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A color image quantum encryption using NCQI representation



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Abstract In the digital, networked and visual age, the image has become the key medium for conveying information and knowledge. Image security has attracted increasing attention as the operation, sharing and communication in various fields. However, with the widespread use of networks, the security of image transmission faces serious challenges, including unauthorized access, tampering, and interception by malicious attackers. Traditional cryptographic methods play a limited role in image security in the cyber age. With the development of quantum computing and quantum communication, quantum image encryption has emerged, and it fully protects the image security from the perspective of quantum mechanics. When the image is encrypted in the quantum state, due to the quantum properties, quantum image encryption becomes extremely secure. As a result, it is impossible for classical computer technology to decode the encrypted images. Quantum Image Encryption not only protects against image theft and tampering but also enables secure image transmission. In this paper, we present a method for quantum encryption of color images based on NCQI representation and modification of RGB pixel positions and their values. In several steps, using NCQI representation and some quantum logic gates, we can identify the quantum state of the image and modify the RGB pixel values and positions. By calculating several parameters, we conclude this study with a statistical evaluation that proves the effectiveness and strength of our method. This research contributes to the burgeoning field of quantum cryptography by introducing a novel method tailored specifically for color image encryption, thereby advancing the capabilities of quantum secure communication protocols.

Keywords: quantum image representation, quantum encryption, quantum encryption circuit, quantum computing

1. Introduction

Quantum technologies use quantum mechanics to advance communication and cryptography (Abd-El-Atty et al., 2018). Current communications may also include sharing images that contain sensitive information. It is important to ensure the security of private records to prevent misuse, and the protection of multimedia data is a major challenge. Moreover, quantum image cryptography remains one of the best techniques for guaranteeing this operation (Naseri et al., 2018). For quantum encryption, quantum image representation, which allows the representation of image data using quantum states, is an important step (J. Wang et al., 2019). Several quantum representations of quantum images have been established: the Qubit lattice (Venegas-Andraca & Bose, 2003), FRQI (Le et al., 2011), NAQSS (Li et al., 2014), SQR (Yuan et al., 2014), QUALPI (Zhang, Lu, Gao, & Xu, 2013), NEQR (Zhang, Lu, Gao, & Wang, 2013), MCQI (Sun et al., 2013), GNEQR (Li, Fan, et al., 2019), NCQI (Sang et al., 2017), QRQI (Wang L. et al., 2019), QRMW (Şahin & Yilmaz, 2018), QMCR (Abdolmaleky et al., 2017), OQIM (Liu et al., 2019), DRQCI (Wang L. et al., 2020) and others (Su et al., 2020).

Color pixels and their positions are encoded differently in quantum representations, which has implications for different image processing applications and levels of complexity (Su et al., 2021). The quantum encryption of an image varies according to the choice of the quantum image representation and the quantum algorithm used. Several methods of quantum image encryption have been developed in recent years (Li, Chen, et al., 2019; Ye et al., 2021; Mahmoud et al., 2021; Song et al., 2022; Sheng et al., 2022; Zhou & He, 2023) and others. However, the rapid evolution of classical and quantum computers requires the creation and development of new methods of quantum image encryption. Here, using NCQI, we represent the quantum state of a color image and perform encryption.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. NCQI representation

It is used for color images and is defined by the following expression (Sang et al., 2017):



$$|I\rangle = \sum_{y=0}^{2^n-1} \sum_{x=0}^{2^n-1} |c(y, x)\rangle \otimes |yx\rangle \quad (1)$$

$|c(y, x)\rangle$ is the color value corresponding to the pixel defined by (y, x) vertical or horizontal positions, and it may be represented in the form:

$$|c(y, x)\rangle = \underbrace{|R_{q-1} R_{q-2} \dots R_0\rangle}_{\text{Red}} \underbrace{|G_{q-1} G_{q-2} \dots G_0\rangle}_{\text{Green}} \underbrace{|B_{q-1} B_{q-2} \dots B_0\rangle}_{\text{Blue}} \quad (2)$$

With

$y \in [0, 2^n - 1]$, $x \in [0, 2^n - 1]$ and each value of the RGB channel $\in [0, 2^q - 1]$.

