add these two accounts together, I would have more than 100 people on my buddy list. Am I awesome [laugh]?" (Peggy, 2-2). Other participants were not as enthusiastic about the number of people on their buddy lists as Peggy was. Jane: "Hmm, I am not sure. I have never counted" (Jane, 2-7). Jack: "I never pay attention to that [how many people on the buddy list]. . . . I guess it is about 20-something" (Jack, 1-2). Jack even puts his friends on the ignore list when needed. He definitely doesn't care how many people are on his buddy list. As for Peggy's excited attitude towards the number 100, it cannot be interpreted as her feelings about those people. In her portrait, she sometimes appears distant towards some of her friends, especially her online friends on Yahoo! Messenger. To some extent, she treats them as numbers or names that show on her buddy lists, not as real humans with any character or feelings. This "bragging right" or particular attitude, hints that some IM users, especially the young, may add people to their buddy lists purely for the sake of making the list larger.

**What do they IM?: Chit-chat, gossip, and feelings.** Personal communication leads as the primary Internet use in the research literature. Socializing with peers is found to be the

dominate activity among teenagers when they use IM systems. Grinter and Palen (2002) suggest young people's IM conversations are informal and are mostly "reflections on the day's events, gossip about others . . . or flirting and even breaking up with boyfriends and girlfriends" (p. 25). Other studies whether on children's or adults' IMing usage, imply that IMing dialogue tends to be casual (Bradley, 2005; Grinter et al, 2006). Similar to these research findings, my participants' IMing conversation with their peers is like everyday chit-chat. "We talk about what happened in the school"; "Gossip"; "Who likes whom"; "I talk about my feelings"; "I would complain to my friends". In Kevin's portrait, he brought up the secret notebook that his classmates "wrote whatever they wanted. Some of them wrote their secrets or gossip about our classmates in it [the secret notebook] such as someone likes or dislikes someone" (Kevin, 4-2). He then drew a connection between the notebook and IMing. It seems that Yahoo! Messenger is a secret place where a person might be more comfortable (or feel safer) to talk about the things on his or her mind. In these participants' IMing conversations with their peers, there are personal feelings (happiness, sorrow or anger), secrets, and gossip. Although Jack and Jane also use IMing for *homework*, this does not happen often.

Besides chatting with their friends on Yahoo! Messenger, Peggy, Jane and Wendy also IM with their online friends. Their IM conversations with their online friends are different from the dialogue they have with their real life friends. Peggy and Jane are more like passive listeners when they IM with their online friends. "We [Jane and her online friends] talk about where to play games or which song we should choose to dance to next. Something related to the game" (Jane, 2-8). "We [Peggy and her online friends] never talk about our private stuff. (Why?) Well. They are just "net-friends" . . . It just doesn't feel right. I am afraid that they might lie to me" (Peggy, 2-8). In contrast to Peggy and Jane's wary attitude towards their online friends, Wendy,

on the other hand, is very close to her online friends. She talks about her personal issues and feelings to these 'friends' sharing intimate information. Wendy is also emotionally dependent on her online friends needing their input on various situations, "When I am mad, my online friends are always there for me" (Wendy, 2-17).

**Yahoo! Messenger and social lives.** Research on age groups of 15 or above contend that Instant Messaging systems (AOL; Yahoo! Messenger; MSN; Skype) play an important role in their users' social lives whether for enhancing their real life relationships or expanding their social lives connecting with people beyond the boundaries of age, gender, race, profession, and geography (Bradley, 2005; Chak & Leung, 2004; Chou & Peng, 2007; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Grinter et al., 2006; Livingstone, 2002; Livingstone, 2003; Symantec Corporation, 2009). The literature assumes that IMing is more likely used to supplement an individual's social life, especially for high school students and college freshmen (age between 15 and 20 years old). In Bradley's study (2005) and in Grinter and Palen's study (2002), adolescents IM mostly with their peers at school to keep their membership in their social groups. Barker (2009) found college freshmen IM with close friends and members in their own social groups.

With 11-year-old children, my findings of IM use differ slightly from what the available research literature suggests even though at surface level there are similarities. For instance, all of my participants use IMing with their classmates, friends and relatives. Three of them became friends with their online acquaintances whom they knew through online gaming. IMing is a part of their social life whether online or offline. The role of IM in my five participants' social lives might not be as essential as it appears to be in the teenagers' lives in the quoted literature. IMing is critical for Jane's and Wendy's social lives, but, this is not so for Jack, Kevin and Peggy.

To further explain IMing in these five participants' social lives, I begin talking about IMing in these participants' offline relationships. This is followed by a discussion of IMing and online friendships.

*IMing and offline relationships.* IMing is almost certainly affiliated with these participants' relationships with their peers or friends, since all of them are using IMing with their friends in real life. Participants in this study seem to share a positive attitude toward the role of IMing in their social life. Jack: "I feel better [after complaining to my friends on Yahoo! Messenger]. My friends give me comfort more or less. I trust them more and feel closer to them" (Jack, 1-11). Kevin: "It [IMing] gives me more time to talk to my classmates. I understand them more and we gradually become closer to each other" (Kevin, 2-12). Jane: "When I have a fight with my classmates at school, it is embarrassing for me to apologize in person, but I can apologize to the person on Yahoo! Messenger when he or she is online. I feel less embarrassed apologizing to my classmate this way" (Jane, 2-13). Peggy: "I felt more comfortable talking to my sister on Yahoo! Messenger. It seemed awkward to say things to her in person" (2-1) and "I asked her [Peggy's sister] questions that I would not ask her in person" (3-1).

Seeing their reflections on IMing in their social lives as a whole, three characteristics of IMing emerge: (a) Availability; (b) Anonymity; and (c) Privacy and Intimacy. IMing, one of the after-school activities, provides more time and opportunity for the children to get in touch with their peers. Without seeing the person on the other end, Yahoo! Messenger to some degree, becomes an anonymous space that provides a safety net allowing its users to feel more comfortable in talking with others. The atmosphere of the IMing conversation then becomes cozy and genuine.

Most participants in this study indicate that IMing more or less assists them in maintaining a good relationship with their peers. This is cohesive with findings in other research that IMing has a positive effect on a person's relationships and it seems to become a major component in a person's social life (Bradley, 2005; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Grinter et al., 2006; Livingstones, 2003; Peter et al., 2007). In Bradley's study (2005), one of her research participants mentions "Not being on [IM] . . . is like . . . out of the loop. I think there are a lot of people who do it because they need to be in the loop" (p. 70). Grinter and Palen (2002) found their participants experienced "high and sustained IM use because of a desire to conform to and increase socializing opportunities with their peers" (p. 23). IMing is apparently vital in one's relationships with peers, like the 14-year-old girl in the study described, "it was a matter of 'be on or be out'" (ibid.). While most of my participants think IMing is beneficial to their relationships, *none of my participants feel they are out of the loop if they are unable to IM their friends*. They do not experience pressure to be online IMing with their peers in order to keep their friendships. In addition, IMing is not the only way for them to be connected with their peers. In fact, Kevin, Jack and Peggy are not always online and are not attached to this way of interacting with peers. Although Kevin credits IMing for giving him more time and opportunities to talk with his peers, it is obvious that his popularity in his class has more to do with in-person interactions. His portrait shows that in his peers' eyes he is knowledgeable, kind, and trustworthy. His case suggests that *face-to-face interaction is the foundation of a good relation; IMing alone cannot build a good relation*. When I asked Jack if he felt awkward seeing his classmates after confiding to them on Yahoo! Messenger, he answered, "No, I don't. I would tell them those things in person as well" (1-11). For my participants, *IMing seems to be a supplement not a substitute for in-person communication*.

In Peggy's portrait, although she has a good interaction with her sister on Yahoo! Messenger, they retain a distance from each other in real life. This hints to the possibility that *the interaction between two people on Yahoo! Messenger does not always transfer into real life*. In some cases though, it does transfer to one's real life relationships, in others, it does not, as Peggy's experience shows. For this reason, IMing is not necessarily related to a person's relationship in a positive way. This coincides with the assertion that IMing alone cannot build a good relationship (which I contend by using Kevin's experiences; see above). In this study, I found that the more the participants IM with their friends (or families) the better they understand them. Nevertheless, it does not guarantee a better relationship in real life. It merely enhances a better understanding between one another making it the largest common denominator of the role of IMing in these participants' social lives.

***IMing and online friendships.*** Online friends or net-friends are people that a person knows through the Internet (e.g. online gaming, blogging or listserv and so on). Researchers have found a part of a child's Internet activities is related to his or her online friends (Bradley, 2005; Chak & Leung, 2004; Chou & Peng, 2007; Livingstone, 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Symantec Corporation, 2009; Turkle, 1995). The Norton Online Living 09 report shows that 55 percent (up from 45 percent in 2008) of the children they surveyed have made friends online, averaging 37 online friends. This report does not provide any information on where and how children meet online friends.

In this study, only girls, Peggy, Jane, and Wendy, have online friends. They all know their online friends through online games. They also share a similar pattern in building an online friendship which starts with a typical online greeting "Ang Ang" which literally means "good morning", "good afternoon" or "good evening" among Taiwanese IMing users. Wendy depicts

how she becomes friends with game players in *Jin-Wu*, an online dancing game, literally meaning “dance up a storm.” “Well, you first dance with the person. You may feel that the person can become your friend. If you like the person then you can add the person to your friend list in Jin-Wu. After a while, you may become more familiar with the person and become online friends with him or her. Then, you ask for the person’s Yahoo! Messenger account” (Wendy, 1-4). In this systematic way of making online friends portrayed by Wendy, it is apparent that an online friendship grows in the public context of the game’s chat room. Then this interplay evolves into a more private space which is Yahoo! Messenger. There is no research specifying how children make friends on the Internet. In the research explaining how online friendships develop among adults, there seems to be a similar way of forming friendships on the Internet. Bakardjieva (2005) suggests that online communication between strangers takes place in multiple dimensions where there is a “public-private-intimate continuum” (p. 185). When looking back at the way my study participants composed their buddy lists (see section, “Who do they IM?: The Buddy List,” pp. 152-154), the way their online friends made it to their buddy lists strengthens the assertion that *Yahoo! Messenger is a private and personal place that one shares with only a select few*. Although the way that Jane, Peggy and Wendy became online friends with other people was more or less similar, their attitudes and actions towards online friends are quite different. Whereas Wendy is closely connected with her online friends, Peggy and Jean keep a certain distance between themselves and their online friends. As for the boys, Jack and Kevin, they are wary about making online friends. “My parents would be worried sick if I have online friends” (1-9), Jack explains. “It is not safe, very dangerous! What would happen to me if they blackmail me?” (2-13), Kevin says in a worried voice. Jane and Peggy being cautious of interacting with their net-friends as well as Jack and Kevin being vigilant about making online

friends, reflect the increasing concern over cyberspace safety for both children and adults (Chou & Peng, 2007; MSNBC, n.d.; Symantec Corporation, 2009). In the Norton Online Living Report 09 (Symantec Corporation, 2009), 70 percent of the surveyed parents are talking to their children about online safety which is up 20 percent from 2008 (p. 5) and 7 in 10 children have been given rules for using the Internet. My participants also mentioned that their parents talk about online safety with them. “My father said I should not give my online friends my real name and home address” (Jane). “My mother told me not to go to some websites” (Kevin). Parents in my study also mention that they are concerned about children’s safety on the Internet and have talked about online safety with their children. “When Peggy is IMing, I sometimes ask who she is IMing with.” (Mrs. Wu). “I feel she [Wendy] is too much engaged with her online friends. I told her to stay away from them” (Ms. Liu).

