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To cite this article: Fengshu Liu (2010) The Internet in the everyday life-world: a comparison between high-school students in China and Norway, Comparative Education, 46:4, 527-550, DOI: 10.1080/03050068.2010.519483

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2010.519483

Published online: 19 Nov 2010.
The Internet in the everyday life-world: a comparison between high-school students in China and Norway

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Based on in-depth interviews, this study offers a comparison of how high-school students in China and Norway are actively constructing the Internet as an element of their everyday lives. Through the Schutzian notions of everyday life-world, social-biographical situation and relevance, the study has revealed striking differences between the Chinese and Norwegian participants concerning their relationship with the Net, although both have been referred to as members of the Net Generation. These are summarised in four interrelated themes that highlight the differences. Together, they shed light on the different places and meanings the Net has acquired in the young people's lives in the two cases and how they negotiate their identities as students within the Internet-transformed context. It is argued that these differences cannot be explained merely by the material resources in the two societies. More importantly, they have to do with the individuals’ and their families’ relevance systems.

Introduction

Much existing research on young people and the Internet has been influenced by the notion of the ‘Net Generation’ (e.g., Tapscott 1998; Prensky 2001, 2006), the generation raised immersed in digital technology, especially the Internet, which has great implications for education and future society (Tapscott 1999; Oblinger and Oblinger 2005). Although useful for designating the Internet’s far-reaching impacts on today’s young people, the notion of the ‘Net Generation’ often adopts a fairly standardised perspective from within the western world, assuming that the Internet bears the same meaning for young ‘netizens’ all over the world. As such, it tends to ‘treat young people as a monolithic social entity and see their relationship to technology as sequential and unidirectional, rather than complex and co-constructed’ within specific local contexts (Lee 2005, 316; see also Buckingham 2008 for further critiques of the concept).

In this article, to show the sociocultural embeddedness of youth’s relationship with the Internet, I offer a comparison of how high-school students relate to the Internet in two societies, China and Norway, based on in-depth interviews. The rationale is that the above-mentioned lacuna in theory and research on young people and the Internet can only be addressed through a close examination of the lived experiences of the Net by real individuals as active agents living in contemporary societies. A qualitative comparative approach, especially one that investigates cases within meaningfully contrasting settings (Bryman 2004) or substantial differences, such as China and

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Norway, is fruitful for highlighting the socioculturally embedded nature of young people’s relationships with the Internet by providing contrasting perceptions, practices and experiences (and similarities). So far, research on young people and the Internet has rarely adopted a qualitative cross-cultural comparative approach.

Both China and Norway have been incorporating digitalisation into national development and have seen an explosion of Internet adoption in the past years. Alongside this, the discourse of the Net Generation has been sonorous. According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) (2009), compared with 22.5 million in 2001, by the end of 2008 the total of Internet users in China had reached 298 million. Despite the rapid growth, however, the Internet in China is so far a predominantly urban youth phenomenon, with people under 30 (especially 10–19-year-olds), mostly members of the only-child generation due to the ‘one-child only’ policy, constituting the main group of Chinese netizens (Guo 2005; CNNIC 2009). This generation has come to be referred to as China’s ‘e-generation’, the ‘wired generation’ or the ‘Net Generation’ (China Daily 2003). In Norway, one of the world’s leading nations in adoption of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Castells 2001; MOD 2005), access to the Internet, mobile phones and other digital tools is almost 100% among young people. It has been observed that the Internet has become an integral part of children’s and young people’s everyday lives (Krumsvik 2006; Kaare et al. 2007). The term Netgenerasjon [Net Generation] has been widely used in the media and academic discussions.

However, despite rapid digitalisation in both China and Norway, and despite the common title ‘Net Generation’, young people in the two societies may find themselves in different life-worlds because of the marked differences in terms of economic, social, cultural, educational and political conditions. How, then, are young people in the two societies actively constructing the Internet as an element of their everyday lives embedded in the local sociocultural contexts? In other words, what place and meaning has the Net acquired in their lives? What differences and similarities can be discerned between the two cases?

In this paper, I explore these questions from a Schutzian perspective. Following a presentation of this perspective, I give a brief account of the data collection. Then, I present the major themes that have emerged from an analysis of the participants’ narratives.

The everyday life-world, social-biographical situation and relevance system: a Schutzian perspective

Schutz (Schutz and Luckmann 1973) defines the everyday life-world as ‘man’s [sic] fundamental and paramount reality’ (3). It is ‘the region of reality in which man [sic] can engage himself and which he can change while he operates in it by means of his animate organism’ (3). The everyday life-world is the domain where one interacts with other people with whom he/she constructs a shared world. Everything one experiences within its limits is taken for granted as ‘natural’ or ‘unproblematic until further notice’ (4).

Schutz’s theorisation of the everyday life-world is rich and meticulous. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive account of it. However, I find his notions of situation and relevance especially useful for this study. In every moment of conscious life, Schutz (ibid) proposes, one finds oneself in a situation. Each situation involves the interplay between ‘imposed’ and ‘open’ elements (ibid,
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100–116), which constitutes the complex relationship between individual freedom and constraint (Bakardjieva 2005).

What makes the term ‘situation’ relevant to my analysis here is that not only can it be used to designate the immediate micro-situation, it can also refer to the larger unit of time and space the individual inhabits at a given point or period of his/her life course (for an explication of the two types of situation, see Bakardjieva 2005). Schutz (Schutz and Luckmann 1973) refers to the latter type of situation as ‘the social-biographical situation of the individual with its involved complex of relevance structures, hierarchies of plans, and scopes of acts’ (57). The meaning-bestowing categories defining such situations are formed intersubjectively and are basically imposed upon the individual and become internalised, by him/her (56–57). Such situations can be described in conventional social categories such as age, socio-economic status, occupation, health status, family, social roles (e.g., gender roles), and so on (Bakardjieva 2005). But, in line with Schutz’s general notion of situation, one’s social-biographical situation is meanwhile relatively open, and can be explicated without limit. At any moment of life, the individual finds him/herself in a specific situation characterised by a configuration of various categories (both imposed and open). Schutz mentions the instance of the individual’s life stages to illustrate this point: ‘The formal structures of childhood, youth, maturity, old age, etc., point to global social fluctuations in scope as well as great variations in content’ (Schutz and Luckmann 1973, 57).

I find the notion of ‘social-biographical situation’ – namely the situation in a broader sense – especially useful for this study. With this notion of ‘situation’ the individual’s ‘here and now’ is expanded, linking his/her self-defined situation to the specific sociocultural context in which his/her everyday life-world is embedded. That is, both ‘the personal’ and ‘the social’, and their complex and inseparable interaction, stand at the very core of this concept. Then some questions become central to this study, such as ‘How is youth as a social-biographical category being experienced by the young people in the two cases in interaction with other factors that are impinging upon their lives, such as the educational system, cultural norms, family and social-economic-political system?’ and ‘How does this affect their orientations towards the Internet?’