$R_{q-1} R_{q-2} \dots R_0$ is the binary extension of the R channel.

$G_{q-1} G_{q-2} \dots G_0$ is the binary extension of the G channel.

$B_{q-1} B_{q-2} \dots B_0$ is the binary extension of the B channel.

To store a $2^n \times 2^n$ image, we need $2n+3q$ qubits. For example, for $n=2$, $q=8$, the NCQI quantum state is represented by the following equation (Figure 1) (Sang et al., 2017; Su et al., 2020, 2021):

$$\begin{aligned} |I\rangle = & \frac{1}{4} [|11111111 00000000 00000000\rangle \otimes (|0000\rangle + |0001\rangle + |0100\rangle + |0101\rangle) \\ & + |00000000 11111111 00000000\rangle \otimes (|0010\rangle + |0011\rangle + |0110\rangle + |0111\rangle) \\ & + |00000000 00000000 11111111\rangle \otimes (|1000\rangle + |1001\rangle + |1100\rangle + |1101\rangle) \\ & + |11111111 11111111 11111111\rangle \otimes (|1010\rangle + |1011\rangle + |1110\rangle + |1111\rangle)] \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

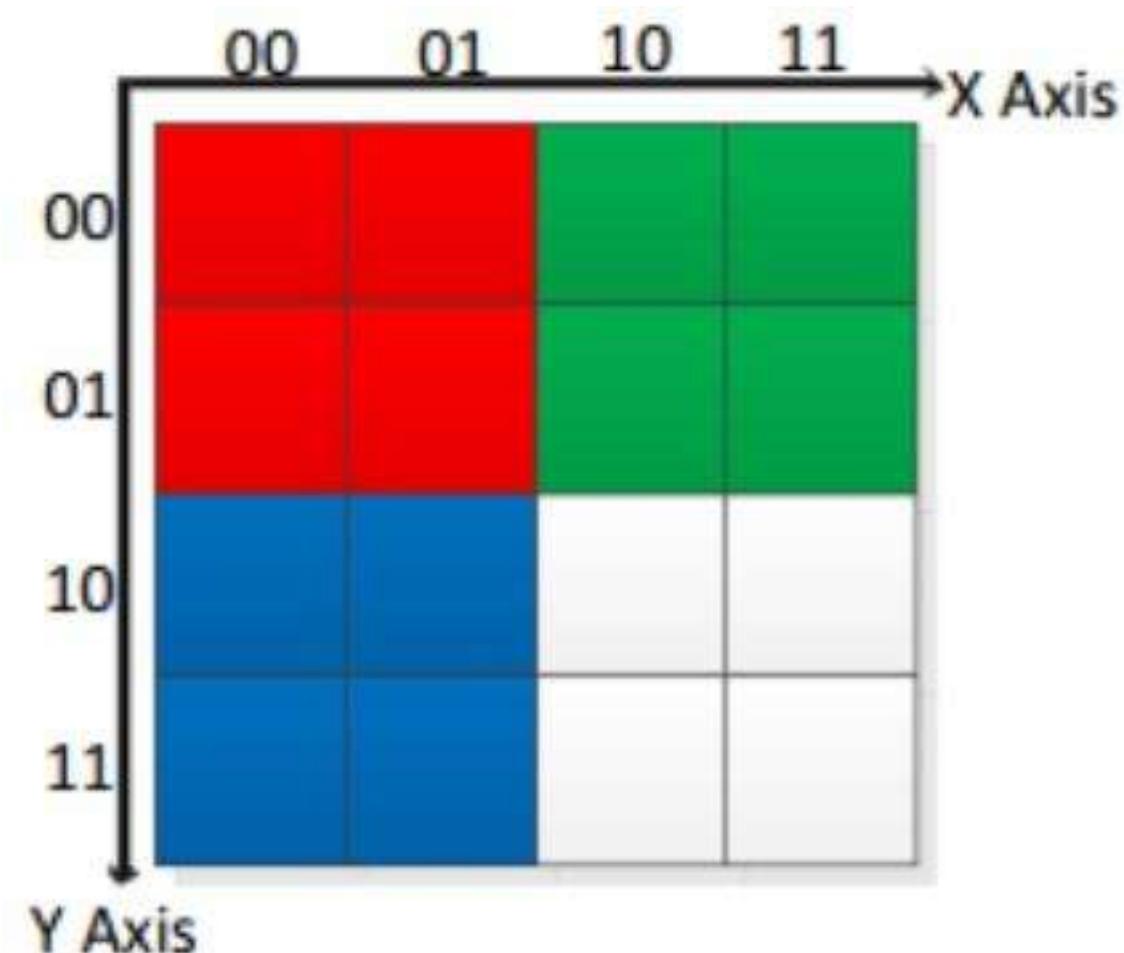


Figure 1 An example of a 4×4 color image.



2.2. The proposed image encryption scheme

2.2.1. Steps of preparation of the NCQI representation of the first 4x4 block

Step 1: We take a color image of Lena 128×128 (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Lena image.

Step 2: Then, we extract the matrices of the three RGB channels and use the first block of each matrix to construct the first block of the RGB pixel matrix (Figure 3, Figure 4).

Step 3: Next, we use the NCQI representation to define the quantum state of the first block after converting the pixel values into binary values. We find the expression:

$$\begin{aligned}
 |\varphi\rangle = & \frac{1}{4} [|11100010 10000001 01101111\rangle \otimes |0000\rangle + |11100010 10000010 01101011\rangle \otimes |0001\rangle \\
 & + |11100000 10000011 01101100\rangle \otimes |0010\rangle + |11100011 10000011 01101110\rangle \otimes |0011\rangle \\
 & + |11100011 10000110 01110100\rangle \otimes |0100\rangle + |11100010 10000111 01111010\rangle \otimes |0101\rangle \\