**IMing malfunctions: Communication problems.** In the previous sections, I have talked about the role of Yahoo! Messenger in my five participants’ social lives either online or offline. It seems that IMing is more or less beneficial in one’s social life. However, there are problems associated with this way of communicating – expressing one’s thoughts in text messages, being completely unaware of the sub-context that the other person is in, and chatting with multiple people individually at the same time. These problems come in play with several participants in this study, but these particular problems have never been explored by researchers.

***Conveying one’s thoughts in text messages.*** Typos result in misinterpretation of IMing messages. Typing slowly halts the flow of an IMing conversation. Jack was yelled at by his peers when unable to respond to his messages quickly enough. “Why do you type so slowly? Faster!” (Jack, 1-16). He could not understand his friends’ messages which contained many typos and indicated that he relied on face-to-face communication to fully understand his friends’ messages.

Typos and typing speed can be resolved when a person is more careful composing his or her message and practices his or her typing. Jack points out a problem with IMing that is difficult to solve, “I have to type a lot to express my feelings or thoughts” (Jack, 1-16). In Peggy’s portrait, she shows an interesting and creative way of expressing her thoughts on Yahoo! Messenger. She uses parentheses to clarify what she means. She gives an example of her text messages with explanations in two parentheses. “Forget it! (I am angry) (Just Joking)” (Peggy, 2-5). In this particular message, she is trying to tell her friend that she is not angry and she is in fact joking about feeling upset. Unfortunately, this way of IMing is still not effective enough to convey her thoughts. “Even if I use parentheses to make myself clear, what I try to say to you might still be vague” (Peggy, 2-5). She continued to say in a louder voice using a gesture showing frustration – “This is a super big problem” (Peggy, 2-5). It is indeed difficult to express one’s thoughts and feelings in text messages.

Peggy agonizing on the difficulty of making herself clear when IMing signifies that the unfolding of one’s self is limited in IMing. Her experience illustrates that operating in this medium makes it impossible to connect with others at a deeper level. This is shared by researchers (Bowers, 2000; Mander, 1991; Nie, 2001) that say that the interaction on the Internet completely lacks the direct contact that one feels in face-to-face interaction.

***Multiple chat-windows; Never-ending chat.*** Jane, being very sociable and never refusing her peers’ requests, often has multiple chat-windows open at the same time. She may have a group chat with multiple friends on the same topic. Or, she may chat with them individually on different topics. Before she sends out her text messages, she has to check whose chat window she is on to prevent her from sending a wrong message to the wrong person. When one is engaged in multiple chats, he or she is more likely to be distracted and has difficulty staying focused on one

particular message. In Jane's case, it seems that the attention she gives to the person whom she is IMing with is implicitly shared by other people who are waiting for her responses. One cannot be completely in tune with his or her friends while multiple chat-windows are open and messages are flooding in. Jane's case reminds me of Doug in Turkle's research (1995). Doug, a college junior, portrays multiple roles simultaneously in MUD chat windows. In his point of view, "RL [Real Life] is just one more window" (ibid., p. 13). Although Jane is not involved in "identity experimenting" as Doug appears to be on the Internet, she and Doug are segmented in those multiple chat windows. Neither one of them is presenting themselves as a "whole." Noddings (2003, 2005a, 2005b) emphasizes a caring interaction happens when one is completely connected with the other person. In transmitting one's concern and care through IMing, a caring relationship is difficult to form.

Besides a person not being able to be as whole when interacting with others, there is no control over the length of an IMing conversation since any pop-up message from a friend can expand an IMing conversation. "There were times I wanted to finish conversations with my friends but they popped up messages to me right before I was about to close the chat window. (laugh) I have to respond to their messages. And our conversations continue and get longer" (Jane, 2-7). Wendy also indicates being pulled back to IMing right before she is about to log off. As most of the participants indicated, they IM on multi-various topics with their friends, sometimes a polite greeting leads to a conversation that lasts for hours. Time management is a critical issue in this regard. Many researchers also warn about the loss of time effecting academic performance. These are major issues resulting from Internet over involvement (Chou & Peng, 2007; Fox et al., 2009; Tsai & Lin, 2001, 2003; Young, 1998).

***Intrusive or not?*** When is the best time to IM is a question that has no correct answer, especially in the context where one has no clues of the person's current status from the basic question, the availability of the person, to a more sophisticated one, the person's emotional availability – If he is too busy to IM; If she is out and unable to reply the message; If he is not in the mood to IM; If she is happy about what I say.

Jack, Jane, and Wendy use the function of “Display name” to indicate their status to their friends. They put “Don't IM me” on the display name to indicate that they are not available, they don't want to be bothered or they are not in the mood to chat. Jean and Jack feel frustrated and even upset when their friends send them text messages after the message “Don't IM me!” is up on their display name. “My status says it clear that I don't want to chat. I feel they are rude” (Jack, 4-6). Jane: “I find these people annoying! . . . I don't understand why they still send me messages” (Jane, 2-12). However, in Wendy's story, her “I am mad. Don't IM me!” is a cue that tells her friends she wants to talk and she is in need of comfort, even though she writes “don't.” Whether one is intrusive or not on Yahoo! Messenger remains a delicate question even with the tech-assistance of “Display name.”

**Everyone uses IMing in a different way.** In the previous sections, I discuss issues and patterns related to IM use from both the literature and my study. In general, the literature suggests the main thing about IMing for teenagers is socializing with peers. Even though the five 11-year-old children in my study illustrate that IM use is related to socializing, there is much differentiation among them. Each one of them shows unique ways of IM use and brings their own languages to IMing.

***Jack: Strong individuality.*** No abusive words, no junk mails, no Spams, and no messages when he says “Don't IM me” – this is what Jack expects from his peers when they IM.

He never hesitates to take his friends off his buddy list on Yahoo! Messenger. He never compromises when he feels they “violate” his rules. Within the parameters of his rules, he, however, keeps a soft spot for his peers. They talk about personal problems and give each other comfort. IMing is beneficial to his friendships; however, it is not the only thing that sustains his social life. His abilities, his intelligence, and the way he interacts with his peers in person surpass what is between him and his peers on Yahoo! Messenger. He has a clear view and a rational attitude towards IMing. To some extent, he is detached from it. “The computer is for chatting and music. That’s all. Sometimes I just stare at the screen doing nothing on the computer but thinking of things” (4-1).

*Jane: IMing is the background music of her everyday life.* When Jane sees her close friends on Yahoo! Messenger, she talks to them before she leaves to play her online games. When she is not available to IM, she puts “out for dinner”, “watching TV” or “don’t IM me” on her display name. She tries to be available for her friends as she makes sure they know where she is or what she is doing. Although she is frustrated by her friends not paying attention to her status and IMing her while she is out, she finds IMing a good way to stay connected with her friends and sometimes a nice way to make up with them. Using the computer is her first priority after finishing her homework. The computer is often switched on as soon as she is home (even if it means she has to break the computer rules). When the computer is on, she is definitely on Yahoo! Messenger. Even if she steps away from the computer, she is sure to return to it as IMing has become the background of her everyday life. IMing is always there reminding her of the existence of her friends on Yahoo! Messenger and of the next text message waiting for her response.

**Kevin: Taking advantages of IMing but distancing himself from it.** Everything is about other people when Kevin IMs with his peers. IMing is for him to get to know his classmates. It is sometimes a place for him to talk about his cool classmates or things at the school. He feels closer to his peers and has fun IMing with them. The atmosphere or tone of his IMing conversation with his peers is comfortable and pleasant. Nevertheless, there is a certain part of him he keeps hidden from the IMing circle. His personal questions are rarely and almost never the topic of the IM dialogue. He is accustomed to dealing with his feelings on his own. IMing is practical and fun but it is not the way he finds his comfort and peace.

**Peggy: Computer time is wasteful.** IMing was a surprise to Peggy. It is a means for her to know more about her sister – an obvious advantage when she thinks of the cold in-person relationship between herself and her sister. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between their online and offline interaction gives Peggy more of the realization of the limits of IMing. “The Internet is a different world. What happens there stays there” (2-2). The distances and differences between online and offline communication seem to be irreconcilable. It is difficult to express her feelings thoroughly and completely in text messages even if she incorporates “the double parentheses” in her messages. When she IMs with her online friends, she keeps herself outside the circle of the interaction due to the lack of trust between them. She never lets IMing take over (or drive) her social life. She never relies on IMing to deal with her feelings and emotions. She instead treasures the direct contact with her friends. She is witty and genuine. She feels like a whole-person when she is with her friends in person. Rarely does she feel this way when she IMs. She seldom uses IMing even though she has total freedom to use computer at home. She asks “Don’t you think it is simply a waste of time to use computer? (4-2); and I find this remark best depicts her attitude towards IMing.

*Wendy: IMing is the whole world.* IMing results in irritation when Wendy is bullied by some online game players. It is also a way that brings her comfort when she talks to her online friends. IMing for Wendy seems an almost alien place from her real life. She rarely IMs her peers in the real world, staying online almost day and night for her online friends. Even when Wendy is offline, spending time with her peers at school, what happens between her and her online friends is often on her mind (and sometimes troubles her). IMing is her whole world. It seems that it is more of her that holds IMing in her life than IMing keeping her.