Schutz (Schutz and Luckmann 1973) lays particular emphasis on the pragmatic motive that organises action in each situation, insisting, ‘the problems of action and choice must, therefore, have a central place in the analysis of the life-world’ (18). The centrality of choice brings to the fore the notion of relevance: ‘[a]ll experiences and all acts are grounded on relevance structures. Every decision more or less explicitly introduces, besides the actor, a series of relevances’ (183). Relevance serves as the scheme of selection and interpretation concerning choices, decisions, and involvement of an individual (Schutz 1970). It permits the individual to focus on one of – or the relation between – multiple ‘virtual realms of reality, or finite provinces of meaning’ in the life-world (7). In asking questions such as whether we see things in the right light, whether we should restrict our ‘interest’ to a given problem, whether something is of interest to me, whether something ‘really matters’ to me, and whether a matter is of consequence to me, we ‘consciously inquire into our own relevance systems’ (Schutz and Luckmann 1973, 182). As such, relevance system (or structure), refers to the totality of those objects, features or concepts which are experienced as relevant in a particular situation (Schutz and Luckmann 1973). Different individuals and groups embedded in their various situations have different relevance systems, depending on
their hierarchies of plans and their knowledge as well as their general material and social environments. People grasp those aspects of reality that are of practical relevance, according to their unique position or situation (Schutz and Luckmann 1973).

Schutz (1970) distinguishes various zones of interests, or relevances, extending from those within reach to those absolutely irrelevant: the ‘zone of primary relevance’, the ‘zone of minor relevance’, the irrelevant zones, and the zone of ‘absolute irrelevance’ (111–112). He further emphasises the constant changeability of relevance configurations as one moves from one situation to another. This notion of zones, or degrees, of relevance will be used to explore the place or importance the Internet has acquired in my respondents’ everyday life-worlds. Expressions such as interest, importance, usefulness, meaningfulness, impact, consequences, necessity/needs and so on, and their corresponding adjectives (and the opposite of these) will be important for describing the young people’s relationship with the Net.

Schutz (1970) also distinguishes between ‘imposed’ relevances and ‘intrinsic’ or ‘volitional’, relevances, which in daily life are often intermingled with one another and seldom found in a pure state (113). The former types of relevance are those imposed on us by events and situations, while the latter types are the outcome of our spontaneously chosen interests and goals (114). Although whether the relevance of an object, piece of knowledge or action recipe is imposed on the subject or intrinsic to her will be difficult to establish unequivocally (Bakardjieva 2005), I still see in Schutz’s notion of intrinsic and imposed relevance an analytical tool that is useful in the investigation of how the tensions between the competing discourses of the Net are being played out in the young people’s everyday lives embedded in the two societies. The construct of the computer as an educational device, in line with the discourse of the information society, is being constantly challenged by the alternative construction of the computer as an entertainment and leisure device (Facer et al. 2001; Sandvig 2006). The socially approved uses of the Net (i.e., those for educational purposes) often stand in contrast with what children and young people actually use it for. Children and young people are far more fascinated by the Internet as a communication and entertainment medium than as a learning and information resource (Facer et al. 2001; Buckingham 2003; Livingstone 2003; Qiu 2003; Livingstone and Bober 2004; Sefton-Green 2004; Guo 2005; Willett and Burn 2005; Sandvig 2006; Golub and Lingley 2008; Liu, forthcoming). As such, viewed from the Schutzian perspective, uses for educational purposes constitute ‘imposed relevance’ for children and young people, whereas uses for recreational and social purposes are more in line with their ‘intrinsic relevance/interest’. One important question to explore in this article is how the high-school students in the two societies are trying to come to terms with the tension between the two types of relevances of the Internet.

To sum up, Schutz’s notions of the everyday life-world, situation and relevance enable me to view the participant as a socially situated individual and interpret his/her Internet-related choices, decisions and preferences in relation to the larger picture of his/her life embedded in specific sociocultural and institutional contexts, with a variety of situational characteristics, as experienced and defined by the subjects themselves.

Data collection

This article draws on open-ended in-depth interviews with high-school students in China and Norway. Additional valuable information also comes from my observation of the two cases while living in the two countries in recent years.
Twenty-five students (aged 16–19) at an upper high school in a city in North China were interviewed in autumn 2007 and 2008. The respondents were recruited with the help of some teachers (my former classmates and friends) at that school, who introduced my project to their classes, inviting volunteers to participate. Permission to conduct the interviews was obtained from the school. From the 31 who showed interest 25 were selected (13 boys and 12 girls), drawn from all the three grades at upper high school. Semi-structured interviews, which lasted on the average 1–1.5 hours, were conducted in groups of three to five in a teacher’s office after school hours. The Chinese teenagers in this study were mostly Han Chinese, reflecting the general ethnic composition of that part of the country. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. A feature unique to the Chinese respondents was that all of them were the only child in the family, reflecting the current demographic situation of urban China. By contrast, all the Norwegian respondents had at least one sibling, with some having as many as six.

Open-ended in-depth interviews, which also lasted 1–1.5 hours, were conducted with Norwegian students (aged 16–19) at an upper high school in the eastern part of Oslo, the capital of Norway, in January and February 2009. The choice of age group and student status was to correspond with the Chinese respondents, for comparative purposes. However, as in the Chinese case, the selection of research site largely depended on convenience. The sample was obtained through personal contact with a teacher who helped me obtain the school’s permission to conduct the interviews; students were then invited to participate in the project. Interviews of 24 teenagers (14 girls and 10 boys), drawn from all the three grades of senior high school, were conducted with groups of 5–7 students. Reflecting the school’s overall population of more than 50% of students from immigrant families, only a few of the interviewees were ethnic Norwegians. However, all of the respondents were born in Norway. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The respondents’ names, where they are used in the text, are all fictitious.

The data analysis shows that the differences between the two cases were much more striking than similarities. Therefore, the main themes that have emerged from the young people’s narratives are organised in ways that highlight these differences, though similarities will also be noted.

‘Wired sometimes, somewhere’ versus ‘wired all the time, everywhere’: adoption/provision, ownership and access/availability

Significant differences were discerned between the two cases in terms of adoption/provision, ownership and access/availability, despite the fact that both had been referred to as members of the ‘Net Generation’. The differences can be roughly summarised as ‘the Internet as a matter of course’ versus ‘the Internet as a matter of negotiation/hesitation’, ‘my PC/Internet’ versus ‘our PC/Internet’ and ‘wired everywhere, all the time’ versus ‘wired somewhere, sometimes’.

In line with research findings from other western countries, where it has become a norm for young people to have a media-rich bedroom (Bovill and Livingstone 2002), the Norwegian sample took it for granted that everyone had their own PC/Internet access in their bedroom. When asked ‘Do you all have your own PC and Internet in your own bedroom?’, a typical response from the group interviews with the Norwegians was: ‘Of course! Who does not?’ They indicated that they were online nearly
all the time and that they had access everywhere – at home, school, the library, the cafeteria and even on the subway. An average of 6 to 10 hours a day online was normal for most of them.

This is in sharp contrast with the Chinese sample, who saw having their own PC and Internet in their own bedroom as unusual, as is reflected in Zhanghuan’s (18-year-old boy) response to the same question: ‘[surprised] In one’s own bedroom? Most families now have broadband at home. But I have never heard of any one at our age with that luxury’. The Chinese respondents further revealed that besides home, school and the Net Café (a widely existing commercial form of e-access in China’s cities; see Liu 2009) were the only alternative places to get online. They reported that they went online only in their ‘free’ time, such as weekends, lunch breaks, summer and winter vacations after exams, for no more than a few hours a week.

It is tempting to assume that the above differences typically reflect the general ‘digital divide’ between developed (e.g., Norway) and developing countries (e.g., China). However, a closer look reveals that the difference is not merely a matter of financial resources in the two societies; it also has to do with the pragmatic choice of the family, which is framed by the sociocultural complexities of the young people’s everyday life-worlds.