 & + |11100000 10000001 01101101\rangle \otimes |0110\rangle + |11100001 10001001 10000000\rangle \otimes |0111\rangle \\
 & + |11100010 10001000 01111010\rangle \otimes |1000\rangle + |11100010 10000110 01110110\rangle \otimes |1001\rangle \\
 & + |11011111 10000110 01110100\rangle \otimes |1010\rangle + |11100001 10000111 01110111\rangle \otimes |1011\rangle \\
 & + |11100001 10000011 01101010\rangle \otimes |1100\rangle + |11100001 10000011 01101111\rangle \otimes |1101\rangle \\
 & |11100010 10000010 01101010\rangle \otimes |1110\rangle + |11100010 10000001 01101011\rangle \otimes |1111\rangle] \quad (4)
 \end{aligned}$$

2.2.2. Quantum encryption circuit

We perform two perturbations:

- Changing the 4 qubits representing the pixel position (y,x).
- Changing the 24 qubits representing the RGB pixel values.

The circuits are established using the quantum gates NOT, CNOT and TOFFOLI and SWAP (Figure 5, Figure 6).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Encryption result

We obtain the matrix (Figure 7) and the state of the first block:

$$\begin{aligned}
 |\varphi_E\rangle = & \frac{1}{4} [|00000000 00011011 00101110\rangle \otimes |0000\rangle + |01011010 11111111 11111111\rangle \otimes |0001\rangle \\
 & + |11111111 01111101 11000010\rangle \otimes |0010\rangle + |11111111 01000100 10001011\rangle \otimes |0011\rangle \\
 & + |00001000 11111111 11111111\rangle \otimes |0100\rangle + |10111001 11111111 11101110\rangle \otimes |0101\rangle \\
 & + |11111111 10101111 11111111\rangle \otimes |0110\rangle + |00000000 11111111 00000000\rangle \otimes |0111\rangle
 \end{aligned}$$



$$\begin{aligned}
 & +|00000000 01010000 10101011\rangle\otimes|1000\rangle+|00000000 00110010 00000000\rangle\otimes|1001\rangle \\
 & +|11111111 11101001 11000101\rangle\otimes|1010\rangle+|00000000 10110010 11110100\rangle\otimes|1011\rangle \\
 & +|00000000 11111111 00000010\rangle\otimes|1100\rangle+|10111011 11111111 11101100\rangle\otimes|1101\rangle \\
 & +|00000000 00000000 01001010\rangle\otimes|1110\rangle+|11111111 10111000 00000000\rangle\otimes|1111\rangle
 \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