## **Part Two: A Larger Image of the Child**

When asked to describe the children in this study, I inevitably recall my last meeting with some of them. One girl asked if I favored any students in this study. “No”, I replied. “Anyone you found special?”, she asked again. “Every one of you is special”, I answered. Feeling the curiosity rising from the girl and other children, I then explained to them why I felt this way. For each child’s name I said, pieces of that child in the interviews, in their parents’ words, and in their teacher’s descriptions appeared in my heart. The complete image of the child I depicted in his or her portrait helped me to organize my thoughts. Jack, Jane, Kevin, Peggy, and Wendy — five children, five families, and one class — each has a signature way of being that sustains my memories. I see the uniqueness in them. I see some consciousness of their parents and family reflecting in them. When they are in their peer groups, I can also see the nuances of their consciousness evolving and expanding. When they are on Yahoo! Messenger IMing with their peers or online friends, the child in the offline world appears in this context without any part of him or herself being left behind.

In this section, I present sketches of these five children through the lens of themselves, their families, peer groups, and their IMing experience to show the larger images of themselves. At the same time, I explain the inspiration that prompted me to look at these children in this particular way, which was Cooley's primary group consciousness.

**Jack: The white knight.** Jack is an independent and critical thinker. He always looks at things from other perspectives and often gives sharp comments. When I asked him if his computer teacher taught the class how to write a blog, he immediately responded "No, he didn't. [in a higher tone] How can one teach blogging? Everyone has his or her own character and writing style. There is no way to teach blogging" (2-13). He is never someone who would reserve his opinions, especially when he feels the need to express his thoughts or clarify his positions. He sometimes insists on his opinion to the point that he appears offensive and somewhat arrogant. While one of his classmates was praising his father for being great and cool, he uttered "Let me tell you what is more cool. My father kept his collection of *Wu-Xia* novels for 20 years and then passed them down to my brother and me. This is cool" (unrecorded conversation). Nevertheless, people around him seem unable to resist his charm or the unique qualities that radiate from him. It is true that his appearance (cute, tall and a fit build) easily attracts people's attention but he does not stand out merely because of his looks. (And his peers are not attracted to him only because of his bold character, though some find it cool.) He is very knowledgeable and versatile. In his peers' words, he knows everything and he is sophisticated. He refuses to lead an ordinary life as he dislikes people who confined by rules. "I don't like to hang out with people who always follow certain rules . . . It is not creative at all" (4-16). He likes to try and learn new things as he expects himself to be creative and to lead an active life. He colors his world with an array of interests — language, sports, reading, writing, and blogging. On

his busiest days he is on three school teams at the same time – the track and field team, the flute team, and the school band. When he walks down the hall way at the school, all eyes are on him and strong admiration is transmitted through those gazes.

In his way of expressing himself whether verbally or physically, one can feel Jack's pride. When looking at this, it seems to me that it's the pride that comes from being in his family – his successful parents and outstanding older brother. When he talks about these three major figures behind him, his tone is high and his voice is excited. He often proceeds at a fast speed as if he cannot wait to tell people how great his family is. In his eyes, his father is a legend. "My father began to make money when he was in high school. He paid his tuition fees and other expenses. . . . He was always in the top ten students at his school. When he failed to obtain admission at National Taiwan University (the best university in Taiwan), he decided not to go to college. Instead, he joined the workforce immediately" (3-33). In his words, his father is independent, decisive, competent, and knowledgeable. "I hope I can become like him [his father]" (3-33), he says with a wider and sweeter smile.

Jack's father is more than a legend. He passes down his life philosophy "learning more and being accountable" and imposes this discipline into parenting his children. "My father rarely scolds me for not doing well in my studies. He scolds me when . . . I forget to bring my homework to school. . . [H]e blames me for being irresponsible" (3-20). Jack's mother aligns with his father and is always encouraging and supportive, especially when Jack wants to try learning new things. "Let the child try", she said repeatedly when I interviewed her. In Jack's description, she is caring and loving, but never compromises her rules when dealing with her children. His brother, another idol of his, shares similar interests with him – playing basketball, learning English, reading novels, and writing blogs. "I talk about my dreams with my brother";

“Whenever I feel troubled, I ask my brother for his advice.” The connection between these two brothers is obvious and strong.

In the sketch of Jack above, I have talked about what I see in Jack - a reflection of consciousness that I see emanating from his family. Mainstream child psychology does not talk in terms of consciousness in this way. One person who has emphasized the child’s and the family’s consciousness and how the child unfolds his individuality in the family is Cooley. Cooley (1909) argues that “primary groups”, among which “the family, the play-group of children, and the neighborhood or community group of elders” (p. 24) are the most important, are essential and critical in the inner development of a child. He would understand much of the above in terms of Jack unfolding in the primary group of his own family. Cooley explains:

By primary groups I mean those characterized by *intimate face-to-face association and cooperation*. They are primary . . . chiefly in that they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual. The result of intimate association, psychologically, is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one's very self, for many purposes at least, is the common life and purpose of the group. Perhaps the simplest way of describing this wholeness is by saying that it is a "we"; it involves the sort of sympathy and mutual identification for which "we" is the natural expression. One lives in the feeling of the whole and finds the chief aims of his will in that feeling. (ibid., p. 23)

The nuances and vignettes in Jack’s sketch and portrait show that he behaves in a way that reflects the common purpose and life of his family as well as the group consciousness of his family. He understands his family’s ideals and he tries to develop himself in that direction. He also has an enormous individuality. He is bringing his character as it evolves into his family even as the family is influencing the direction he is growing. In his story one can see there is this family in which people themselves practice these ideals. The whole family is moving in the spirit of these ideals and this moving is what Cooley calls the “we.” His family lives in this spirit. Jack has not merely absorbed this spirit, but has become part of the spirit.

Besides his family, Jack's class, peers, and friendships form another arena of "primary group" association. Like a rose with a beautiful color and sweet fragrance that attract people, Jack is cute, cool, and famous in his peers' eyes. However, a rose is never without thorns. He pricks people with his blunt comments once a while. When his classmates were feeling sorry for a murderer who could not obtain forgiveness from society and were arguing that everyone deserved a second chance, Jack waved his fist hard in the air. "That is the price of his behavior. You should think about those people he hurt!" (unrecorded conversation). Some of his peers find him argumentative and harsh, whereas others appreciate his deeper thinking and find him inspiring. "Uhh...It is so difficult to win an argument with him [Jack]"; "Jack often gives a unique (or different) comment". Jack is critical, is constantly thinking, and has his own ideas. In his class, he does not retreat from his individuality. He makes friends with people who share similar interests. "I hang out with Jeff [his classmate] because we both like to read and play basketball" (4-17). He praises people who have the qualities he pursues. "One of my classmates cut his eraser in half and carved one half of it into a personal stamp. No one has ever thought about doing something like this. This is what I want to be. Being creative" (4-16). His individuality is vital and strong in this peer group. He develops and expands as a total independent person within it. There is a place in this peer group that belongs to him. He accepts his role as his peers accept the way he is. The unity between him and his peers emerges in his way of being.

The image of Jack unfolding himself in his peer group is reminiscent of how Lee illustrates Cooley's concept of primary group consciousness by describing a boy's feelings and behaviors in a team when playing against other people. "[T]he team is not only an extension of the player's consciousness; it is a part of his personality. His participation has deepened from

cooperation to membership. *Not only is he now a part of the team, but the team is a part of him* [italics added]” (Lee, as cited in Cooley, p. 35). There is a clear unity between the player and the team, and there is a similar unity between Jack and his peers.

In Jack’s IMing I see his individuality which has been nurtured in the family, his strength and principles of the family, and his free independent style of being in the peer group. All three of these play a big role when he IMs.

Jack, Yahoo! Messenger, and IMing have a mild relationship. He IMs to keep in touch with his relatives who live far away. He IMs with his friends to figure out his homework. He appears to be practical and rational about IMing (or Yahoo! Messenger and IMing as a whole). Nevertheless, in this mild and calm relationship, he has several principles on which he will not back down. When he has the message “Don’t IM me!” on his display name, he definitely does not want to be disturbed. If his friends still IM him, he reacts emotionally just like the exclamation mark he adds at the end of his message. “I yell at them. My status says clearly that I don’t want to chat. I feel they are rude. Seriously, I would yell at them. They ask for it!” (4-6). Isn’t this déjà vu of the time his father scolded him for being reckless? He apparently expects his friends to be responsible for their own behaviors. When he receives messages with abusive words or inappropriate content from his friends, he either stops IMing them or puts them on the ignore list. He explains “The only way that I can avoid that type of message is to add my friends to the ignore list” (1-12). Isn’t this another way to say that he does not wish to associate with such behaviors, content, or consciousness? There is nothing like this in the perfect images he observes in his family. In his stern attitude towards the abusive, it is apparent that he sticks to his values and acts independently instead of knuckling under to peer pressure

Jack, however, is not always negative about IMing. There are times he talks about it in a light and happy tone. “We talk about daily stuff” (1-8); “I share my feelings with my friends. So do they. . . . My friends give me comfort . . . I trust them more and feel closer to them” (1-10 & 1-11). A softer image of him and a picture of the genuine interaction between him and the peer group appear. The unity within this group is implicitly surfacing in his peers’ accepting him and seeing each other as part of the peer group. Often being in the mood of learning and trying new things, he uses Yahoo! Messenger in a versatile way compared with his peers who merely do IMing. He uses it to listen to music and share photos with his friends. He does not limit himself in certain ways of using Yahoo! Messenger as he dislikes the ways ordinary people stick to certain rules. He has his own way of doing things, looking at things and he has his own way of being in this particular context (Yahoo! Messenger).

Jack is a strong color on a canvas, a distinctive character in a play, an unforgettable fragrance in a bouquet. In his story, there are enormous traces of his individuality when he is with his family, his peers, and when he is IMing on Yahoo! Messenger. He emphasizes that one has to be responsible – he never compromises his rules on Yahoo! Messenger, feeling angry when one does not read or respond to his messages accordingly. He thinks one should be critical – he often gives insightful remarks. He believes one needs to be creative – he admires his peer’s unique talents and ideas. In the way that he thinks, talks, and acts whether online or offline, his uniqueness truly prevails.