Schutz (Schutz and Luckmann 1973) argues that the everyday life-world is intersubjectively constructed by the subject and his/her fellowmen. This is true not least of technology adoption, ownership and access/availability within the family (Livingstone 2002). As revealed by the respondents, parents have been playing an important role in shaping the availability of the Net at home. The teenagers in both samples were still largely dependent upon their parents, not merely in an economic sense, but also in that young people’s choice is still much influenced by parental values and expectations – which is especially true in the Chinese family, where parents seem to be more authoritarian than in the Norwegian family (Kaare et al. 2007). Thus, besides economic considerations, PC/Internet provision within the family depends on the extent to which parents view the Net as beneficial for their children’s overall development.

Like parents in western societies (Facer et al. 2001), Chinese urban parents, who typically cherish high expectations of their only child (Fong 2004; Liu 2006a, 2008; Rich and Tsui 2002), tend to see the computer/Internet as of great importance for their children’s future, in line with the official discourse of the information society and knowledge economy. However, because the current exam-oriented education system tends to leave little room for exploration beyond textbooks, Chinese parents widely perceive the Net as antithetical to academic performance, especially given the predominantly recreational uses observed among Chinese children and young people (Guo 2005; CNNIC 2009; Liu forthcoming). There is a widespread anxiety among Chinese parents about the Internet, which tends to distract their children from the school work necessary for success in the National College Entrance Exam (Golub and Lingley 2008; Liu forthcoming); lack of success in the examination is seen as fatal for one’s future life chance in a society characterised by fierce competition, lack of social security and a changed notion of what counts as the ‘good’ life (Fong 2004; Rosen 2004; Liu 2008). Thus, in the Chinese case the Internet is simultaneously seen as highly relevant and absolutely irrelevant.

The interviews with the Chinese participants showed (in accordance with my observations in Chinese homes) that it is not unusual for parents to be hesitant about having the Internet installed at home. In many families the Internet has been installed
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(after much negotiation), and it is commonly understood by the family members that it is a collective gadget and part of the home interior, like the family TV. It is thus typical that it is placed in the sitting room, rather than in a private bedroom. Moreover, in the home, use of the Internet is constantly in parental view. As such, compared with their Norwegian (and some other western) counterparts, the Chinese high-school students’ bedrooms (and homes) constituted a relatively poor ‘media environment’ (Livingstone, d’Haenens and Hasebrink 2001). However, as mentioned above, this difference cannot be explained purely from an economic perspective. Given the ‘child-centred’ culture and the purchasing power of the only-child family (Liu 2002, 2006a, 2008a; Rich and Tsui 2002; Anagnost 2004; Fong 2004), most Chinese parents would have provided their only child with a personal PC/Internet access if they were convinced about its relevance to the child’s future success. But, in the Chinese context, where the youngster’s bedroom is an extension of school (given the large amount of school work a student is supposed to do after school and the small amount of free time), home and one’s own room are construed much less as leisure spaces than in some western contexts, such as in Norway, where young people’s ‘bed-room culture’ allows for a diversification of tastes and habits at home and represents an expression of individualised lifestyles on the part of young people (Livingstone 2002a). With the collective central goal of getting the child into a university, preferably a good one, the urban Chinese family life is organised to a great extent around the child’s study (more exactly, school-related work). Thus, the home Internet serves as a mere symbol of modern material wealth and a symbolic link to the information society in the newly emerging middle-class family. In other words, it is still beyond their zone of primary relevance.

Concerning access at school, in 2000, the Chinese Ministry of Education, in line with the social-political agenda of China’s digital revolution, started the xiaoxiao tong [connecting every school] project, which aims to provide Internet access for teachers and students in 90% of schools within 10–15 years (CNNIC 2009). According to CNNIC, this project had been nearly completed by the end of 2009. In reality, however, Internet use at school is extremely limited. According to my respondents, at their school (recognised as the best one in the city) they could go online only for 1–2 hours a week when they had computer classes to learn basic computer/Internet skills ‘which we have already picked up elsewhere’, as one boy told me. Moreover, they indicated that such classes were offered only in the first year of upper high school. It seems that the computer/Internet at school also serves a largely symbolic purpose to cater to the social-political agenda of China’s information revolution, hence, an ‘educational boondoggle’ (Seiter 2005, 102). Again, this may be to do with resource constraints. But, more importantly, it is also framed by the above-mentioned exam-oriented curriculum and pedagogy, which makes it difficult to integrate the Internet effectively into the system.

In a similar vein, the fact that the Norwegian youth take for granted the presence of personal PC/Internet access in their bedrooms should not be understood solely in terms of the greater material affluence (although to a certain extent true) that these youths enjoy compared with young people in China in general. Admittedly, Norwegian late teenagers enjoy greater economic autonomy from their parents, thanks to the fact that unlike their Chinese counterparts, they can have an income through part-time jobs alongside schooling (most of my respondents had part-time jobs) and that inter-generational relationship tends to be much less hierarchical than in the Chinese family. In Norway, personal PC and Internet access in their own room can be a
personal matter rather than one that involves the whole family, as in China. Nevertheless, parental attitudes towards the Internet still play an important role in the young people’s choices and decisions concerning their relationship with the PC/Internet. According to my Norwegian respondents, their parents supported them in using the Net as they generally share the view that computer/Internet access can help their children with their academic performance. This mirrors findings from research done in other parts of Europe, such as the UK (Livingstone and Bober 2005). As my respondents indicated, although their parents showed concern about the negative effects of the Net, they also saw it as necessary to provide their young with personal PC/Internet access. Thus, in Norway, as in some other western societies, parental recognition of the educational value of the Net seems to have outweighed their concern about the negative influence of the Net, which forms a sharp contrast with the Chinese case, where it is the other way round. In China, for the aforementioned reasons, parental control and deliberate limitation were seen as necessary.

As in the Chinese case, Norwegian parents’ attitudes towards (and support for) their children’s use of the PC/Internet have to do with the educational system that constitutes a major part of young people’s everyday life-worlds. In the Norwegian case, where the school allowed for much greater freedom and space for young people to explore alternative ways of learning and being than in the Chinese case, use of the Internet does not seem to stand in conflict with academic performance – or at least not as much. Rather, the Internet and books are seen as complementary to each other for learning purposes, reflecting the observation that in the Nordic countries, ‘print and screen are not framed as in conflict’ (Livingstone 2002, 323). In line with this, there is a consensus among policy-makers, teacher educators and school leaders that ICT implementation and the integration of the Internet into the curriculum must be given high priority (Krumsvik 2006). Thus, although the situation of ICT implementation is still not satisfactory in reality (Krumsvik 2006), compared with China and indeed most other countries in the world, there have been more serious efforts in this respect, so that Norwegian students enjoy a relatively rich media environment at school. The young people reported that they had to use the Net in every single class and subject. While this may be specific to this school, which was IT-oriented, I was told that using the Net in class is also common in other schools in Oslo. Being wired is a state they are, and indeed, are supposed to be in, both at school and at home.

We need to look beyond the home and school in order to get a more comprehensive picture of the availability of the Net to young people. For the Chinese youth in this study, the Net Café is almost the only other site where the Net is available. Research (Liu 2009) shows that although today most urban users have broadband connection at home, the Net Café still constitutes a popular space for online (and offline) activities among urban youth because it serves as a temporary escape from parental and teacher supervision. By the same token, the Chinese respondents reported that they liked going online at the Net Café.

