How media technologies and cultural backgrounds affect the pursuit of spiritual well-being among international students

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How can we provide better support services for international students in the area of spiritual well-being and growth? Answering that question is becoming an increasingly complex problem in today's highly-mobile, multicultural, and media-saturated environment. In this paper, I focus on the ways that global mobility and new media (such as social media, mobile phones and the internet) are changing the ways that international students are pursuing religious/spiritual well-being. This paper is part of a larger PhD thesis that examines international student well-being practices in the light of the rapid rise in mobility and new media technologies. As we explore these complexities, I pay special attention to the way in which specific religious traditions and cultural values place emphasis on particular ways of pursuing spiritual growth and well-being. Then I will show how the international student experience of mobility and global media complicate these practices.

Here, I present ethnographic work done among the tertiary-level international students in Melbourne, using a combination of interviews and picture diaries of more than 20 international students. Using the case studies of five students, I illustrate about how migration and media are changing international students' practice of religion / spirituality in two areas: how Muslims have to renegotiate their religious identities and lifestyles in an adverse environment, and how students of different faith traditions construct religious identities through the media. Finally, I make some recommendations about how student support services can help minister to the needs of international students seeking spiritual growth and wellness.

Introduction

International students coming to Australia for tertiary education are at a great point of transition in their lives – transitioning from one culture to another, from adolescence to adulthood, from being dependent to independent living, and eventually from students to entering the workforce. This process of transition also plays out in the domain of spirituality and religion. Migration – whether permanent or temporary – often leads to changed perspectives and new understandings of the world and one's role in it. For international students who are spiritual/religious, the challenges they face in spiritual worldviews and spiritual practices – and the resulting changes in behaviour and thought patterns as they learn to adapt in a new spiritual environment – are one of the major concerns for both themselves and their families.

How then can we provide better support services for international students in the area of spiritual well-being and growth? Answering that question is becoming an increasingly complex problem in today's highly-mobile, multicultural, and media-saturated environment. The emphasis on multiculturalism in the last few decades have seen a flood of international students entering Australia from a wide variety of different cultural and religious backgrounds – all with different ideas about what "spirituality" and "spiritual well-being" means. At the same time, the rapid rise of new media technologies such as the internet, social media, and mobile phones have led to a change in the international student experience. International students today have access to various new technological solutions and strategies to pursue their social, emotional and spiritual well-being on their own, outside of traditional support services offered by organizations and institutions. Thus, practitioners who are engaged in providing spiritual support services have to deal with the realities of both culturally-diverse ideas about spiritual growth and

well-being, as well as students being active agents in pursuing spirituality through the use of media technologies outside institutions.

Traditionally, much of the research that has looked at religion/spirituality and well-being among migrants or international students has focused on how religion has acted as a source of transnational community and mobility (Chen 2008; Connor 2012; Gomes & Tan 2015), as a way to cope with stress (Hsien-Chuan Hsu et al. 2009; Koenig, King & Carson 2012), and as a framework within which people find meaning in life and interpret their migration journey (Hagan & Ebaugh 2003; Groody 2013). However, this becomes complicated with the introduction of new media technologies. Lundby (2012) outlined five particular ways in which religion and the media intersect: Technological Determinism (McLuhan 2010), the Social Shaping of Technology (Campbell 2010), the Mediation of Sacred Forms (Lynch 2012), the Mediation of Meaning (Hoover 2003), and the Mediatization of Religion (Hjarvard 2011). It is the latter two approaches that are of particular interest in this paper.

In the Mediation of Meaning approach, Hoover (2003) argues that people use both media and religion in their everyday lives to search for meaning and construct identities for themselves. Thus, what is important to study is the processes by which people construct religious/spiritual identities and meaning through media usage in their everyday lives. (For example, how do people create or express their spiritual identities if they share religious messages on their Facebook wall?) Developing this idea further, the Mediatization of Religion theory by Hjarvard (2011) argues that media is so embedded into society today that it fulfils, substitutes or transforms many social functions that were once filled by other social or cultural institutions, like religion. Thus, it is important to examine how standard religious practices are now shaped by or influenced in some way by the logic of the media. (For example, how has the practice of reading religious Scripture for instruction changed due to the availability of a mobile phone app for Scripture?)