**Peggy: The girl that wore mismatched socks.** Peggy is a mystery; a mixture of maturity and innocence. She cries over a commercial that shows a reunion of a missing puppy and his mother. She laughs hysterically when she realizes she is wearing mismatched socks. However, she could be indifferent to things that her peers are excited about such as computer time. “Don’t

you think it is simply a waste of time to use computer? [posing as if she was sitting in front of a computer; holding her chin and making a vacant stare] I sometimes simply look at the computer clock ticking time away” (4-2). I am often surprised by her reflection on things. “If I were a parent I would not let my children watch news. There are so many bad things on the news. There is no need for children to know those things. Children should grow up in a pure environment” (4-8). In her giggling and sometimes goofy expressions, I never expected to see such a reflective soul. On the other hand, she keeps her thoughts and feelings in a diary rather than share them with other people. “I create dialogues in my diary. I write something like this: ‘How are you?’ ‘You know, something happened today at school’” (2-3). Through those conversations she has with the diary, she finds peace and comfort at heart. The image of her talking to her diary takes me to the time when she was talking about the year she was separated from her family and lived with her grandparents. “I drew two eyes and a mouth on my pillow and pretended it was my mother’s face. When I missed my mother at night, I talked to the pillow as if I were talking to her” (2-3). She began to deal with her feelings (mostly loneliness) on her own when she was just six years old, but she never closed her heart. She is outgoing, witty, and excited about life, like the color she loves. “Red is my favorite color. It looks so passionate and alive” (4-5), she says.

Whenever I think of the time that Peggy talked about the year she was separated from her family, a part of me aches over the lonely image that she depicted. At the same time, another part of me is touched by her enthusiasm for life. I don’t see her agonizing about her life. Beyond passively accepting where she is and what she has, she transforms herself to live with it. She seems to constantly realize there is another way to face life. It is not to fight against life directly, rather it is to cope with life in a way that brings peace to her heart. Even though what she is able to do is limited, she accepts; she makes changes; finally, she transforms not only herself but also

the context (things, people around her). This is the way that helped her to endure the loneliness in that year. This is also the way she faces her life as she grows up. Her mother seems to encourage this spirit in subtle ways.

Although Peggy is not the only child at home, her sister who is 5 years older, studies at a junior college miles away from home, effectively making Peggy an only child. Her sister seems invisible in her life. Peggy only mentions her sister during our interviews when the topic is IMing. There is almost no spontaneous interaction between the two of them. Her mother, though, is her close companion at home. They not only are mother and daughter but also best friends. At times, Peggy is clingy and wants to have her mother's complete attention. "When Peggy comes home, she begins to talk about what happened in school. What happened between this person and that person . . . She doesn't stop until I ask her to" (Mrs. Wu). At other times, she can be very mature, offering her mother advice for problems in life (mostly her parents' relationship issues) like a young adult. When Peggy and her mother are together, there are a lot of laughs, nudges, and side talks in a sweet and intimate way. The connection between them is tried and true.

In Peggy's eyes, her mother is always encouraging and laid-back. "Once I was ranked sixth in one exam. My mother was so excited that she put my grade report on the wall. Can you believe that? [laugh] I told her that it's embarrassing. She, however, said being ranked sixth was really good" (4-15). Rather than comparing Peggy with other children, she recognizes Peggy's efforts and appreciates what she achieves. "I sometimes ask Peggy how to do things on computer. She often responds [mimicking Peggy's voice and her posture - a shrug] 'I don't know' [laugh]" (Mrs. Wu). It seems to me that Peggy's mother sees her from an angle that focuses on a child's purity rather than ability. She treasures the beauty of Peggy's innocent and joyful heart. "I really don't have rules for Peggy. She is a good girl. I give her a lot of freedom. I

don't like to pressure her" (Mrs. Wu). Like the way she envisions Peggy, she herself leads her life in a fun (and exciting) way. "The most important thing on my mother's list of life is good food and good times. On weekends, my mother would look up new restaurants in magazines and we would choose one to eat at" (4-16). As for Peggy, she often talks about feeding the street dogs, hanging out with her good friends, reading good books or visiting new places. She rarely mentions her studies, grades, troubles or worries. She fulfills her life 'full throttle', with all her energy. Never does she become stressful trying to meet others' expectations (like crying about not getting first place instead of being satisfied with getting sixth place) What matters is how she feels at heart – the lightness, the joy, and the peace.

One would never describe Peggy as quiet or shy as she is the complete opposite. In a group discussion, she is often the one that volunteers to talk. She is very chatty and tends to side talk with her classmates during the class (which has brought her scolding from her teacher). During recess, scenes where she chases her peers in the hallway or pretends fighting her classmates with her water bottle are not uncommon. She has been elected several times as a class leader, mostly, she adds, because of her popularity rather than her leadership abilities. She is lively and energetic. She is also gentle and kind. When her classmate shouted at her that "Red is my color", she just turned and murmured with her head bent "I also like that color" (unrecorded conversation). She transforms the unpleasant thrill, the disagreeable comment, and the uncomfortable moment with a quiet, graceful and almost silent gesture – her signature way, which is not to fight directly. With average intelligence and no recognized talents, she performs academically at a reasonable level. Nevertheless, she is sensitive and critical in some ways. When her classmates are excited talking about the latest Harry Potter book, she asks them in a voice of coldness and with a stern expression: "Why do you want to have more stories of Harry

Potter? How come you never ask why the author cannot finish the whole story in one or two books?” (unrecorded conversation). Suddenly, the air freezes and everyone looks at her not knowing how to respond to her. Then, she continues: “How many books do I have to read to finish Harry Potter? [in an agonized voice] Too many” (unrecorded conversation). Everyone bursts into laughter because of this twist (which I would call black humor). It is funny indeed. Still, it says to me that she is critical. She looks at things (that people are fond of) from a different angle, like the way she feels about computer time. She is also showing her social skill – the art of transforming a context or an atmosphere. She pushes a little then backs off. Her moves often give good twists that add more sparks between herself and her classmates.

Like Peggy’s sister, Yahoo! Messenger does not often appear in Peggy’s life. Peggy logs on to it once a while with the longest separation between them, so far, being three weeks. Having complete freedom to use the computer at home, her lack of interest in computer time and IMing is obvious. When looking into her experience of IMing with her sister, it is apparent that their good interactions online does not change their in-person relationship. She tends to have a neutral position towards IMing in a person’s social life and appears to be less interested in it. But when she is on Yahoo! Messenger IMing with her peers, she is more enthusiastic and engaged. She is not always passively listening to her friends when she IMs. She even develops a unique way of IMing to prevent her peers from misreading her (see Peggy’s portrait, section “Say it Clearly, Say it Right,” pp. 127-129). Being on the Yahoo! Messenger, she is as witty and kind as she is in the real world. “I give them [her friends] some advice. If they tell me they like someone, I sometimes suggest that they write letters to the person. I would say ‘do you want me to write the letter for you’ [laugh]” (1-2). Like the way that she was when asking her classmates about the Harry Potter books, she gives her friend a shock here. She knows her friend would not let her

write the letter. Her offering to write the letter is to lighten the atmosphere of their conversation. At the same time, her care for her friend is expressed and enriched with some sweet and fun flavors. Although helping her friends with their personal feelings or problems is quite normal to her, she rarely asks for help with her own issues. When asked if she confides in her friends when IMing, she responds to me in a low tone “I sometimes do. Not often though” (2-3). I recall the conversation between her and the diary. It seems to me that the one she most shares her feelings with is her diary. The little girl that pretended to talk to her mother at nights has not yet disappeared.

In Peggy’s smiles, I find no sign of her having been apart from her family a few years ago. She is like her favorite color – red – always energetic, curious about life and loving life. Rarely do I find a stern or an uneasy look on her face. Even when there is one, it is often followed by long hysterical laughter. Once, before our interview, I caught Peggy in a still and tranquil moment. She was writing in her diary. She was focused and tuned out to the world around her. At that particular moment, I understood why the diary was her friend, the one she confided in. It is the space she feels most close to and it is the way she feels most comfortable expressing her thoughts. IMing is not the way she chooses to release her feelings. She cares how she interacts with her classmates or her sister in person more than what happens between them on Yahoo! Messenger through text messages. She values direct in-person contact; the connection that she can see and feel.

**Kevin: Memories fade with time.** I would never have thought Kevin was a big brother to a two-year-old boy when I met him for the first time. His cute, chubby face makes him look younger than his peers. His appearance, the neat and clean wardrobe and the upright posture, makes him look obedient and somewhat reserved. In my first interview with him, he talked softly

in an almost timid voice. He did not look like the first child in a family, lacking the air of a confident leader, but he answered my questions in an organized way surprising me with perceptive remarks about life. “*Memories fade with time.* Those things [troubles or annoying things] are like sand. What you need to do is to wash them away. They won’t bother you afterwards” (1-24). As we became familiar with each other, he talked with more expression and body language. He joked about his classmates’ dreadful nick names. He danced around the classroom just to show me how beautiful a human body is. His sense of humor gradually poured out. His intelligence in art was revealed bit by bit. When he felt jealousy emerging in his classmates over his participation in this study, he proposed to recruit more of his classmates for the project as a way to avoid agony or bitterness in the class. It is not difficult for one to notice that he is sensitive and thoughtful.

In his classmates’ eyes, Kevin is like a little brother that has a good temper and still retains a boy-like high pitched voice. When his classmates make fun of him for not being able to ride a bike, he insists it is dangerous to bike on the street and protests with an innocent and almost naïve expression, “I just don’t know why it is so funny that I don’t know how to ride a bike” (unrecorded conversation). He never talks back directly to the person that attacks him and always tries to maintain a good relationship with his peers. Besides having a warm temperament and not being athletic, he is regarded as knowledgeable and artistic. He is the most popular person in his class whenever there is a team project or team competition. He has led many teams to win first place. He is also good at art and literature. He started a weekly news journal about his class. He has been elected as the art officer of his class for many times. He maintains a stable image like his stability in his relationships with peers. People often describe him as a good student and a good boy. Nevertheless, his image is not plain and dull. He is fond of incorporating

Chinese idioms in his sentences. It sometimes makes him sound knowledgeable, but it also makes him look a bit “dorky”, especially when what he says is totally irrelevant. His classmates give him a nick name, *Ding Ding*, which means a person that acts retarded. In this class, his talent is recognized therefore more of his being is coming through since he feels at home in the class. His school life has not always been like this.

In his former school, Kevin was introverted, withdrawn, and oppressed by bullies. His teacher was incompetent and did not care for his students. “My classmates cursed, yelled, fought and hit each other. I covered my ears and sat quietly at my desk . . . The class was the worst one in the third grade. It was a battle field. My classmates were bombing each other with abusive words all the time” (1-30). The only comfort in his life at that time was his mother. After school, he went to his mother’s boutique, finished his homework, and talked to his mother when the customers were not around. He enjoyed being in the shop, helping with the shop chores, and getting to know his mother’s interests – the art pieces, elegant clothing, and decorations of the shop. His mother would carefully review his homework and listened to him talk about his school life - sometimes about troubles in his classroom. “My mother told me not to fight back even when my classmates hit me” (4-7). Kevin “tried to stay away from those behaviors [the bullying] to fight for [his] survival” (1-30) in that particular class in the ways his mother taught him, dealing with violence in a more peaceful manner. Then a surprise changed his life for the better.