That Norwegian teenagers’ everyday life-world is wired to a greater extent than that of the Chinese is also reflected in the greater availability of the Internet in the wider society. My respondents reported that that access is universal. When asked ‘Where do you get online?’, they indicated ‘Everywhere’: ‘One can go online on the subway, at the library, at school, at the cafeteria, home and so on,’ as some of them explained to me. And they indicated that they were wired almost all the time. Unlike in China, where the school students tended to prefer going online at the Net Café (which served as a special space of temporary freedom from parents and school), the
Net Café seemed irrelevant to the Norwegian teenagers’ life-worlds. This difference again has to do with the question of need in both cases, which is framed not only by the varying extent to which the Internet is available in the two cases, but also has to do with the fact that the Norwegian respondents, unlike the Chinese, perceived little need to escape from their everyday life realities (although there were exceptions). This point will be discussed more fully later in this article.

To sum up, the universal adoption of and taken-for-granted personal PC/Internet access, and wide availability of the Internet to the Norwegian students, in contrast with the Chinese students’ hesitant adoption/rare ownership of, and limited access to it, reflects the differences in infrastructure in the two societies. However, it also has to do with the various sociocultural factors that impinge upon the young people’s life-worlds, hence relevant systems, embedded in the specific local contexts.

‘Wired for fun’ versus ‘wired for everything’: purposes of use in the local contexts

Generally speaking, users throughout the world employ the Internet in multiple ways: socially, instrumentally and recreationally. However, from the theoretical approach adopted in this study, individuals in their specific social-biographical situations, with their specific relevance systems, appropriate the Internet in ways that make sense for their own purposes. Thus, if we conceptualise Internet use as a spectrum covering these different purposes (social, recreational and instrumental), then we can locate individuals’ or groups’ trajectories across the surface. Different trajectories between the two groups across the spectrum are now discussed.

In line with the general tendency among Chinese users to use the Net predominantly for entertainment (Guo 2005; CNNIC 2009), I discovered that my Chinese respondents used the Internet mainly for recreation – a term they used interchangeably with ‘entertainment’, ‘pastime’, ‘fun’ and ‘leisure’ (for convenience, I shall also use these interchangeably). When asked how they would define the Internet, a predominant reply was ‘just entertainment’; that is, they equated the Net with entertainment. Thus, it is not surprising that many of them used the verb ‘play’ when talking about the Internet, such as ‘play with the computer’, ‘play online’ or ‘my mother does not allow me to play (online)’.

A wide range of online recreations was identified by the respondents, from playing online games to watching movies, listening to music, reading novels, chatting, reading and writing blogs and decorating one’s online personal space or visiting other people’s personal spaces. The online activities could vary from person to person, often (but not always) in gender-specific patterns (with more males playing online games and more females doing the other activities, and boys spending more time online than girls in general). As already mentioned, they went online only in their ‘free’ time, but almost solely for recreation, or as they put it, ‘just to relax’. ‘If we do not have more than two hours, we will not go to the café because one cannot do [he meant ‘play’] anything in less than two hours’, an 18-year-old boy told me.

Compared with online entertainment, Internet use for social-communicative purposes and community-building seemed of less relevance to them. Furthermore, uses for social-communicative purposes were often tainted with fun-seeking elements. Admittedly, in many ways, the Chinese teenagers employed the Internet for social-communicative purposes in similar ways to the Norwegian youth in this study. For example, just as youth in Norway (and some other western societies) is much attracted to
social networking sites such as Facebook, Friendster and MySpace, the majority of urban teenagers in China have an account at a site called QQ (a site run by a company named Tencent), which offers the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) function and a MySpace-like social networking site (where one can blog) among other things. Like the Norwegian participants, they seemed to employ the Internet’s social-communicative facilities in ways that lend support to research findings from the west showing that in most cases the Internet strengthens young people’s local networks rather than extending their networks beyond (Wellman and Gulia 1999; Johnson 2001; Gross et al. 2002; Livingstone 2002b; Livingstone and Bober 2005; Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007; boyd 2008). Furthermore, they mostly used the mobile phone, especially short message services (SMSs; see Latham 2007, for the popularity of SMS in China) to contact friends and relatives. Again, this preference for the mobile phone as the major communication method is in line with research findings from other societies (e.g., Livingstone and Bober 2005) as well as with the Norwegian case in this study.

However, two features seem to distinguish the Chinese sample from their Norwegian/western counterparts concerning their uses of the Internet for social purposes. First, compared with the Norwegian respondents, they seemed to be less dedicated to online socialising. Although most of them had an account in QQ, it seems that this social network site had not acquired the equivalent status of Facebook among the Norwegians, some of whom told me, ‘Everyone has Facebook. Otherwise, you fall out’, echoing the American youth’s relationship with MySpace as described by boyd (2008). Furthermore, I learned that the majority of the Chinese respondents did not have an email account and many of them had not even heard of the term ‘email’. The few who had an account indicated that it was seldom used. Concerning online chatting, some of the respondents claimed that they seldom chatted, unless they needed to kill time. This relative lack of interest in employing the Internet for social purposes seems somehow unexpected, for it is reasonable to assume that in the ‘lonely’ life-world of the singleton, one may especially value the Internet for its opportunities for social and communicative purposes. However, as Wangchen (18-year-old girl) explained, offering a shared understanding among the Chinese participants, ‘Our daily life is largely organised around school and the local society. Nearly all our friends and families are nearby. There is no such need. The Internet for us is mainly for relaxation’. This remark brings us back to the realities of their everyday lives with their own relevance systems and, related to this, to their preoccupation with online entertainment.

The other feature that distinguishes the Chinese sample’s online social–communicative activities is their combination of communication and entertainment. This is most evident in the way they used the chatting function. I heard two opposite reports concerning online chatting. As mentioned above, some of the respondents claimed that they seldom chatted ‘unless we cannot find other things to do online’, as Zhanglin (17-year-old) told me at a group interview. For them, chatting usually served the purpose of pastime or killing time rather than more serious activities. There are, however, others who reported that each time they were online, they would chat with friends. And the purpose, as Fanxiang (17-year-old boy) explained, is to ‘crack jokes with friends and pass on messages’. As a few of the respondents emphasised, ‘chatting is chatting’; it is not for anything serious, but for fun. While such a view may neglect the fact that chatting does sometimes handle more serious topics, it reflects the type of recreational orientation towards the Net widely found among the Chinese students. This tendency was further observed in their use of the ‘my space’
at the social network site QQ, which, according to many of the respondents, mainly served as a space for reading and circulating jokes rather than for blogging and communicating with others.

Thus, tracing their trajectory across the conceptual spectrum, I found that the Chinese high-school students rarely used the Internet for instrumental purposes, such as studying, information seeking, and news retrieval and so on. I was especially struck by the rarity of their use of the Internet in relation to their school work. When asked whether they used the Net for education-related purposes, the reply was, ‘No. we cannot even manage the knowledge in the textbooks’. This perceived and experienced irrelevance of the Internet to academic work in the Chinese sample contrasts markedly with the Norwegian, where it was seen as an integral part of their school work, constituting a strong theme which deserves a separate section (see below).

Posing the same set of questions to the Norwegian students about purposes of use revealed quite another picture. Admittedly, entertainment was an important part of their online activities, as for most young people with access to the Net. Like their Chinese counterparts, their online entertainment and pastime took the form of gaming, movie watching, music downloading, blogging, visiting the social network sites, and so on. It was also similarly gendered with more boys playing games, and more girls doing social things (but it is noteworthy that unlike in the Chinese case, the girls were no less attracted to the Internet than the boys. It seems that compared with the Chinese girls, the Norwegian ones were less interested in online gaming. These are phenomena that deserve further research). Nevertheless, for most of them entertainment was in no way the major purpose of going on line. Generally speaking, they used the Net just as much for instrumental purposes, which in this case was mostly related to their school work and information seeking, such as news. When asked in which aspect of life they found the Net most useful, the Norwegian teenagers found it hard to put their online recreation ahead of the other online activities. In short, it seems that they used the Internet for a wider range of purposes than the Chinese, as was further demonstrated by their answers to the question ‘What do you use the Internet for in daily life?’. Here are some examples from the interviews:

Marthe (16-year-old): Facebook, msn, hotmail (check mail), read newspapers, homework, school work … …

Sophia (18-year-old): I use it mostly for schoolwork and updating myself for news. Sometimes also watch movies, do shopping, keep in touch with friends and families and so on.