This paper thus is an examination of the ways in which international students pursue spiritual well-being and growth outside religious/spiritual organizations, as active agents making decisions for themselves. It highlights the ways in which they incorporate media technologies into their spiritual practices, and how the affordances of those media technologies has led to interesting new ways of developing or expressing spiritual identities. This paper is part of a larger PhD thesis centred around an ethnographic study of the lives of international students in Australia, and what role media technologies play in helping them define and pursue culturally-specific forms of well-being. While the personal stories of the students highlighted in this paper should not be taken as comprehensive or indicative of their cultures as a whole, to some extent they provide insights into the values and thought processes that drive their understanding and pursuit of spiritual growth and well-being.

Methodology

A total of 20 international students were recruited for this study, with a focus on recruiting students from Asian countries (including the regions of South Asia, Far East Asia, Southeast Asia, and northern Asian countries such as Russia and Mongolia). This was primarily because the majority of students currently studying in Australia are from the Asian continent, and so capturing the diversity of cultural viewpoints and use of media among these study participants would be of greater relevance and use to support services personnel in Australia. All of the participants were from tertiary-level higher educational institutions in a major Australian city, who have spent at least 6 months in Australia prior to the study, to allow them to have sufficient time to form an opinion on life in Australia and Australian culture.

The project employs a mix of qualitative methods to collect data. This includes participant observation, the collection of picture diaries composed by the students themselves, as well as semi-structured

interviews of about 60-120 minutes each. The interview questions can be roughly grouped into four broad categories:

1. Descriptions of their life's journey that led them to becoming an international student in Australia.
2. The challenges they faced as an international student in Australia, and how they dealt with them
3. How they think about "well-being" or "a good life", and how their cultural backgrounds, media consumption, or previous life experiences have shaped their ideas about this "good life".
4. How they are currently pursuing "well-being" or "a good life", and what role media technologies have played in their pursuit of a good life.

In addition to their interviews, students were asked to compile picture diaries of 10 photos with accompanying written descriptions that detailed how they interacted with media technologies in their daily life, and what influence – if any – these media technologies have had on their well-being. Picture diaries were compiled in Word document or PDF format and sent to the researcher prior to the interview. During the interview, the researcher would also discuss the content of the picture diaries, and ask the participants to further elaborate on any interesting practices or points-of-view raised in the picture descriptions. Audio records of the interviews were then transcribed and analysed together with the picture diaries for common themes and patterns. A selection of these themes are discussed below.

Discussion

A number of themes emerged from the study and analysis. Two of them will be discussed here: firstly, how Muslim students negotiate new religious identities and lifestyles as they transition from being a religious majority to a religious minority. Secondly, how students from different spiritual traditions seek religious instruction and inspiration through the media.

Negotiating Muslim Identities and Lifestyles in an Adverse Environment

The practice of religion is often accompanied by both material goods that aid in that practice, as well as aspects of lifestyle and environments that will help or hinder the formation of a religious identity. Many students who come from countries where their religion is dominant to Australia – a country that has been shaped by Christianity and increasing secularism – find that many of the things they've taken for granted in their home countries now have to be negotiated much more carefully in Australia if they are still to maintain the religious lifestyle they are accustomed to. Here, I present case studies of two Muslim students in Australia, how they have to deal with the challenges of being a religious minority in a Christian or secular society, and how media technologies are incorporated into their spiritual journeys.

Kayla is a 26-year-old postgraduate student from India, taking an MBA course while her husband (also from India) works to support her and their one-year-old daughter. She was raised in a Muslim family, with her mother especially being very devout and passing on traditions of the faith to her and her siblings. Her in-laws are also extremely religiously-conservative. As such, adherence to the Islamic faith is not just a matter of personal belief, but also intertwined very closely with family tradition and honor to her. To start off with, Kayla describes some of the challenges she and her husband face when trying to adhere to the religious ritual for Friday prayers and sermons:

> "**Kayla:** *In India, see, in terms of praying, for the men … here, if you have to go to the mosque, you have to travel pretty far. […] Because it's a Western country, I expect that, but I'm just saying that it's hard for the men to be on track to go and pray. Like, on a Friday, there's a sermon. It's usually during lunchtime at twelve. So, if I was to*

expect my husband to go pray his Friday jummah – we call them as jummah prayers, because Friday is called jummah in Arabic – he wouldn't be able to do that because it's not feasible for him. So it's difficult, you know. See, you're connected, in a way… but we don't have lots of friends who are trying to say 'You have to pray'. Because you know like in India we had mosques very close by to our house, so we could hear that and make it a point every day to go pray in a mosque. He used to make it a point that every Friday, he used to be there. Because, at least he should be going to the place once a time in a week. So, he tries and make it to go pray, but here it's not same. There, we used to have people coming over from the mosque, to talk to people, saying how you should be more connected to God, and what are the benefits that God Allah has for us."

Here, Kayla describes her life growing up Muslim in India, and how there was a sizable Muslim community around her home with people often visiting her family from the neighbourhood mosque. That religious community and environment growing up is not present in Australia, as mosques are scattered far and wide. The work patterns and distance to the mosque in Australia make it very difficult for her husband to attend Friday sermons and prayers, as he cannot get sufficient time off to travel to the mosque and back on Friday lunchtime, whereas in many Muslim countries, special allowances are made in the workday schedules to allow Muslims to attend Friday prayers. This also impacts her connectedness to the religious community. For Kayla, her faith is very much practised in community – her family members, the other villagers and fellow mosque-goers in India all serve as sources of instruction and encouragement to her to practise her faith. But because their new lifestyles in Australia no longer make that feasible, she instead turns to media technologies to fill in the gap in religious instruction and encouragement for her family members:

*"**Kayla:** Even my daughter, she's watching a lot of TV. She likes to watch a lot of cartoons, so when I'm playing around, there's this Australian-based cartoon from Sydney – it's called Zaki. Zaki and Friends. So they're trying to say more about Allah and the Quranic verses, and all the good deeds a person is supposed to be doing, and how the children should behave, and you know. So my daughter is learning, from a very little age – she's like, one, now – and she's just learning from a very small age as to what's happening and what she's supposed to be doing. Because, in a country like Australia, it's difficult to practice religion. Especially my daughter. I'm pretty scared, in a country like Australia, it's difficult for her to keep rooted in our values and beliefs. So, from a young age, I try to incorporate little things into her. I don't want her to be like – see, the dressing here in Australia is very different. I mean, I'm not trying to say she's not allowed to wear certain clothes when she grows up – I don't want her to question me, 'Why I am not supposed to do this?' Like, from a very early age, we're trying to say, 'See, this is our religion, we're supposed to be modest in our clothing and our behaviour.' So, if she gets all of this from a very young age, then it would be really good. […] So, yeah, I mean – all these, I try to put all these cartoons for my daughter. I mean, we select all these cartoons wherein Zaki – even I like watching them, the stories of the prophets and all of it. So it's a kind of a time, you know, she can watch all these and understand more a bit, and for me it would be an entertainment."*

Note that Kayla wishes her daughter to remain "rooted in our values and beliefs", and attempts to structure her media intake to allow her daughter to absorb that worldview. Specifically, she uses an Australian-made kids' cartoon to teach her infant daughter about the Quran and the behaviour expected of

Muslims. She's especially concerned about the issue of dressing, in comparison to the Australian culture around her. At the same time, she is also aware that she has to negotiate this carefully – rather than forbidding certain styles of clothing, she instead is trying to communicate the value of modesty that underlies Islamic dress styles. At the same time, Kayla also narrates how she herself turns to online videos to get religious instruction and encouragement:

> "**Kayla:** And I also use the internet and watch some videos on the internet, regarding how things should be. 'When we're feeling happy, we don't thank God, but when we're feeling depressed we thank God. I mean, we ask God for giving us more peace and happiness and all that stuff, but when we're happy we don't thank Him.' And uh, lots of the videos are about the history of Islam – there's a movie called The Message. It's an English movie, and it's pretty good. I really watch that over and over again.
>
> [...]
>
> **Researcher:** You said you also watched things on the internet about how things could be. Are these, like, sermons from imams?
>
> **Kayla:** Ah, they're actually not imams, they're like normal people like us. There's this one guy called Nouman Ali Khan on YouTube, he's like, um, I guess from US or Canada – I'm not quite sure which place he's from – but then ah, when he went to high school, he was a normal person who's never pray. But then, you know, he just tries to say around things – how he was before and how he is now and how things have changed for him. And how we should like, you know, be trying to be more modest towards our religion, and how things are and how we should be doing things."