When Kevin was 10, his younger brother was born. This incident drew a dividing line in his life – he became an older brother; and he transferred to his current school. After a short period of adjustment, he assumed his new role and helped to take care of the baby – making milk, pampering him, bringing him to the park, and sometimes “allowing” him to make a mess in his bedroom. His father is the major figure behind his transition to this new role. Kevin’s father

owns a construction company that he has built through years of hard work. He understands how critical it is to be diligent and accountable for one's life. He works hard for his career and most importantly his family. In his eyes, Kevin should also be independent and accountable. "I wish him to be independent" (Mr. Chen), he repeated his wish many times when I interviewed him. He expects Kevin to take care of himself and to share responsibilities at home. "I told Kevin that his father and mother were busy. He should help us to take care of the baby" (Mr. Chen). Kevin became a care giver for his brother. In his portrait, there are scenes where he prepares milk for his brother, cleans up after his brother, and keeps company with his brother. He spends less time with his mother alone since the baby is the center of hers as well as the family's life. He rarely talks to his mother about his emotions. He deals with his feelings and emotions in his way – "Memories fade with time", he says.

In Kevin's steady and calm voice, I feel the strength – the strength that resides in the ways that he fights for his survival in a rough environment, he adjusts to assume his new role as an older brother, and he develops sound and decent relationships with his peers in a new environment. When he is on Yahoo! Messenger, this strength is also embedded in the way he IMs. Kevin speaks of IMing in a bland tone devoid of sparks. He finds IMing practical and positive in his social life. In his way of IMing, there seems to be an element missing. IMing to him is a way to learn more about his peers and is beneficial in forming his friendships in his class. He talks about his cool classmates, gets to know his friends, and sometimes exchanges gossip with his peers when IMing. He however, deliberately excludes his personal feelings from the dialogue. "I never talk about my personal things when IMing with my friends. I keep those things to myself" (2-6), he says firmly. This is reminiscent of the time he said "*Memories fade with time*". Those things [troubles or annoying things] are like sand. What you need to do is to

wash them away. They won't bother you afterwards" (1-24). Happiness and sorrow to him are like the wind that blows over a stream - it leaves no trace. His strength emerges from the spirit.

**Jane: Peaceful and hardworking.** Jane is tall, thin, and somewhat plain. She is often in black tops and dark jeans. One seldom finds bright colors in her apparel. Her ordinary features seem not to catch people's attention. Often going along with the majority, her true thoughts are scarcely known. In a crowd, she is hardly visible. When we talk one on one, she, however, becomes more open and lively. She talks about her teacher and how her teacher is reckless in some ways; how Yahoo! Messenger means to her; and how it feels being the oldest child in a family and an older sister to a couple of much younger siblings. I soon find myself attracted to her sharp observation, contemplative mood, and maturity. The moderate atmosphere in our interviews, whether it is the tone of her voice or the content of our dialogues, is very pleasant and sheds a light into her character.

The way Jane conducts herself (mature and sensible) reminds me of her father's calm voice and his diligent attitude towards life. He is a filial son to his parents, a faithful husband to his wife, and a caring father to his children. He emphasizes it is important to understand one's role and fulfill the role with one's best effort. When Jane started her primary education, he thought "She [Jane] had become an elementary school student. And she should build a good foundation for her studies" (Mr. Tsai). Her academic life is her priority. She always does well in her studies. "Jane worries no one for her studies. She takes care of her studies well" (Teacher Huang), her teacher praises her in a genuine tone. She is not merely a diligent student. Being the oldest child in her family, she, in her parents' eyes, should be the role model for her siblings. "My mother told me that I had to take care of my younger sister. . . . I make sure that she washes her lunch box when she comes home, takes a shower before my mother comes home, and packs

her books for the school before she goes to bed” (3-8). Although her sister is not always cooperative and sometimes makes a fuss to give her a hard time, Jane never forsakes her role as an older sister whom is expected to be responsible and accountable for her siblings. Her parents trust her to guide her siblings. “Once my sister was whining about a television show when my father was watching the television, I took her aside and told her to stop because father’s favorite show was on. My father did not say a word to my sister. He remained seated and merely peeked at us while the whole thing was going on” (3-9). She takes pride in this role in the family. “Although it was really hard to teach my sister those things in the beginning I can feel there are changes in her. She does not always need me to tell her to do things now” (3-10). It seems that what she does for her sister or in this family purely comes from her own rather than her parents’ expectations. She wants to be a good student and she wants to be her siblings’ role model. She carries herself in a way that reflects her father’s principle – knowing one’s role and fulfilling it with one’s best effort.

When in a group, Jane is like a “statue.” She is often quiet, never interrupts other people, and rarely volunteers to talk. The only time I saw her raise her tone and act a bit emotional was when she tried to stop an evolving argument between two of her classmates. She is gentle and kind. Her peers see her as a peace maker that eases the tension and resolves conflicts in the class. “Someday Jane would be cut in half because she is always the mediator between two opposite groups or people” (unrecorded conversation), one of her classmates says, with a laugh. She is indeed the quiet observer and genuine peace maker that only sounds her voice when needed. Looking into the way she is in her peer group, it seems to me that she plays a similar role in it as she does for her younger sister at home. She has embodied the role as an older sister at home that nurtures good habits in her sister and copes with her sister’s inappropriate behaviors. In her peer

group, she shows how one should act to maintain the harmony within the group. Because of her thoughtful and mature nature, she forms decent friendships with her peers where strong ties and trust exist.

Jane was not allowed to use the computer until she was in the third grade. When she began to use the computer, she was under the rules that her father laid down – no computer unless she finished her homework. Like most children, she feels excited to be on the Internet IMing with friends and playing games. “I always feel high when I use the computer” (2-8), she says. Still, she retains a sensible attitude. She is never overly engaged in conversation with her online friends, always keeping their conversation within the scope of the games. As for IMing with her peers, she IMs to chat and to figure out her homework (1-12). If there are things she feels embarrassed to say in person to someone, then she IMs. “When I have a fight with my classmate at school, . . . I apologize to the person on Yahoo! Messenger” (2-13). She does not IM for fun. She incorporates IMing into her life with IMing becoming an alternative for her to express herself. Her moderate and gentle nature spreads over the way she IMs. She knows the appropriate ways to act in this context. In her mind, there is this implicit trust between her father and her in using the computer (and conducting herself in general). Looking back at Cooley’s primary group consciousness, a child often reflects the image of his or her primary group. In Jane’s case here, it is clear that the way her father acts (a responsible man) is embedded in the way she behaves on the Internet. She reflects her father’s principles and expectations. When looking back at the trust between her father and herself, although it is subtle, one might find it loud and strong in the way she behaves.

Jane often reminds me of marathon runners - steady paced, long strided, moving forward in a rhythm in tune with the whole body. She is focused and thorough. She is always calm, never

raises her tone, and never rushes through things. Whether she is with her family or her peers, she participates in a subtle way, quietly expressing her thoughts and giving care and attention. Whether she is a big sister to her younger siblings or a peace maker for her classmates, the way she interacts with them shows the image of a role model. In fact, she thinks of herself as a role model. She embraces the idea of being responsible and truthful in her role that her father nurtured in her. When she is on Yahoo! Messenger IMing with her peers, she acts with self-discipline. She interacts with her peers or net friends within a boundary. Nevertheless, she remains attentive and considerate. Whether it is replying or sending out messages, her thoughtful nature has never been lost. In her moves (whether online or offline), one can see the meanings of the words, 'appropriate', 'genuine', and 'disciplined'.

**Wendy: A lonely heart on the Internet (or Gaming 24/7).** With an analytical mind, Wendy gives incisive remarks even if they are damaging to her image. "I play online games every day. . . . I am addicted to online games. It is why my school work is getting worse" (1-5). She is full of emotions and feelings. She blushes when talking about her new online friend with whom she shares a mutual attraction. She frowns when talking about annoying and mean online players. She wears a warm smile when talking about her online friends whom she often turns to when she is upset. Although her voice is energetic and enthusiastic as she speaks about her online friends, I sense a hint of avoidance and loneliness. She has created a comfortable shelter for herself on the Internet, a place where she retreats from the unpleasantness in her life. It seems what she has in life is insufficient for her needs, especially her emotional needs.

Wendy comes from a single parent family. Her father is invisible in her life leaving no good memories. "My father left us [Wendy's mother and her] when I was two. I have seen him less than ten times in my life. It was so odd when I saw him the last time. I don't wish to see him

again” (3-15). Her mother, on the other hand, is sole provider and nurturer to Wendy, therefore their relationship is closer. They resemble each other in the way they act, look, talk, and think. They share similar interests and tastes. The tone and atmosphere between them is as it is between friends. There are no strict rules or disciplines. “My mother rarely sets rules for me” (3-2), Wendy says. Coincidentally, her mother gives an almost identical description of her parenting. “I don’t give her any rules. I am very lenient on Wendy. For example, I told her that she had to be at least 10<sup>th</sup> place in her exam. When she didn’t make it, I came up with excuses for her (laugh)” (Ms. Liu). And Wendy seems to have a mind of her own. “My mother and my cousins say I have enough clothing for my gaming avatar and I should stop spending money on those things, but I simply ignore them. When I find one I like, I buy it” (1-3). In this family, the dominant voice seems to be Wendy’s.

In school, Wendy is no different than she is at home. Her teacher describes her as a “Little Princess” that “seems to be a bit self-centered . . . and likes to make complaints about her classmates” (Teacher Huang). He further contributes this behavior to Wendy being the only child at home where her mother “spoils” her. I have seen her playing and talking with her friends cheerfully and I have seen her shout at her classmate harshly. “She sometimes is emotional”, said one of her close friends. When she is in a good mood, she is as pretty as a doll. Her big eyes, long hair, and two little dimples in her cheeks make her happiness contagious. When she is upset, her sharp voice and mean look scare away her peers. “I have a bad temper” (3-8), she says in a low voice. As I ask how she feels about her behaviors, “It is really bad” (3-9), she utters. “I apologize to my friends if I feel I am wrong. However, I will never do so if I think I am right” (3-9), she continues in a more defensive tone and aggressive voice. Her self-reflection seems too short to make any difference in her demeanor as she always follows her own mind and shuns

others' advice or comments. She hangs out with a small group of friends in her class whom she sometimes excludes from her world for no apparent reason. "She sometimes is weird. I don't know why she suddenly stops talking to us", says her friend.