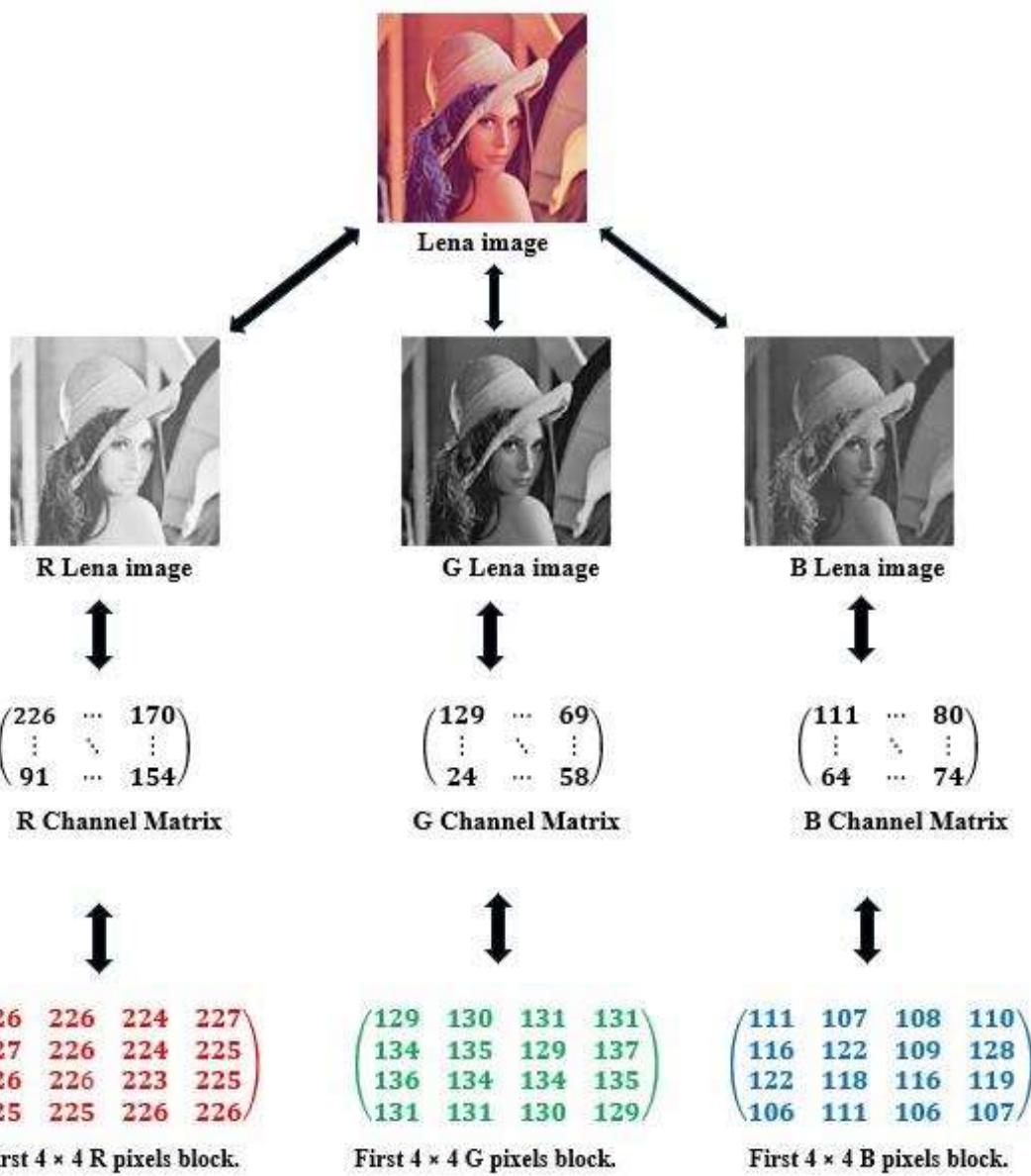
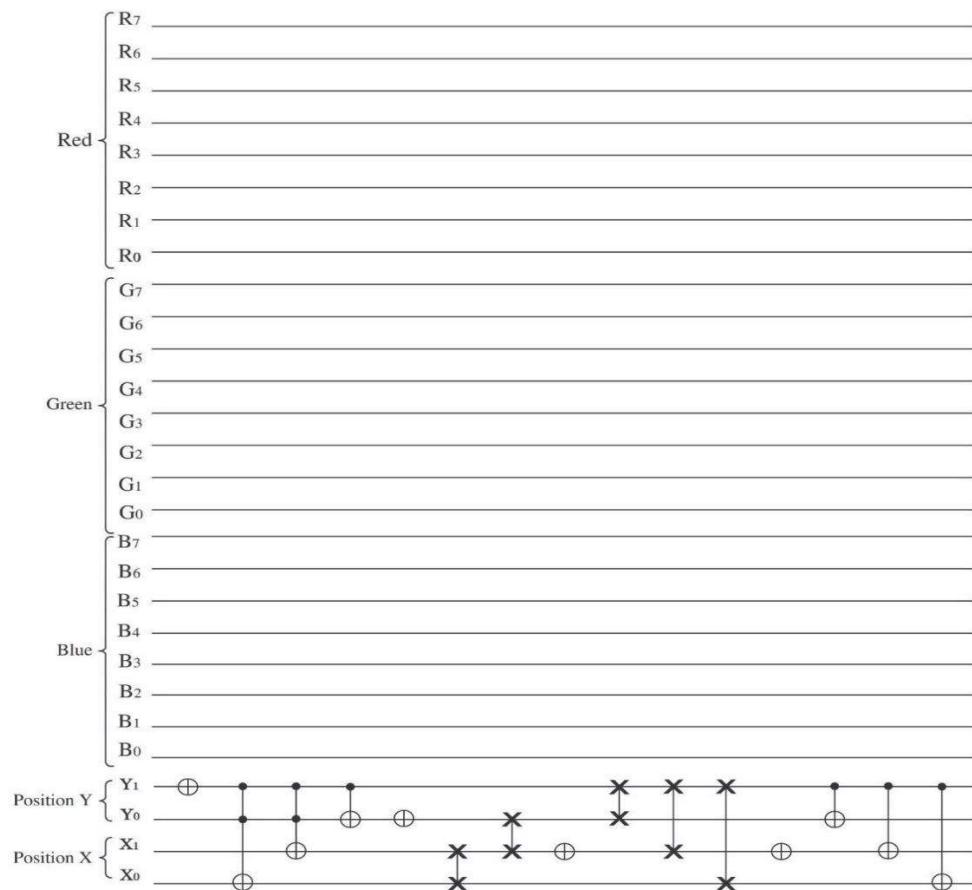