Kayla's description of both her and her daughter's media intake suggest a couple of interesting things. Firstly, consider the sources of religious information and instruction – mostly videos either on TV or on YouTube rather than traditional Friday sermons at a mosque. Furthermore, Kayla describes Nouman Ali Khan as a 'normal person' rather than an *imam* (priest/cleric). The democratization of information on the internet has allowed anyone to post content online, and similarly, for anyone to find content they wish. This is a clear example of the mediatization of religion, where the religious practice of exhortation has been reshaped by the affordances of YouTube to a situation where lay believers are producing religious content for the exhortation of their fellow believers, rather than leaving that function to official priests in mosques.

Secondly, note that Kayla watches *Zaki and Friends* together with her daughter. This helps to replicate some of the social connectedness that Kayla grew up with in India. While she uses *Zaki and Friends* as a way to instruct her daughter, for herself it's a relaxing form of entertainment and a reminder of the values she herself grew up with. Furthermore, her viewing of *The Message* movie as well as Nouman Ali Khan (a 'normal person') can all be interpreted as ways for her to keep that sense of social connectedness with the larger history of the Islamic tradition (for *The Message*) as well as with her fellow peers in the laity (Khan) rather than with the teachings of Islam itself. For Kayla, connections to tradition, to family, to being part of a larger whole, is just as important to her faith as the actual teachings.

However, that isn't to say that Kayla is a big supporter of incorporating media technologies into her everyday life. In fact, the media environment in a non-Islamic country like Australia also espouses certain values that challenge the faith of Kayla and her husband and tempt them to sin on a near-daily basis:

Kayla: Even the internet over here… Sometimes you just put anything on the internet, and suddenly from nowhere these porn things pop out. And you really can't do anything about it. And we never had this problem in India. In terms of religion as well, porn is haram in Islam, and it's not a good thing… Even I don't want my husband to sit and watch porn and respond to wrong things. It gives humans a different direction, so yeah. That's one thing that is bad over here. And all these all these ads on the TV, you have all these rum, beer and wine. And on the internet.

Researcher: Okay. I can understand the TV. But, for the internet, and porn, for example – in India, why was that not a big factor as well? Did you have less access to the internet back then? Or were certain sites censored more?

Kayla: Yeah, it was more censored back there. You didn't have certain sites popping up like this, like over here. See, if you're opening certain sites over there, you wouldn't have uh, you- it's more of a censored thing, where it wouldn't pop in like it's popping in here. Like dating – you have these ads that is popping in from the side, like dating, or would you be interested in Asian girls, or something like that. And sometimes like, betting, would you be interested in betting, Betting365, or something like that…. My husband just happened to sit and watch cricket on the television. And it showed, you know… He just watched it… he wants to go checking. He did make an account about it. I mean like, I was so upset about it, you know, him doing that. It's wrong. You're not supposed to be gambling. Betting is like equivalent to gambling… You haven't worked hard and so you have no right on that money. You work hard and you get that money, I would be really happy. But then, if he hasn't worked hard and he's getting that money out of nothing, then it's haram."

Kayla talks about her family's struggles with the media ecology in Australia, particularly with regards to porn, alcohol and gambling – all of which are considered *haram* (forbidden) in Islam. Many countries with sizable Muslim populations like India would automatically practice media censorship of advertisements on TV or the internet to prevent these things from being seen. However, the combination of free speech in Australia and Christian ethics that do not expressly forbid these three items as forbidden in the same way that Islam does has contributed to a media environment that is very challenging for Muslim students to navigate as they attempt to live a religiously-pure lifestyle.

However, negative media environments do not just involve appeals to religiously-forbidden lifestyles. Recently, with the rise of Islamophobia around the world and in Australia, Muslim students often have fears about their own safety and security due to negative portrayals of Islam in the media. This is particularly illuminating in the case of the other Muslim case study, Tamar.