The Internet is a playground to Wendy. Her mother, who often goes along with her wishes, introduced her to this playground to her. They play the same online games. They used to share a Yahoo! Messenger account. There is a relay of Internet activities (mostly online gaming) in her family. On weekdays, "I play games until 9:00 pm. Then, I have to log off because it is my mother's turn to play" (2-12). On weekends, Wendy is online except when she sleeps. She is heavily into online games. While playing games online, she also forms close friendship with some of her online friends. She regards them as her siblings although she has never met them in real life. "When I feel upset, I type 'I am mad. Don't IM me!' in the display name. . . . My *Gan-Jie* [her online friend] is always the first one IMing me" (2-17). In her eyes, her online friends are always there and give her comfort whenever she needs them. It seems to me that Wendy is constantly searching for attention, companionship, and care. At home, she is accompanied by her mother who always gives in to her wishes. In school, she hangs out with a certain group of people who endure her emotions. On Yahoo! Messenger, she has a group of online "siblings" always there waiting for her.

Wendy is rarely in a reflective mood. When she is, she expresses herself in a low, guilty, or even vulnerable tone. The mood does not last long and her strong ego appears. She seems to avoid problems in her life, whether it is a bitter dispute or a misunderstanding between her and other people (her peers and her net-friends). When she is feeling hurt, she turns to the Internet searching for sympathy. She accepts her addiction and then blames it. "Her mother spoils her",

says Wendy's home-room teacher (teacher Huang). Although this remark to some extent explains Wendy's behaviors, I find she may have developed patterns of conduct for herself.

## **Reflections**

Readers of this dissertation might have found that my focus was not only on how a child exists on Yahoo! Messenger but also how the child presents him or herself within the family and peers groups as well. I did not stop at finding patterns of IM use among these five participants (like the way many researchers have done). Instead, I continued to give readers individual images of the five children through a variety of angles that were critical in assisting readers in understanding the whole of each child. Why is it important to do a study in this way? Throughout the write up of the portraits and the cross-case discussion, I have tried to convey the inspiration that motivates me to see my participants and explore the research questions in this manner. It is the spirit of holistic education – to see a child as a whole person. The role of IMing in a child's life should not be presented merely by how the child exists within the context of IMing. It is intertwined with other aspects in the child's life. It is essential for me, and other researchers, to understand a child through multiple perspectives. Looking at a child in this way enables me to have a deeper understanding of the real unfolding of the child. What I have presented shows that IMing is a part of a child's self image and is interconnected with the other elements embedded in the child's whole image. Without knowing the child through a broader lens, I might have provided a limited and superficial understanding about that human life (the participant) and an issue (IMing).

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion and Recommendations

In this chapter, I first present a summary of this study in four dimensions: (a) Immediate effects of a computer class on Yahoo! Messenger, (b) The individuality of the participants, (c) In-person contacts, and (d) The spirit of the research methodology. Following the summary is a discussion of future research on information technology (mainly internet activity).

#### Summary of the Study

**Immediate effects of a computer class on Yahoo! Messenger.** The computer class on Yahoo! Messenger that the participants had in fourth grade plays a major role in the participants' Internet activities. I observed immediate effects of this computer class on the children in my study and the school's computer curriculum which are illustrated through the following two perspectives: the role of IMing in a child's life in general and computer education and computer skills.

When the participants talked about Yahoo! Messenger or IMing during the interviews, every one of them mentioned the computer class in the fourth grade. Some of them learned IMing for the first time. Some began to IM with classmates and friends more than family afterwards. The influence of this course on a child's Internet activities is powerful. A trend of using Yahoo! Messenger among the participants and their peers was formed immediately after this class. The Internet is more than just a place for a child to find information for homework. It has become a playground to hang out with friends, classmates, and net-friends in any available times. Although the participants' parents are concerned about their children's safety on the Internet, they seem to have a neutral (if not positive) impression on IMing. Peggy's mother asks

Peggy to IM her older sister to find out whether she is coming home or not. Wendy's mother, who is the only parent that uses IMing among all the participants' parents, schedules a meeting with me through IMing - "I will ask Wendy to IM you when I will be available". Jane's father chatted with me briefly on Yahoo! Messenger after he overheard Jane and me as we audio chatted<sup>19</sup>. He seemed to have no problem with Jane using Yahoo! Messenger. IMing is seen as convenient and useful. Since it came to these participants' lives from a computer class at school, it is inherently positive and often faces less challenge from parents. Its place in the family seems secure and legitimate. Within the family, IMing is a *known* Internet and after-school activity. I suspect that it might become a normal family Internet activity where parents and children communicate with each other, like what Wendy and her mother have already created.

When I asked the computer teacher why he taught Yahoo! Messenger in his class (other than it is one of the units in the computer textbook), he emphasized "It [IMing] is a way of communication. People use it at work. Students need to learn it" (Teacher Lee). He apparently looked at IMing only as a computer skill that would benefit students in the future. I have argued IMing is more than "sending text messages on the Internet". It changes the image of a child's life (and it may change the picture of family life in the future). Using IM is as easy as eating meals. It requires no special intelligence or skills but your body changes from what you eat. (The five participants have a similar level of technological skill about IMing after the computer class although some of them had learned it before.) A computer teacher teaching students how to use IMing, resembles a nutritionist introducing how much fiber, iron, vitamins, and so on, the food contains. When a person chooses to have a certain food in his or her diet (routinely), body changes would evolve from those choices. What I observed in these children's IMing activities

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<sup>19</sup> One can use microphone to have audio chat or web camera to have video chat on Yahoo! Messenger. None of my participants uses microphone or web camera.

and the computer class was similar to how food relates to one's body and health. The computer class was the key transitional point in these children's Internet activities. They became more involved in this activity and expanded their social lives (and consequently spent more time on the Internet).

In the history of education, we rarely find such an immediate and profound influence from a class. To see the computer class and the child's IM usage together, it tells me that what a curriculum committee chooses, advocates more than just skills or knowledge. The curriculum has extended its connection with the child's development. The participants' IMing experiences made it clear that a computer class is more than a class about computer skills as Teacher Lee (the computer teacher) thought. In fact, when a computer technology or skill becomes one of the units in the curriculum, its value and image changes, especially in the Taiwanese culture, where what is included in education obtains more recognition from students, parents, and the public. In other words, the curriculum itself adds value to the element that is taught to the students. This study shows that IMing is seen as a norm and is embraced by the children and also receives recognition from parents. When the computer teacher gathered all the fourth graders together in the virtual space of Yahoo! Messenger, he probably never expected the changes in his students that would go beyond the computer skills to reach the deeper internal and personal sides of each child.

Researchers criticize computer education for lagging behind the development of computer technology (Armstrong & Casement, 2000; Healy, 1998). Parents who were interviewed by Armstrong and Casement (2000) appeared to be enthusiastic about putting computers in their children's classroom and regarded computer skills "synonymous with academic success and marketable skills . . . [and] a passport to success" (pp. 61-62). The particular educational policy on information technology in Taiwan, *Ban Ban You Dian Nao*

[Every classroom is to be equipped with an Internet ready computer], also advocates the idea that computer literacy is essential to a child's future success. In reviewing the computer curriculum at the research site, Tai-Young Elementary School, from learning word processing to acquiring Web site design skills (see *Table 1, The Curriculum of Information Technology Education in Tai-Young Elementary School*, p. 64 for the detail), it seems to me that *the development of technology is leading computer education*. Most computer classes are centered on computer skill proficiency. The only unit that is not completely about computer skills is the topic of Internet safety. The computer curriculum as a whole appears to be vocation or market oriented. There seems to be a pro-technology tone in the computer curriculum (like teacher Lee's comment suggests, "IMing is the way of communication . . . Students need to learn it"). This is specific to this school and the computer teacher. However, it suggests that computer teachers, in-service teachers or curriculum committee members might overlook the influence of computer classes on the educational community simply due to a teacher's (or principal, business person, or others) preference. IMing is only one of the computer skills covered in computer classes in Taiwan. Since it does have such immediate and profound influence on a child, I assume computer education as a whole might have stronger (or more serious) influence. The role of formal education in children's development of computer literacy deserves further examination.

**The individuality of the participants.** In Chapter 5, I talked about the patterns that I observed in these participants' IMing experiences. The participants share some ways of IMing or incorporating IMing into their lives. For example: Jack, Jane and Wendy all post "Don't IM me" when they are not available or not in the mood to IM; Peggy, Jane, and Wendy became net-friends with online game players. Nevertheless, it seems that there is no uniform way of using IMing within the patterns. *The individuality of each of the participants appears when one looks*

*into how and what these children's ways of IMing really imply.* Jack believes one should be responsible and he never compromises this belief even when he is IMing. Wendy tends to avoid problems in life and she seems to turn Yahoo! Messenger into a shelter for herself. Jane is always like a big sister to her peers and tries to accommodate people's needs whether chatting or sharing personal feelings when IMing. Peggy finds no significant connection between IMing and her relationships in the real world and sees using the computer as a waste of time. Kevin thinks IMing is a way to get to know his classmates but does not see it as a harbor for his personal feelings. In the section of "A Larger Image of the Child" in Chapter 5 (see pp. 168-191), in which I depict each participant through the child's, parents', teacher's, and peer group's perspectives, it is clear that what the child is in the real world is reflected in the ways he or she uses IMing.

IMing researchers who focus on issues such as "identity experimenting" or "stranger on the train" (that are related to the characteristics of IMing "anonymity") tend to raise the discussion of an individual's online and offline self. For instances, shy people are found more open and talkative online. A man portrays himself as a woman. Some researchers argue that the Internet (online chat rooms) is a harmless way for an individual to explore his or her identities. They indicate a person can be completely different from how he or she is in the real life when being on the Internet. In other words they suggest that because of the Internet, one is able to have multiple selves, at least having one online self and one offline self. What I observed in these five participants seems to imply that there is no discrepancy between one's identities, whether it is in the real world or on the Internet. As I emphasized in the introduction of Chapter 5, *not one bit of the participants are left behind in the real world when they are online IMing with their peers or net-friends.*

**In-person contacts.** Another crucial observation about these participants' IMing usage is that in-person contact is indispensable for a sustainable relationship. This assertion is best exemplified by Jack, Kevin, and Peggy. They all acknowledge that IMing is positive in enhancing one's relationship. Even so, each of them clearly argues that IMing is hardly comparable with the in-person interactions. IMing is not the way (or the only way) to deal with one's feelings or to create friendships. When Kevin had fewer chances to talk to his mother, he didn't substitute IMing with his peers for speaking with his mother. Jack does not see Yahoo! Messenger (or the Internet) as the only place for him to express his feelings. Peggy would rather spend more time hanging out with her friends than IMing with them since she understands that what a person find while using Yahoo! Messenger is not always transferred into the real world. When looking into how they are with their peers in real life and how they view IM's role in their social lives, it seems that IMing is less important to their social development and the tendency among these students is to favor face-to-face interactions over IMing. *It is the in-person contact that defines their relationships, not IMing.* Peggy does not IM with her peers for the sake of maintaining friendships. Jack does not constrain his boldness when he IMs. Kevin does not IM his personal feelings to win a friend. Wendy, who has an unstable relationship with her peers, tends to have less (or shorter) interactions with her peers on Yahoo! Messenger. Jane retains her role as a big sister when IMing.