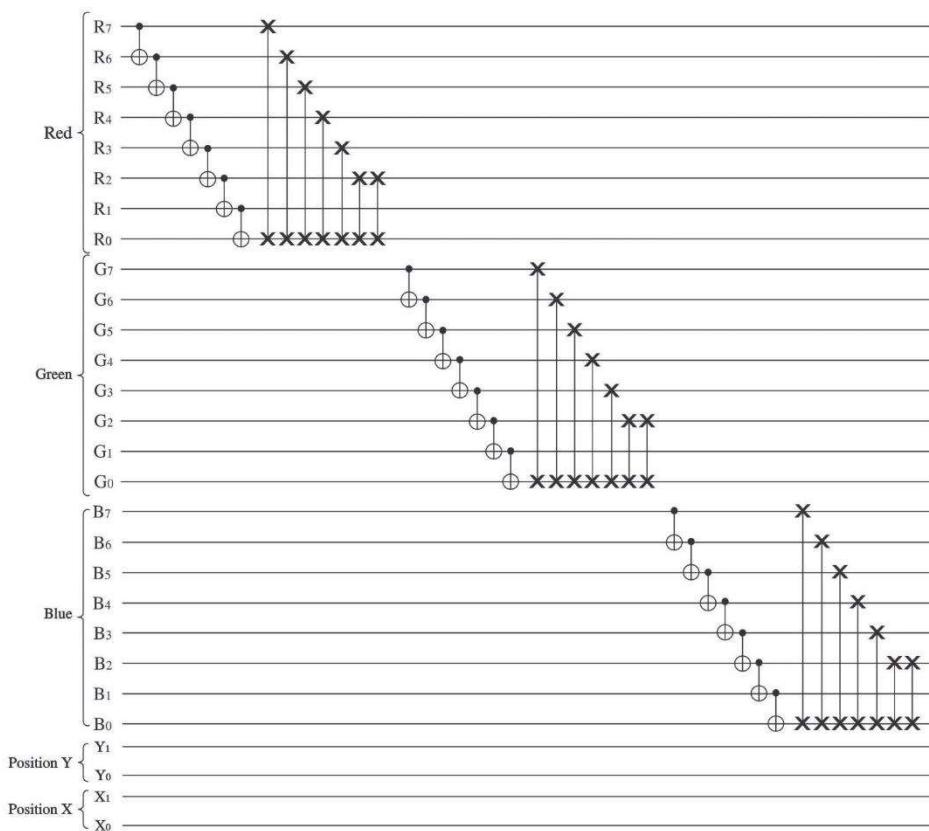