Tamar is an 18-year-old undergraduate from Brunei, in her Foundation Year of studies. She comes from a religiously-moderate family, grew up in a cosmopolitan environment, and describes herself as 'not very devout'. Media technologies – particularly social media – also form a large part of her life. Tamar turns to them regularly for information and communication needs. However, this also makes her more sensitive to religious news and happenings online:

"Tamar: Regarding the news I see related to Islam or Muslims, although Australia is quite tolerable to religions other than Christianity, the matter of ISIS scares me as they wrongfully represent the Muslim faith. What ISIS is doing goes against every Islamic belief. Their actions and justifications for these actions is shaming the rest of the Muslim population who follow the true Islamic values. People outside of the

Islamic following are seeing Muslims as threats thus causing Muslims everywhere, young and old, to be mistreated when we don't deserve it. It scares me as I am a Muslim myself.

Although I am not a devout Muslim strictly speaking as I don't wear the hijab as often as I should thus I am not harassed on the streets for being a Muslim, my brothers and sisters all over the world are being harassed which saddens me. Practicing my faith as a Muslim is more of a personal than public matter to me. I prefer to keep my faith as a Muslim, and my preference of how I practice Islam, to myself. To me, religion and how we practice it should be between the person practicing and the Lord himself. I am grateful however, that there are people out there who defend Muslims who are harassed, like the "I will ride with you" hashtag trend which encouraged even celebrities to protect Muslims who are harassed."

Because she does not always wear the hijab, Tamar is not often identified externally as a Muslim, but she still identifies herself as one internally, as a matter of private and personal practice. Her words also indicate that she thinks of herself as part of the larger brotherhood of Muslims around the world. Tamar gets most of her news about her fellow co-religionists through the Internet, particularly Facebook and Twitter. While this helps her connect to the larger worldwide community of Muslims, the news about Islam and ISIS has led her to experience a whole welter of negative emotions: anger and disgust at the wrongful representation of Islam by extremist groups, fear that ISIS is causing non-Muslims to view all Muslims as a threat, frustration at the unjust treatment of Muslims everywhere, sadness and sympathy for her fellow co-religionists being so mistreated. At the same time, some positive campaigns on Twitter has led her to feel grateful to those willing to stand up for Muslims being harassed. The "I will ride with you" hashtag that Tamar mentions was a response by the Australian community towards the local Muslim population in the wake of the Lindt café siege in Sydney in 2014, offering to accompany them on public transport networks so that they wouldn't feel alone and afraid to display their religious identity (Ruppert 2014). It was inspired by a story where an Australian woman saw a Muslim woman take off her hijab on the train after hearing about the siege. While it was originally started as a method to reassure the Muslim community that they need not fear misplaced retaliation from non-Muslim Australians, Tamar interprets that hashtag as helping to defend those that are actively being harassed worldwide.

Kayla's story illustrates the difficulties of students coming from highly-devout, religiously-conservative environments, where religion is understood as a communal way of life, and embedded into many daily life practices. Her struggles to replicate that kind of environment she grew up in, and pass it on to her daughter, show some of the difference in norms with local Australian ideas about religion and religious identity. Australian values of individual freedom, and the growing secularism in society, has led to an understanding of religious as a matter of private practice and belief, rather than as a communal *ethos* that binds together the fabric of society. Kayla's needs for spiritual well-being, then, revolve around the question of how to *construct* an environment that facilitates living according to the religious traditions she has been brought up in, in the midst of a society which tends to downplay the involvement of religion in public life.

For Tamar, religion is a matter of private belief and practice. However, what she desires most is safety to practice in private, and to not be harassed because of misinformed portrayals of her religion. Tamar is also example of a generation of young people who are highly-connected to social media, and thus live in a highly-mediated world, where their perceptions of the world and environment around them are often shaped more strongly by the news they consume online. Thus, it is imperative that, for Tamar and others like her to feel safe, the discourse and conversations in the online world and social media need to project a sense of welcome, non-judgment and safety.

Constructing Religious Identities through Media

What does it mean to be religious or spiritual? How do students develop or grow a spiritual/religious identity? Hoover (2003) has argued that modern religious identity is a project of the autonomous, reflexive self in the search for personal meaning. Roof (2003) describes the contemporary mode of religious practice as spiritual "questing" or "seeking", where history, authority or tradition matters less than finding personally-meaning symbols of spirituality. For international students, the process of migration cuts them off from their usual religious environments, and often thrusts them into unfamiliar territory, where they have to examine their previously-held beliefs and construct their own understandings of spirituality.