*It is also the in-person contact that forms who they are.* In Chapter 5, I present sketches of these participants through images of how they are with two primary groups (the family and peer group), as well as how they are while they are on Yahoo! Messenger. It is apparent that these children are clearly aware of their roles within each context and social group. They know

what others expect from them and they behave in a way that shows the spirit of the group and the nature of his or her self. *There is no need to act differently on the Internet.*

**The spirit of the research methodology.** The inspiration of this study comes from the spirit of holistic education which is to see a child as a whole person and to place a child in caring interactions and relations. This spirit is on the same plane as what essentialist portraiture research methodology advocates. A researcher is obligated to see the good within the participant and present him or her as a whole person. In this study, I learned to illuminate a child's image through the child him or herself, the parents, the teachers, and his or her friends. By interviewing the child, the parents, and the homeroom teacher, observing the child's emotions, and endeavoring to understand the interconnections between the various nuances in this child's life, I was able to see the essence of the child, and obtain a whole vision of the child. I could envision how all the child's aspects related to the whole image of the child. The voices of these participants affirm the nature of the research methodology – caring. “I was so nervous in the beginning because I thought I had to answer your questions immediately. As soon as you began to interview me, I felt it was more like we were chatting with each other. I think it was pretty nice. I don't normally have opportunities to talk about those things we said during the interviews” (Peggy). “You never interrupted me. You always let me say what was on my mind” (Wendy). “I feel it was a wonderful experience. I sometimes feel it is a miracle that I got to know you. It's fate” (Kevin).

The intimate connection between me and the participants truly assisted me in looking beyond the numbers or frequencies of how they used IMing. It opened the door to the children's lives for me. I was then able to depict authentic pictures of the children and how IMing was connected to their lives, and what IMing truly meant to them.

## Future Research

This study was conducted in an elementary school where Yahoo! Messenger was included in its computer curriculum. The findings show that the computer curriculum was critical in the five participants' IMing use. Since not all elementary schools in Taiwan include Yahoo! Messenger in the curriculum, the implications of this study might be limited even if it is compared with a similar population (southern Taiwanese, 11 to 12 years old children, middle-class SES). In order to have a more general understanding of how IMing is related to the life of an 11 – 12 year old child and the role that computer curriculum plays in the whole picture, different research sites and more participants might be needed.

In this study, I focused on a particular medium – Yahoo! Messenger and a more specific way of communication – Instant Text Messaging (IMing). Some of the participants complained of not being able to express their thoughts clearly in text messages and some of them felt irritated when receiving messages from their peers when they indicated they were not available for chatting. These complaints to some degree resulted from the character of IMing, anonymity, where a person does not know the sub-context of the other person with whom he or she is IMing. The newly-developed online social networking services or mediums such as Blog, Facebook, MySpace, Youtube, and Twitter<sup>20</sup> have made audio and visual elements available. (Sometimes to the point that it encourages its users to make themselves more visible to other people.) At the same time, audio and video equipment have become standard features for laptop and desktop computers. In other words, IM users are more likely to be able to see or hear the other person while IMing. The five participants indicated that among them and their peers instant text

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<sup>20</sup> Twitter is a social networking web site that enables its users to send and read short messages (up to 140 characters) known as tweets. Twitter users usually have “followers” who might be their friends, family, colleagues, or online friends. The messages exchanges among them are to answer the simple question: What are you doing? (Twitter, 2009)

messaging was the dominant way of interacting on Yahoo! Messenger. Even though they are acquainted with Blog and Youtube, and may know analogous vistas that have audio and visual equivalents such as MySpace, Facebook or Twitter, they only do text messaging (IMing). Future research should look into what might motivate a child to switch from a text-based interaction to an audio and video one. What would the interaction between two or more people on the Internet become when they are able to see and hear the other people? How much would the audio-video interaction resemble in-person contact? Will this type of communication solve the communication problems raised by my participants? Or, will new problems evolve? These questions merit further investigation.

Studies show that teenagers tend to use IMing to keep membership in their peer groups. I observed embryonic peer pressure building up in my participants who are 11 to 12 years old. Every one of them was asked by their peers to put them on their Yahoo! Messenger buddy lists. Even though they hesitated to put some of their peers on the list, they did eventually. But, my participants did not follow up with all their peers on Yahoo! Messenger, even if they *were* on the list. It seems to me that the peer pressure of using IMing to keep one's membership in a peer group is not nearly so developed in my young participants as it was in the studies involving teenagers. The five participants in this study are on the verge of becoming teenagers entering junior high school. It is expected that they would face different contexts in terms of academics, peer groups, and adults. It is important to explore how different phases of an individual's development and education might alter his or her motivation to use IMing.

In this study, my participants' parents appear to be closely engaged in their children's lives. In the portraits of the participants, it is clear that the growth and development of a child is substantially related to the parents. In the Chapter 5 cross-case discussion, I emphasized that

these children reflect their parents' images while retaining their individualism. The inspiration of this finding is that future research may look at the family as an additional perspective. In other words, not merely to understand how a child uses IMing in the family but also to learn the ecology of IMing within the family which might include the parents' and siblings' Internet activity.

Finally, the issues or problems observed in the five participants also deserve more attention. In Jane's case, IMing with multiple people at the same time seems to cause obvious problems in communication, such as when one has to check the chat window before sending out messages, but, there are more critical issues embedded in multiple chat that may have more profound influence on IM users. Problems such as how much of the individual's self can unfold in such a multiple interaction, or how much of an individual's self is lost when he or she is involved in multiple chat seem inevitable. In Turkle's study (1995), she asserts that the situation where Doug is involved in multiple chats and multiple roles in the online chat rooms is a symbol of the postmodern era, where one's self is dynamic and fluid rather than static. I argue that researchers should go deeper to understand how the individual is really expressing self within different chat windows. Playing different roles does not necessarily mean there are multiple selves inside Doug (or any IMing users who practice multiple chat). Future research might want to go back to the basic question to understand how an individual's self is truly unfolding in this form of communication.

In addition to the problem that evolved from Jane's case, I found Internet addiction another critical issue. Wendy appears to be addicted to online gaming and she seems to be overly engaged with her net-friends. It seems apparent that her being addicted to Internet activities is more or less related to her desire for attention and comfort. While Internet addiction is now

commonly found in teenagers and adults, this study shows that children are not immune to it. However, Internet addiction might have different implications in different age groups. Future research should investigate what Internet addiction really means in order to prevent it from happening.

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## **Appendix A**

### **An Assent Letter for Children**

# **UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN**

Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
College of Education  
311 Education Building  
1310 South Sixth Street  
Champaign, IL 61820

### **Assent Letter for Children over 10**

We would like to invite you to participate in a research project on how children use Instant Messenger systems and online games. This project will be conducted by Wanju Huang and Dr. Klaus Witz, from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In this project, Ms. Huang will interview you for two to three sessions, each of which lasts around thirty minutes. In the interviews, you will be asked to share your perceptions of using Instant Messenger or online games, experiences of online communication, and influences of these activities on your everyday life. The interviews will be audio recorded with your permission. Example interview questions are as follows: Does chatting with your friends/classmates online enhance your offline relationship?; Do you feel pressure to be online for your friends/classmates in order to stay in the group?; Why do you think two strangers, who never met each other in person, could become friends through online text chatting?; Do you have more intimate conversation with your net-friends? During the interviews, you are free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. However, if Ms. Huang feels your use of the Internet inappropriate, she will point it out to you immediately and then report it to your parents. Examples of inappropriate Internet use are: downloading copyrighted music or movie clips, visiting adult websites, having sexual talks with friends online or meeting online friends in person without parents' permissions.

Results of the project may include a brief case study of your portrait, using detailed quotes from the interviews. To ensure that I quote you correctly, I will check the quote that I plan to cite with you. The form of dissemination would be a thesis, conference presentation(s), and publication(s) in journals. Also, a summary and a packet of resources or related materials, if any, will be provided to you. In such talks and write-ups, all information that could identify you will be removed, and every effort will be made to preserve confidentiality and protect your privacy.

There are expected to be no risks to participation beyond those that exist in daily life. In addition, we will provide you with a packet of safe use of the Internet and online instant messaging. Participating in this study would benefit you from understanding the Internet better and taking proper steps to assure appropriate use of the Internet. Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason. You are free to refuse to answer any questions that you don't wish to answer. Your decision to participate, decline, or

withdraw from participation will have no effect on your status the school.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Wanju Huang by telephone at 1-217-721-7103 (United States), 886-7-7317975 (Taiwan) or by e-mail at [whuang9@uiuc.edu](mailto:whuang9@uiuc.edu) or Dr. Witz at 1-217-333-4505 or [kwitz@uiuc.edu](mailto:kwitz@uiuc.edu).

**I, \_\_\_\_\_, (print name) do/do not (circle one) want to participate in the research project described above.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature                      Date

**I, \_\_\_\_\_, (print name) do/do not (circle one) give permission to have my interviews audio taped.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature                      Date

Please keep a second copy of the assent form for your record.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Anne Robertson, Bureau of Educational Research, by telephone at 1-217-333-3023, or by e-mail at [arobrtsn@uiuc.edu](mailto:arobrtsn@uiuc.edu), or University of Illinois, Institutional Review Board (IRB), by telephone at 1-217-333-2670 (you can call collect), or by email at [irb@uiuc.edu](mailto:irb@uiuc.edu).