Bill (17-year-old): I read about sports, especially baseball, Google, Wikipedia, school work, chat, play games, read news, participate in discussion forums and so on.

Tom (18-year-old): Much the same as others do. Entertainment, such as watching movies, downloading music, gaming, communication, chatting with friends and relatives, school work, etc.

Like their Chinese counterparts, it seems everyone had their own trajectory across the conceptual spectrum, as everyone may have had their own preferences concerning online activities. Some may have spent more time online for social purposes (as especially in the case of some girls), while others were more devoted to recreational purposes. Still others were oriented more towards instrumental purposes (school work and information seeking). Nevertheless, whereas the Chinese respondents were
predominantly located at the recreational end of the spectrum, each of the Norwegian teenagers, as well as the whole group, was to be found along the whole spectrum. Generally speaking, for these young people, the Net had been equally useful for all these purposes.

It is worth mentioning that compared with their Chinese counterparts the Norwegians seemed to employ the Net for social purposes in a fuller way. Facebook, msn, and hotmail (or other forms of email) were important means of maintaining (and developing) their social circles and keeping in touch with families and friends, rather than purely for fun. Thus, it seems that for them online communication, such as chatting, served ‘serious’ purposes to a greater extent. Furthermore, although online communication was mainly for the sake of maintaining local networks, as with the Chinese, some of them did also use the Net very much to keep in touch with those back at ‘home’, as many of them were from immigrant families, which is an important social-biographical characteristic that distinguishes them from their Chinese counterparts. Although relatively unusual, some of them did frequently employ the Net to communicate with ‘strangers’ in other countries. For example, Cindy (18-year-old) indicated that she benefited from such practices because she learned about other people, cultures, societies and places in this way. As she planned to go to a university in Canada, she had been gathering information through online communication about that university and that city where the university is located. Her experience points to another feature that sets the Norwegian youth apart from their counterparts in this study, namely their English proficiency. As most of them can communicate fluently in English, they can (if they will) interact with people (with English proficiency and access to the Net) from all over the world. As a few boys mentioned, because they knew English, they often played games with, and hence socialised with, people, which in turn strengthened their English. Their English skill gave them a cultural resource that was not enjoyed as much by their Chinese counterparts, most of whom found it difficult to communicate in English (either orally or in writing). As a result, the Chinese youth were mainly restricted to the Chinese web.

Another online activity that applied to each and every one of the Norwegian respondents was to read online news on a daily basis. All of them read online newspapers. Besides Norwegian newspapers, some of them also read news in other languages, such as English and the languages used in their countries of origin. The purpose, they explained, was to keep up with what was happening in the world, ‘because that has an impact on the individual living in local contexts too’, as Robert (16-year-old) argued. This seems different from their Chinese counterparts, who reported that they seldom spent their online time on reading news, as they were not ‘concerned about politics-related things’. This is much in line with the general tendency among the post-1989 generation of Chinese youth to show a pragmatic attitude towards politics (Damm 2007). Moreover, it seems that this also has to do with the relevance structures of their everyday life-worlds which were greatly framed by school work and characterised very much by authoritarian control from various sources, such as the school, the family and the state. In contrast, the Norwegian sample believed they could make a difference and there was a willingness to participate in social-political engagement (although in ways that may be different from the previous generations). Some of them told me they devoted considerable amounts of time to reading news and visiting political sites now in order to get ready to vote in political elections later on; ‘it is important to vote’, Ivan (17-year-old) argued. Again,
this was to do with the relevance structures of their everyday life-worlds in which the education system and society in general allowed for more space for individual expressions, greater autonomy and more room for other activities than school work.

To sum up, it seems that the Norwegian sample was ‘wired’ for all kinds of purposes whereas the Chinese were ‘wired’ mainly for fun. The difference also bears a spatial dimension. Due to their different social-biographical situations (such as immigrant backgrounds, English proficiency, greater concern about social-political issues, the less rigid school system and more free time), the Norwegians seemed to employ the Net ‘farther and wider’ than the Chinese, who were mainly confined to the Chinese Web, interacting with local people and local content and mainly for fun, owing to the lack of these same sets of conditions. As is shown in the following section, how an individual orients him/herself towards the Net is framed by, and also frames, his/her self-understanding as a student.

‘The Net as a stumbling block’ versus ‘the Net as a great helper’: the Internet and the ‘good’ student

An important question to explore in this study is what kind of relevance the Internet has gained for the young people as students. It is noteworthy that determining the Internet’s relevance to one’s specific situation is not always a straight-forward process; rather, it often involves negotiation, as we have already seen in this article. This is especially true when people are simultaneously addressed by competing discourses about the Internet, or seen from a Schutzian perspective, when they have to come to terms with both the imposed relevance and intrinsic relevance of the Internet. Thus, exploring the young people’s meaning-making about the Net brings to the fore the tension between the imposed and intrinsic relevances of the Net as experienced by the high-school students in their specific everyday life-worlds – that is, the multi-purpose potential of the technology functions as a locus around which young people negotiate their identities as students.

A persistent theme that has emerged from the interviews with the high-school students in China is that they tended to see the Internet as antithetical, and hence largely irrelevant, to studying, a view greatly shared by urban parents and other adults. This echoes the concern in the wider Chinese society about the danger and risk brought about by the Net (Golub and Lingley 2008; Liu forthcoming). When asked whether going online helped them in their studies, the predominant reply from the middle school students was ‘No, the opposite’. Similarly, when asked if they saw the Internet as an important thing in their lives, Suxiang (a 16-year-old female student) replied, ‘It is very useful in some ways, such as entertainment, but it can also be seen as useless because it delays danwu [studying]’. I probed the respondents further: ‘But there may be much learning involved in online recreation. Moreover, one can employ the Net for educational purposes. How can you say it is the opposite of learning?’ In response, most of the respondents claimed that there was anyway very little learning in their online recreation – at least in the sense that it did not help enhance their exam results. Such remarks point to the constraints incurred by China’s exam-oriented educational system, in which academic performance is entirely assessed by paper-and-pen-based exams, rendering anything beyond the text books largely irrelevant.