Figure 3 Steps of extracting the first block RGB pixel matrix.

(226, 129, 111)	(226, 130, 107)	(224, 131, 108)	(227, 131, 110)
(227, 134, 116)	(226, 135, 122)	(224, 129, 109)	(225, 137, 128)
(226, 136, 122)	(226, 134, 118)	(223, 134, 116)	(225, 135, 119)
(225, 131, 106)	(225, 131, 111)	(226, 130, 106)	(226, 129, 107)

Figure 4 First block RGB pixel matrix.



**Figure 5** Quantum encryption circuit that changes pixel positions.**Figure 6** Quantum circuit encryption that changes the pixel values.

(0, 27, 46)	(90, 255, 255)	(255, 125, 194)	(255, 68, 139)
(8, 255, 255)	(185, 255, 238)	(255, 175, 255)	(0, 255, 0)
(0, 80, 171)	(0, 50, 0)	(255, 233, 197)	(0, 178, 244)
(0, 255, 0)	(187, 255, 236)	(0, 0, 74)	(255, 184, 0)

Figure 7 First encrypted block RGB pixel matrix.

Then, we do the same for the other blocks. After concatenating all the blocks, we obtain the encrypted image (Figure 8).

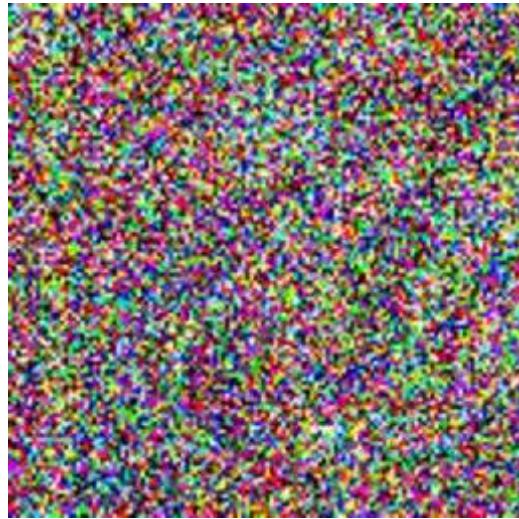


Figure 8 Proposed Lena encrypted image.