## **Appendix B**

### **A Consent Letter for Parents**

# **UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN**

Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
College of Education  
311 Education Building  
1310 South Sixth Street  
Champaign, IL 61820

### **Consent Letter for Parents**

Your child is invited to participate in a research project on how children use Instant Messenger systems and online games. This study aims to understand/investigate the influence of the Internet on children's social, moral, and spiritual development. It will be conducted by Wanju Huang and Dr. Klaus Witz, from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In this project, Ms. Huang will interview your child for two to three sessions, each of which lasts around thirty minutes. In the interviews, your child will be asked to share his or her perceptions of using Instant Messenger or online games, experiences of online communication, and influences of these activities on his or her everyday life. The interviews will be audio recorded with you and your child's permission. Example interview questions are as follows: Does chatting with your friends/classmates online enhance your offline relationship?; Do you feel pressure to be online for your friends/classmates in order to stay in the group?; Why do you think two strangers, who never met each other in person, could become friends through online text chatting?; Do you have more intimate conversation with your net-friends? During the interviews, your child is free to refuse to answer any questions he or she does not wish to answer. However, any use of the Internet that Ms. Huang feels is inappropriate would be reported to you. Examples of inappropriate Internet use are: downloading copyrighted music or movie clips, visiting adult websites, having sexual talks with friends online or meeting online friends in person without parents' permissions.

It is understood that results the project, including a brief case study of a portrait of the child may be prepared, using detailed quotes from the interviews. To ensure that I quote your child correctly, I will check the quote that I plan to cite with your child. The form of dissemination would be a thesis, conference presentation(s), and publication(s) in journals. Also, a summary and a packet of resources or related materials, if any, will be provided to you. In such talks and write-ups, all information that could identify your child will be removed, and every effort will be made to preserve confidentiality and protect your child's privacy.

There are expected to be no risks to participation beyond those that exist in daily life. In addition, we will provide you with a packet of safe use of the Internet. Participating in this study would benefit you and your child from understanding the Internet better and taking proper steps to assure appropriate use of the Internet. Your child's participation in this project is completely voluntary,

and your child is free to withdraw at any time and for any reason. Your child is free to refuse to answer any questions he or she does not wish to answer during the interviews. Your child's decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on his or her status at the school.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Wanju Huang by telephone at 1-217-721-7103 (United States), 886-7-7317975 (Taiwan) or by e-mail at [whuang9@uiuc.edu](mailto:whuang9@uiuc.edu) or Dr. Witz at 1-217-333-4505 or [kwitz@uiuc.edu](mailto:kwitz@uiuc.edu).

**I do/do not (circle one) give permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_  
(name of child) to participate in the research project described above.**

**I do/do not (circle one) give permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_  
(name of child) to have their interviews audio taped.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**(Print) Parent's name**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Parent's signature**                      **Date**

Please keep a second copy of the consent form for your record.

If you have any questions about your child's rights as a research participant, please contact Anne Robertson, Bureau of Educational Research, by telephone at 1-217-333-3023, or by e-mail at [arobrtsn@uiuc.edu](mailto:arobrtsn@uiuc.edu), or University of Illinois, Institutional Review Board (IRB), by telephone at 1-217-333-2670 (you can call collect), or by email at [irb@uiuc.edu](mailto:irb@uiuc.edu).

## Appendix C

### A Consent Letter for Parent Participants

# UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
College of Education  
311 Education Building  
1310 South Sixth Street  
Champaign, IL 61820

#### Consent Letter (for parents)

You are invited to participate in a research project on how children use Instant Messenger systems and online games. This study aims to understand the influence of the Internet on children's social, moral, and spiritual development. It will be conducted by Wanju Huang and Dr. Klaus Witz, from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In this project, Ms. Huang will interview you for two to three sessions, each of which lasts around forty minutes. In the interviews, you will be asked to share your perceptions of your child's computer activities, especially using Instant Messenger or online games, influences of these activities on your child's everyday life, and your relationship with your child. The interviews will be audio recorded with your permission. Example interview questions are as follows: Do you set any rules to regulate computer activities at home?; How do you approach your child about his or her online activities? How would you describe your child? During the interviews, you are free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

It is understood that results the project, including a short story of how your child uses the Internet and how he or she reflects on the Internet use in life may be prepared, using detailed quotes from the interviews. To ensure that I quote you correctly, I will check the quote that I plan to cite with you. The form of dissemination would be a thesis, conference presentation(s), and publication(s) in journals. In such talks and write-ups, all information that could identify you will be removed, and every effort will be made to preserve confidentiality and protect your privacy.

There are expected to be no risks to participation beyond those that exist in daily life. During the interviews, Ms. Huang will discuss issues and contents related to the Internet with you. It would benefit you from understanding the Internet better. In addition, we will provide you with a packet of safe use of the Internet which would assist you taking proper steps to assure your child use the Internet appropriately. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not influence your child's school standing or the school services your child receive. Your participation in this project is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason. You are free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer during the interviews.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Wanju Huang by telephone at 002-1-217-721-7103 (United States), 011-886-7-7317975 (Taiwan) or by e-mail at [whuang9@uiuc.edu](mailto:whuang9@uiuc.edu) or Dr. Witz at 002-1-217-333-4505 or [kwitz@uiuc.edu](mailto:kwitz@uiuc.edu).

I, \_\_\_\_\_, (print name) do/do not (circle one) want to participate in the research project described above.

\_\_\_\_\_

**Signature**

**Date**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, (print name) do/do not (circle one) give permission to have my interviews audio taped.

\_\_\_\_\_

**Signature**

**Date**

Please keep a second copy of the assent form for your record.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Anne Robertson, Bureau of Educational Research, by telephone at 002-1-217-333-3023, or by e-mail at [arobrtsn@uiuc.edu](mailto:arobrtsn@uiuc.edu), or University of Illinois, Institutional Review Board (IRB), by telephone at 002-1-217-333-2670 (you can call collect), or by email at [irb@uiuc.edu](mailto:irb@uiuc.edu).

## **Appendix D**

### **A Consent Letter for Teacher Participants**

# **UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN**

Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
College of Education  
311 Education Building  
1310 South Sixth Street  
Champaign, IL 61820

#### **Consent Letter (for teachers)**

You are invited to participate in a research project on how children use Instant Messenger systems and online games. This study aims to understand the influence of the Internet on children's social, moral, and spiritual development. It will be conducted by Wanju Huang and Dr. Klaus Witz, from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In this project, Ms. Huang will interview you for two to three sessions, each of which lasts around forty minutes. In the interviews, you will be asked to share your perceptions of your students' computer activities, especially using Instant Messenger or online games, your concerns over these activities on your students, and your impression of your students. The interviews will be audio recorded with your permission. Example interview questions are as follows: How do you feel about your students' online activities?; What is your impression of Jean (a pseudo name of the teacher's student)? During the interviews, you are free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

It is understood that results the project, including a short story of how your student uses the Internet and how he or she reflects on the Internet use in life may be prepared, using detailed quotes from the interviews. To ensure that I quote you correctly, I will check the quote that I plan to cite with you. The form of dissemination would be a thesis, conference presentation(s), and publication(s) in journals. In such talks and write-ups, all information that could identify you will be removed, and every effort will be made to preserve confidentiality and protect your privacy.

There are expected to be no risks to participation beyond those that exist in daily life. During the interviews, Ms. Huang will discuss issues and contents related to the Internet with you. It would benefit you from understanding the Internet better. In addition, we will provide you with a packet of safe use of the Internet which would assist you taking proper steps to assure your students use the Internet appropriately. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will have no effect on your status at, employment at, or future relations with your school or the University of Illinois. And it will not influence your relationship with the investigator, Ms. Huang. Your participation in this project is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason. You are free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer during the interviews.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Wanju Huang by telephone at 002-1-217-721-7103 (United States), 011-886-7-7317975 (Taiwan) or by e-mail at [whuang9@uiuc.edu](mailto:whuang9@uiuc.edu) or Dr. Witz at 002-1-217-333-4505 or [kwitz@uiuc.edu](mailto:kwitz@uiuc.edu).

**I, \_\_\_\_\_, (print name) do/do not (circle one) want to participate in the research project described above.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature                      Date**

**I, \_\_\_\_\_, (print name) do/do not (circle one) give permission to have my interviews audio taped.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature                      Date**

Please keep a second copy of the assent form for your record.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Anne Robertson, Bureau of Educational Research, by telephone at 002-1-217-333-3023, or by e-mail at [arobrtsn@uiuc.edu](mailto:arobrtsn@uiuc.edu), or University of Illinois, Institutional Review Board (IRB), by telephone at 002-1-217-333-2670 (you can call collect), or by email at [irb@uiuc.edu](mailto:irb@uiuc.edu).

## **Appendix E**

### **Still Thoughts**

#### *Brief Introduction to Still Thoughts:*

The contents of Still Thoughts are quotations from Master Cheng Yen's daily talks that were recorded and sorted by her followers. Master Cheng Yen is a Buddhist nun who established Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan in 1966. Tzu Chi Foundation has dedicated itself to provide services in the fields of education, medicine, charity and the promotion of humanistic values across the world. Master Cheng Yen devotes herself to leading people toward a "pure world" – "a world without suffering and obtained through love, compassion, joy and selfless giving" (Tzu Chi Foundation, 2001). Still Thoughts serves as a great inspiration for people who want to cultivate such a spirit. It is regarded as "bible" by many people in their speech and conduct.

#### *Quotations from Still Thoughts:*

1. A person with a generous heart and compassion for all beings leads the most blessed life.
2. As we put the front foot down, we lift the back foot up. We let yesterday go, and focus on today.
3. To willingly undergo hardship for the sake of others is compassion.
4. Transform greed into contentment, and contentment into compassion.
5. To bestow loving kindness is a blessing. To extinguish affliction signifies wisdom.
6. Abide by your principles in everything you do. Never act purely to satisfy others. For rather than satisfying others, you may be in over your head.
7. Realize you are blessed, and cherish these blessing. Then continue to cultivate more blessings.
8. People who are preoccupied with past achievements cannot humble themselves.

## Appendix F

### San Zi Jing (Three-Word Chant)

#### *Brief Introduction:*

San Zi Jing (Three-Word Chant) was written by Wang Yinglin (1223-1296) during the Song Dynasty. It embodies the essence of Confucian thought, especially in educating young children. The work is a collection of couplets, with each line comprising only three Chinese characters. This makes the recitation and memorization of the couplets easy. For centuries, it has been regarded as a great book for cultivating a child's character.

#### *The First Paragraph of San Zi Jing:*

Ren Zhi Chu  
Xing Ben Shan

Xing Xiang Jin  
Xi Xiang Yuan

Gou Bu Jiao  
Xing Nai Qian

Jiao Zhi Dao  
Gui Yi Zhuan

#### English translation:

Men at their birth,  
are naturally good.  
Their natures are much the same;  
their habits become widely different.  
If foolishly there is no teaching,  
the nature will deteriorate.  
The right way in teaching,  
is to attach the utmost importance  
in thoroughness.