Accordingly, I was told time and again by both those who defined themselves as good students and those who defined themselves as otherwise that although nowadays one seldom found an urban youngster who did not go online at all, ‘good students’
used the Internet in very self-controlled ways, just as they spent very limited time playing in other forms. Or as Zhangyi (17-year-old), who often visited the Net Café, put it: ‘We are not good students. Good students seldom go online’. It was thus a shared understanding that a ‘good’ student would become a ‘bad’ one by going online (too much). Thus, those students who went to the Net Café whenever they were ‘free’ seldom did so without a sense of guilt or uneasiness, as this was, after all, ‘bad’ for a student. Likewise, they viewed their classmates who disciplined themselves for the purpose of exams, and therefore rarely went online, with a mixed feeling of contempt and admiration:

Such people appear unsocial and somehow strange. I do not approve of that type myself. But on the other hand, I admit that they are doing the ‘right’ thing. After all, your goal is to enter the university. When you have entered the university, in fact, it is very fast to learn that thing [using the Net]. (Tanyong, 16-year-old boy)

This wisdom was again widely shared by the students. Therefore, it was commonly understood that they were supposed to go online less and less, ideally totally avoiding the Internet, as they went higher in the grades at high school, at the end of which would be the National College Entrance Examination, with its determining effect on their future life chances. Preoccupied with the preparation for the highly competitive exam, the Chinese high-school students tended to live in the future concerning their relationship with the Internet. They did recognise the Internet’s potential for a broader range of purposes well beyond entertainment, as is reflected in remarks such as ‘The Internet is everything. One can get everything one wants there. One can do everything on it’ and ‘The Net is a “know-all”’. However, they indicated that they could only wait until after the National College Entrance Examination to integrate the Internet more closely into their lives. They further emphasised that this ‘integration-to-be’ would be necessary in order to keep up with the ‘knowledge/information society’. Fong (2004), in her study of Chinese urban youth, also found a tendency to focus on preparation for the National College Entrance Exam at the temporary expense of many personal wishes and desires.

Of course, not all managed to exert the degree of self-discipline required for this rational choice and the extent of such ‘abstinence’ varied from individual to individual. As I shall show in the next section, the greater the pressure to work hard, as is usually the case in the last year of high school, the greater the felt need to relax by escaping into the ‘virtual world’. The more time spent online (given the predominant entertainment-oriented uses), the worse the school performance becomes; so goes the vicious circle. This explains why parents were extremely nervous about young people and children going online, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, parental oversight of their children’s use of the Net constituted an important element of these high-school students’ everyday life-worlds. Some respondents reported frequent disputes between the two generations concerning the Internet and the Internet Café. By the same token, the few students who told me that their parents did not exert much control over their Internet use, indicated that an important way to live up to their parents’ expectations was to exert self-discipline about going online. Thus, the first step towards becoming a ‘better student’, hence a ‘better child’, was to go online less, if at all.

The widely shared view among the Chinese youth of the Internet as counter-productive to study seems to stand in sharp contrast to the Norwegian students’ perception of the Net as a great helper with their school work and academic achievement. The latter
is in line with research findings in some other western societies (e.g., see Livingstone and Bober 2005). It was a shared understanding among the Norwegian participants that one could hardly manage at school without the Net. They explained that this was first of all because the school system had been constructed upon the ideal of an IT school. ‘We use the Net for each and every subject’, many of them emphasised. The Class Fronter, an Internet-based data system for communication and collaboration in relation to teaching and learning at school, made it convenient for submitting/posting homework and getting feedback. But more importantly, as mentioned earlier, the possibility of using the Net for learning purposes was enabled by the curriculum and pedagogy, which were very project-based, encouraging students to seek information from far and wide to get the optimal outcome of a task. As the Net fitted in well with such purposes, it was commonly recognised by the Norwegian students as a great help with their karakter [school results].

However, the tension between the imposed relevance of the Net for educational purposes and the intrinsic relevance young people tended to find in it was by no means totally resolved. Just as their Chinese counterparts needed to practise self-discipline to keep a proper distance from the ‘dangerous’ Net, the Norwegian high-school students need to practise self-discipline concerning the different types of uses in order to harness the Net for educational purposes. The image of a good student that has emerged from the Norwegian youth’s narratives is one who uses the Net a great deal, yet in a balanced way, not allowing non-education-related online activities, especially online entertainment and communication, to outweigh education-related activities. As Greta (18-year-old), who saw herself and her friends as good students, told me, ‘We discipline ourselves. Otherwise, one gets easily distracted by online entertainment and/or socialising’. By the same token, a couple of the students attributed their ‘not very satisfactory academic performances’ to their using the Net too much for entertainment. Per (16-year-old) mentioned that he was thinking about limiting his online entertainment for the present and using the Net more for school work. In reflecting upon the negative effects of the Net on learning, Stein (18-year-old) commented, ‘One tends to use much time for other things on the Net’. Likewise, Meli (16-year-old), who found himself addicted to online gaming which had heavily affected his school performance, indicated, he sometimes wished that the Net had never been invented.

Like the Chinese, the Norwegian high-school students also had to negotiate between ‘learning’ on the Net and ‘playing’ on the Net, although the negotiation took different forms. When asked if they perceived any difference in using the Net at school and at home, all indicated ‘very different’: ‘At home, you are free to do whatever you like online, whereas at school you are supposed to use the Net only for purposes related to the subjects’. However, in reality, this boundary never seemed clear-cut as the imposed relevance of the Net as an educational device could be (at least partly) resisted even at school. For example, here is an excerpt from an interview with some Grade-two (17-year-old) students:

Amund: Half of us, when we are supposed to work on the computer/Net, are on Facebook. As soon as the teacher comes, one changes it to other sites.
Interviewer: Does the teacher find out?
Ruth: Yes, he knows.
Marit: But he/she does not care. It is up to us. It is we ourselves who lose by doing so.
Furthermore, the tension between the imposed and intrinsic relevance of the Net manifested itself at home, too, despite the claim that they were free to do whatever they liked online within that domain. In contrast with the Chinese sample, talking about their parents’ attitudes towards their use of the Net, most of the high-school students indicated that their parents did not impose any regulations about their use of the Net at home. This may have been to do with their status as ‘late teenagers’, almost adults, who in Norway enjoy more individual autonomy compared with their counterparts in China. Moreover, it may also have been to do with the fact that the Norwegian home serves more as a leisure space than in China. However, the more relaxed attitude of their parents also seems to be related to the fact that ‘they trust me’, as some of the Norwegian youth put it. Although most of them reported having no conflict with their parents concerning the Internet, with parents imposing few regulations at home, a few did tell about how their parents nagged and/or reacted strongly about their using the Net too much for leisure activities. For example:

\textit{Ali (19-year-old):} My mother has regulations. She does not want me to sit there too long.
\textit{Interviewer:} Is she concerned about your health?
\textit{Ali:} Yes, that is also true. But she does not want me to waste all the time in front of the PC.
\textit{Interviewer:} But if you use it for school work?
\textit{Ali:} Yes, then she thinks that is fine.
\textit{Interviewer:} How does she control that?
\textit{Ali:} She comes in with some food/snacks and sees what I am doing [laughing].

One boy, who reported playing online games for many hours at weekends (sometimes 24 hours), told me that his mother once got so angry that she cast his PC out of the window.

Thus, the distinction they made between recreational and educational uses brings us back to the tension between the imposed and intrinsic relevance of the Internet. Whereas the Chinese high-school students tended to find the Net highly irrelevant to themselves as students, the Norwegian students generally found it very useful for achieving good academic performance. Despite the presence of the tension between the imposed and intrinsic relevance of the Net in both cases, it affected the young people rather differently concerning their identity construction as students. The following section demonstrates how the Net’s relevance to the young people in the two cases differs in still another (although related) dimension.

‘The Internet as another world’ versus ‘the Internet as part of this world’: between the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’

Another interesting dimension of the two groups’ different relationships with the Net is whether or not they make a distinction between the so-called ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds. Exploration of this theme will help us to get a more nuanced understanding of how the Net fits into the young people’s relevance systems within their own life-worlds.