3.2. Statistical analysis

3.2.1. Histogram

It is used to show the distribution of pixel values (Le et al., 2011; Li et al., 2014). It is established according to the three RGB channels (Figure 9).

The histograms of encrypted images are nearly uniform, whereas the histograms of the original images are considerably different (Li, Chen, et al., 2019).

3.2.2. MSE

The mean squared error is a measurement of the similarity between the pixels of the original image and the pixels of the encrypted image (Heidari et al., 2019) (Choudhary & Jb, 2014). It is calculated using the following equation:

$$\text{MSE} = \frac{1}{M \times N} \sum_{x=1}^M \sum_{y=1}^N (I(x, y) - I'(x, y))^2 \quad (6)$$

With

$I(x, y)$: original image and $I'(x, y)$: encrypted image

$M \times N$: size of the image and x, y : pixel position.

Table 1 shows the found MSE values according to the RGB channels and those of the two previous results.

According to the MSE values, our values are higher than those of the other references, which indicates that the original and encrypted images are very different (Mahmoud et al., 2021) and that our encryption method is efficient and withstands attacks.

3.2.3. NPCR



Using the NPCR, we can estimate how changing the pixel values will affect the analogous original image (EL-Latif et al., 2020). A high NPCR indicates that the encryption system is more resistant to differential attacks (Liang et al., 2023). The NPCR is calculated by:

$$\text{NPCR} = \frac{\sum_{x,y} D(x,y)}{N \times M} \times 100\% \quad (7)$$

With

$$D(x,y) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } I_O(x,y) = I_E(x,y) \\ 1 & \text{if } I_O(x,y) \neq I_E(x,y) \end{cases} \quad (8)$$