When asked if they could come up with a metaphor or metaphors to describe the Internet, many of the Chinese youth referred readily to the Internet as just a \textit{xuhuan shijie} [virtual world]. In other words, they made a clear distinction between the ‘virtual’
and ‘real’ worlds. They further insisted that it was the ‘virtual’ nature of the Net that was interesting to them. Or as Liwei (17-year-old boy) argued, ‘If it were the same as reality, it would not be able to attract people’. A shared explanation of why the ‘virtual’ world, or more exactly, the ‘virtual’ part of Cyberspace was of particular interest to them, was that the jali [pressure] on the self in ‘real’ life is too great, which constituted a strong theme in my Chinese respondents’ narratives about their relationship with the Net. They attributed the pressure to a range of interrelated characteristics of their social-biographical situations, such as great parental expectations, the approaching filial duty, the highly competitive educational system, the busy school life strictly structured around exams, the competitive labour market and the changing notion of what counts as the ‘good life’ (see Liu forthcoming, for further discussion). Many of them also indicated that ‘real’ life was really boring because the school life was strictly structured around exams so that there was very little diversion from studies.

Related to this pressure for achievement and boredom with life, my respondents generally shared the perception that their parents could not understand them and that there was a general lack of opportunity for individual expression. Representing his friends at a group interview, Sunhao (17-year-old) said, ‘It is the same for all of us only-children. Our parents have planned each and every step of our life course according to their beliefs. And we are to go according to that plan’. In talking about their relationships with their parents, they often showed an envy of their western counterparts, who, they claimed, had very few such problems (see Liu forthcoming, for further discussion). ‘When we are frustrated in real life’, emphasised Wangli (17-year-old girl) at another group interview, ‘we turn to the Net’. A 16-year-old boy told me, ‘When I do very badly in an exam, I would just immerse myself in the virtual world, playing and playing, not caring about anything in the “real” world’. The following conversation highlights the major difference between the ‘two’ worlds as perceived by the Chinese youth:

Zhufeng (17-year-old boy): The greatest difference between the two is that the virtual world is easier than the real world. In reality, you have to struggle many years to upgrade yourself. But in the virtual, you can do that by merely overcoming a few tasks.

Cuiqian (17-year-old boy): Besides, in real life you cannot foresee the future, but in games, you can. You know what is going to happen. You then have a sense of being able to foresee things.

The sense of achievement and being in control may be especially relevant for the boys, who are supposed to achieve something according to the traditional gendered expectations still very prevalent in today’s China (Liu 2006b, 2006c). However, the girls, although they tended not to play online games so much, especially the kind enjoyed by boys, also showed great appreciation of the ‘virtual’ world, where one ‘does not need to think about school and parents and all the other things in this world’, as Zhaofei (17-year-old girl) told me.

Thus, ironically, just as the perceived pressure to achieve made them see the Net as a stumbling block, highly irrelevant to good school performance, their lived experience of pressure made them see the Net as an effective way to cope with pressure, boredom and frustration. Consequently, as mentioned in the previous section, it was commonly recognised that they must play less as the final National College Entrance Exam drew closer. However, the pressure could be so great that they failed to exercise the necessary self-discipline. Another observation is that the higher the
student’s grade was, the more he/she needed to go online; as Qinfeng (19-year-old boy) explained, ‘We need to relax in order to cope with the pressure. Your parents and relatives are there expecting a good result from your exams. And you are told time and again how crucial these exams are for your future’. This tendency is reported in other studies which show that urban Chinese students often resort to the virtual world of the Internet to dispel the pressures of study, school and home (McLaren 2007).

The type of boundary between the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’ world drawn by the Chinese was much less evident among the Norwegian youth. While the former saw the Net as ‘another’ world to escape to from their everyday lives, which were characterised by pressure and frustration arising from the actualities of their social-biographical situations, the latter viewed it as an integral part of their everyday life, rather than serving as a parallel world out there to be explored. As Knut (18-year-old) told me, ‘The Net is a natural part of us. We use it for everything in our lives, such as entertainment, study, communication and information. We are wired all the time’. Echoing this comment, Hans (17-year-old) remarked, ‘The Internet is as natural as a part of one’s body’. When asked to provide a metaphor for the Net, unlike the Chinese youth who predominantly defined the Net as a ‘virtual world’, none of the Norwegian respondents used that expression. In fact most of them found it hard to come up with any metaphor. Instead, they tended to define it in more ‘realistic’ ways, such as ‘information [medium]’, ‘communication [medium]’ and ‘entertainment [medium]’. Only two of them managed to offer a metaphor. One (18-year-old boy) compared the Net to a ‘universe’. Despite the overlapping elements between the term ‘virtual world’ and ‘universe’, it seems that compared with the former, the latter is still a description of the Internet in largely ‘realistic’ terms. The other one (16-year-old boy) said, ‘The Net is a rubbish bin’. When I asked him, ‘Does this mean there are only negative things contained in the cyberspace?’, he replied, ‘No. It just means that one can find all kinds of things in it’. With the finding in the Chinese case fresh in mind, I probed the Norwegians with the question ‘Do you see the Net as a ‘virtual’ world, or another world, apart from the real world?’, Paola (18-year-old), supported by all the others in the group, exclaimed emphatically, ‘The Net is not another world. It is part of our world’. However, some of them added that in a way the Net is a virtual world. ‘It depends upon how one uses the Net. Those who play online games are living part of their lives in the virtual world,’ as Anna (17-year-old) argued.

The function of the Internet as an escape from the ‘real’ world was largely irrelevant to the Norwegian students, in contrast to the Chinese. As with the Chinese, the Norwegians’ understanding of the Net’s relevance has to be understood against their social-biographical situations, which are structured quite differently. While pressure (and frustration and boredom) constituted a striking theme in the Chinese youth’s narratives, this was much less evident in the Norwegian case, although admittedly everyone is somehow under pressure, as it can be argued that pressure is a prevalent human experience in the late modern era often referred to as the ‘risk society’ (Giddens 1991). First of all, although it varied from person to person, generally speaking, the Norwegian teenagers did not complain about great pressure related to parents’ expectations. This is not to say that their parents did not have expectations. In fact, many of them indicated that their parents had great expectations of them. This was especially true of the students from immigrant families, where parents who missed the opportunity for a good education themselves tended to hope that their children would live a different life by means of academic achievement. For example, Suna (18-year-old girl, with five siblings), whose parents came to Norway as refugees, told me, ‘My
parents hope that I will have a very good education as they did not have that opportunity themselves back in our homeland’. Another girl, Pega (16-year-old), said, ‘My parents want me to have a good education and [hope I] will not end up with 50 children at home [laughing]’. By ‘good education’, she meant at least a Master’s degree. Furthermore, and interestingly, whereas it is widely observed that parents with only one child, as in the Chinese case, tend to have high expectations, a child having siblings can also lead to high parental expectations. For example, in response to my question whether their parents had great expectations of them, Julie (17-year-old), ‘Yes. Because I have an elder brother who is unbelievably clever. He is at the university, my parents expect me to do as well at school’. In a similar vein, Hanna (17-year-old) at the same interview said, ‘I have a younger sister, my parents want me to set a good example for her’.

Although a few of them did indicate that they felt some pressure because of parental expectations, none talked about pressure in the same emphatic and striking way as the Chinese students. Moreover, while the Chinese felt that their future was designed by their parents, the Norwegians perceived much greater autonomy from parental ‘control’ as to what they should do in the future. Generally speaking, they showed confidence in deciding for themselves what to do in life and in living a life according to their own wishes. And they perceived their parents as supportive of their own dreams. This constitutes a contrast with the widely voiced lack of room for individual expression amongst the Chinese.

It is arguable that the Norwegian youth’s greater freedom from parents’ control and expectations may have to do with the fact that they are not the only child in the family, as is the case with the Chinese. However, more importantly, it seems also related to the fact that compared with Chinese youth, Norwegian students enjoy greater life chances. As Elisabeth (17-year-old girl with immigrant background) who had first-hand knowledge about people’s lives in different societies, said, in making the point that they are not under great pressure, ‘Here it is not necessary that one exerts oneself so much as in some other societies in order to have a standing in society’. Her statement points to the wider range of life chances and the generally greater welfare enjoyed by young people in Norway than in many other societies, such as China.

In addition, as we have seen, the pressure on Chinese students had much to do with the exam-oriented and highly selective educational system based on textbook knowledge. Such a system leaves little room for free time and exploration beyond the textbooks. Although such a problem was not totally absent from the Norwegian case, the school was organised quite differently, as already mentioned. It is noteworthy, though, that many of the Norwegian respondents did disclose a certain degree of discontent with school, referring to it as the major source of boredom in life. For example, when asked if they felt bored sometimes, many of my respondents told me, ‘Yes. School’. Most of the third-year students indicated that they were glad about finishing high school soon and entering university, where, as Adam (18-year-old) said, ‘One can focus on the subject one likes, instead of studying all the subjects one is required to even if one does not like them’. It was a shared perception that there was very much to do in the school subjects, which could prove to be stressful sometimes, especially when there were tests. All this would sound familiar to a Chinese student, and indeed may find resonance among youth in many societies. Nevertheless, while many of the Chinese students felt the pressure to be unbearable so that they needed to escape to the ‘virtual’ world for a break, the Norwegians emphasised that the stress, boredom and pressure was not so great as to be unbearable. Even in the case of the
heavy gamers, the main reason for going online so much was to have fun, rather than to escape. Furthermore, even if they needed to escape from reality, they had other spaces to flee to. As Sofia (17-year-old) put it, ‘We do not escape in that way’. They had a wider range of activities, and indeed, more free time as well, compared with the Chinese high-school students, as is clear from the following remarks at a group interview:

‘When I am stressed, I just sleep’.
‘I listen to music’.
‘I play football’
‘I go to the movies with friends’.
‘We hang around with friends, go shopping’.
‘We go to the pub’.

Although the Chinese may do all these things once in a while, these were far from a typical part of a high-school student’s life. Another activity which offered the Norwegian high-school students a more varied life was that many of them were working part-time. This would be unimaginable for their Chinese counterparts.

**Conclusion**

According to Schutz (Schutz and Luckmann 1973), different individuals and groups embedded in their various social-biographical situations have different relevance systems, depending on their hierarchies of plans, their knowledge as well as their general material and social environments. This is not least true concerning how people make choices, decisions and preferences about the Internet. Through the Schutzian lens and the comparative approach, I have been able to identify striking differences between the Chinese and Norwegian high-school students concerning their relationships with the Net, although both have been referred to as members of the Net Generation. I have summarised these in four interrelated themes that highlight the differences and similarities. Together, they shed light on the different places and meanings the Net has acquired in the young people’s lives in the two cases and how they negotiate their identities as students within the Internet-transformed context.

This study is exploratory, hence not meant as generalisable. However, the findings indicate that there are different modes of being the Net Generation, depending upon individuals’ relevance systems. With their preoccupation with online entertainment, the Chinese sample used the Net for a rather limited range of purposes compared with the Norwegian. Whereas the Norwegian high-school students attached great importance to the Net as an aid to their academic performance, important for transition to higher education, their Chinese counterparts tended to see it as a ‘stumbling block’ for achieving the same goal. And, while the Chinese students tended to use the Net as an escape from their ‘real’ world, the Norwegians found this function of the Net highly irrelevant to themselves. Thus, in general, the Internet had gained different degrees of relevance in the two cases: one could locate it in the zone of primary relevance in the Norwegians’ lives, whereas it seemed largely to be in the zone of minor relevance in
the Chinese students’ lives. As such, it seems that the Norwegian youth had integrated
the Internet more into their everyday lives compared with the Chinese youth, who
used it mainly as a toy, detachable, or even as something to be avoided. In light of the
distinction made by Turkle (1984) between the ‘instrumental user’ and the ‘expressive
user’ regarding types of technology–user relationship, the Chinese young people
belonged predominantly to the camp of expressive users (although admittedly, such a
dichotomy could be questioned in some cases, see e.g., Bakardjieva 2005). However,
it is hard to define the Norwegian youth explicitly in this light; they seemed to be both
instrumental and expressive users simultaneously.

Although these contrasts may be explained to some extent by the difference in the
general material wealth in the two societies, the participants’ choices, decisions and
preferences about their Net need to be viewed against their specific everyday life-
worlds, which serve as the arena for, as well as setting the limits of, human action
(Schutz and Luckmann 1973). In talking about their relationships with the Net, the
young people in the two societies brought to the fore the various characteristics of
their specific social-biographical situations. As has been shown through the major
themes presented in the preceding pages, striking differences exist between the two
cases in terms of perceived pressure, flexibility, autonomy, life chances, family
structure, intergenerational relationships and, particularly, the educational system.
These have largely shaped the different ways the young people in the two societies
construct the Net as an element of their everyday life-worlds.

Although the tension between the construct of the computer/Internet as an educa-
tional tool (the imposed relevance) and young people’s preference for it as a leisure
device (the intrinsic relevance) was evident in both cases, it was being played out quite
differently in the two local contexts. In the Chinese case, where academic perform-
ance was mainly dependent upon the student’s grasp of the contents of the textbooks
and his/her diligence in doing the thousands of exercises of set types in preparation for
the exams (Liu forthcoming), the original tension between different use purposes
became one between school education and the Internet. As such, the imposed rele-
vance of the Net as an educational device was largely rejected in the Chinese case.

This type of tension between the Internet and school education was by no means
absent in the Norwegian case, either, despite the efforts to encourage the integration
of the two in the formal education system. It is still a well-recognised fact that many
schools face challenges to incorporate the Internet into the curriculum (Krumsvik
2006). The Norwegian high-school student also needed to exert self-discipline in
order to harness the Internet in ways conducive to school performance. As in the
Chinese case, this reflected the inherent tension between the imposed and intrinsic
relevances of the Net and that between informal and formal learning (Sefton-Green
2004). Nevertheless, such a tension was far less striking in the Norwegian case. There,
the Internet did not stand in sharp conflict with school education, which allowed for
much room for explorative learning beyond the textbooks. Rather, use of the Internet
for information-seeking in relation to school work was widely recognised as helpful,
and indeed crucial to strong academic performance.

If information can be seen as ‘capital’ in a Bourdieuan (1986a) sense, as is often
the case in the discourse on the Information Society (and knowledge economy) (Facer
et al. 2001), then compared with their Norwegian/western counterparts, the Chinese
students appeared ‘information poor’ despite their status as members of the Net
Generation. However, one should guard against the tendency to describe young people
in simple technology-deterministic terms, such as the Information Society’s ‘losers’
and ‘winners’ (Hetland 1999). For the same reason, I do not mean to portray the Norwegian students as the ‘perfect’ users of the Internet, either. As in the Chinese case, problems in relation to young people’s use of the Internet, such as addiction to online gaming, pornography, mobbing, reduced outdoor activities and so on, exist widely in the Norwegian society, too, as is often reported in the media. And yet, this last point does not make the widely found tendency among the Chinese students to view the Internet as antithetical to learning less problematic. From the Schutzian perspective, people actively appropriate technology, but this is done without stepping out of their everyday life-world into a different ‘finite province of meaning’ (Schutz and Luckmann 1973, 23). As such, we need to look at the social and material environment in which young people find themselves to gain an understanding of and solution to the problem.

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