$M \times N$: size of the image

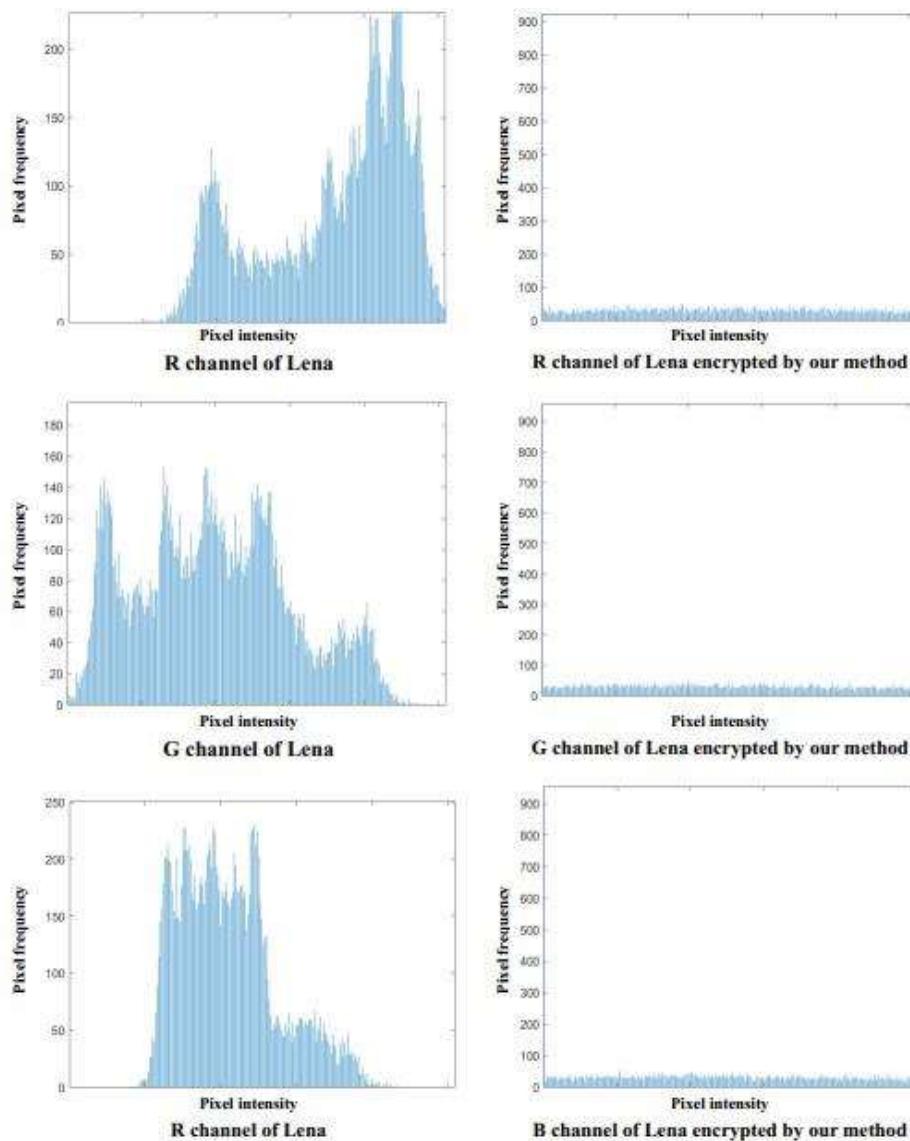


Figure 9 Histograms of each RGB channel in the original image and the encrypted image.

Table 1 Comparison of the MSEs between our scheme and other results.

Image	MSE per channel		
	R	G	B
Image encryption for Lena in (Wang et al., 2020)	9.117E3	9.810E3	1.068E4
Image encryption for Lena in (Rfifi et al., 2021)	9.827E3	1.0481E4	4.108E4
Our proposed image encryption for Lena	1.4975E4	1.2564E4	1.4974E4



Table 2 shows the NPCRs found and some other results.

Compared with other values, our NPCR is the highest, which indicates that there are more changes in the image that result in a large number of pixels being modified in the encrypted image (Ma et al., 2022). This shows good sensitivity to modification and therefore good resistance to certain cryptographic attacks.

Table 2 Comparison of the NPCRs between our scheme and other results.

Image	NPCR (%)
Image encryption for Lena in (Heidari et al., 2019)	99.6093
Image encryption for Lena in (EL-Latif et al., 2020)	99.5987
Image encryption for Lena in (Abdullah & Mahdi, 2022)	99.6205
Our proposed image encryption for Lena	99.6521

3.2.4. Correlation coefficient

This coefficient is a crucial indicator of the effectiveness of image encryption. It measures the degree of similarity between two pixels (Shang & Xu, 2024). It is defined by:

$$r = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^M \sum_{j=1}^N (V_{ij} - \bar{V})(W_{ij} - \bar{W})}{\sqrt{(\sum_{i=1}^M \sum_{j=1}^N (V_{ij} - \bar{V})^2)(\sum_{i=1}^M \sum_{j=1}^N (W_{ij} - \bar{W})^2)}} \quad (9)$$

With

V_{ij} : the pixels of the original and encrypted image

W_{ij} : the pixels of the encrypted image

\bar{V} and \bar{W} are the average values of V_{ij} and W_{ij}

Table 3 compares our correlation values in the H, V and D directions with previous results.

According to the table, the comparison of our correlation coefficient values with the values of other studies shows that they are close to zero, which indicates that there is no similarity between the pixels of the original and encrypted images (Jiang & Yang, 2023; Ye, 2010).

Table 3 Correlation values using our encryption and those of other previous results.

Image	Correlation		
	Horizontal	Vertical	Diagonal
Image encryption for Lena in (Heidari et al., 2019)	0.0199	-0.0077	-0.0102
Image encryption for Lena in (Li et al., 2019)	0.1356	-0.0165	-0.2003
Our proposed image encryption for Lena	0.0114	0.011567	0.0060

4. Conclusions

In this article, a new technique for quantum encryption of color images, which is based on using the NCQI representation by applying two successive operations, including changing RGB pixel positions and changing RGB pixel values, is studied. To evaluate our studied method, we used the MATLAB environment to display the histograms and calculate the MSE, NPCR and correlation coefficients.

The results show that our encryption approach is effective and can withstand attacks. The proposed method may be suitable for providing an effective solution for large-color image encryption applications.

Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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