In some cases, international students turn to media to reaffirm their existing spiritual/religious identities. For example, Tamar describes how she looks up correct ways of practicing Islam through the internet:

> *"**Tamar:** I went to religious school for 8 years back home, so I know plenty of Islamic beliefs. However, some of the things I learnt has been lost, so I refer to the internet for help to remind me of specific practices. In this way, I am able to practice the religion properly, rather than practicing it wrongly."*

In a similar vein, Sally, a Christian undergraduate student, uses Pinterest to access Biblical quotes and motivational images related to Christianity, to put her into a good mood and remind her of her faith:
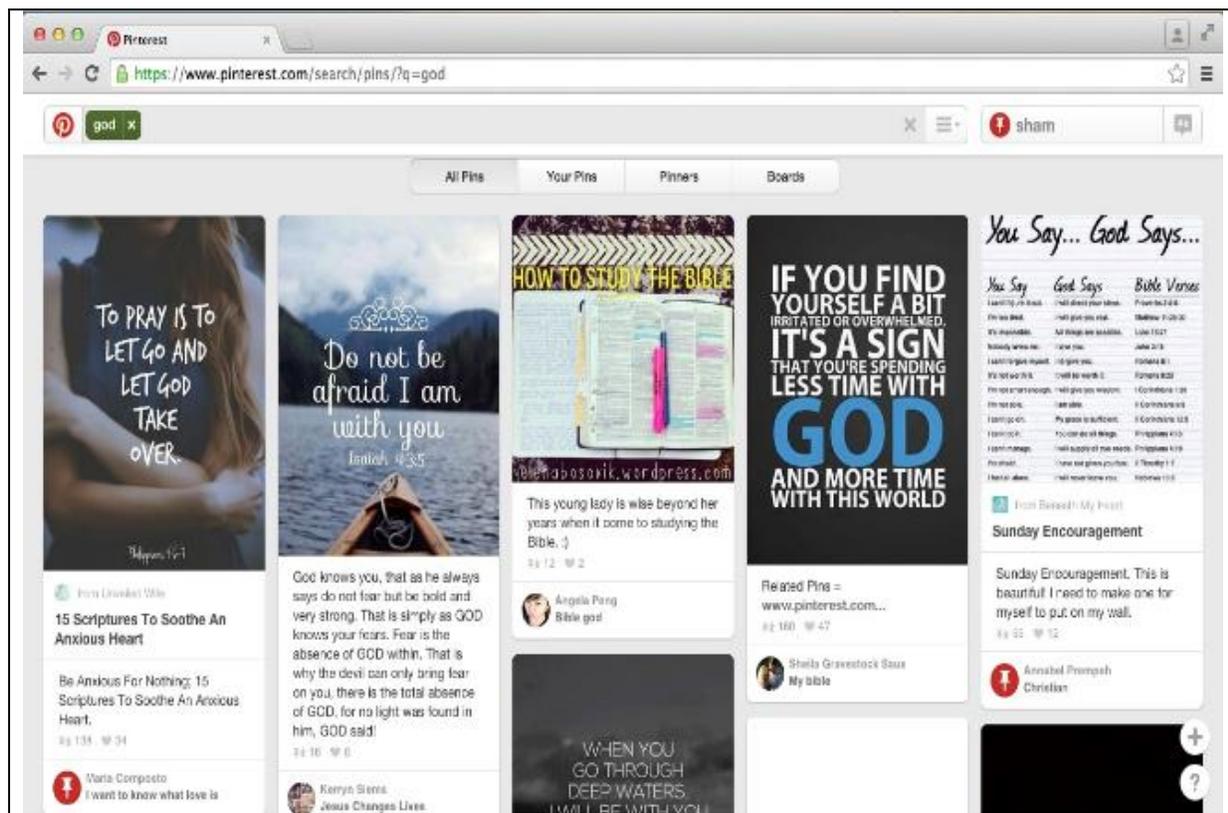
I visit pinterest.com occasionally to read up on interesting, creative and motivational quotes from people all across the world. I especially love bible quotes and motivational pinterest related to God.

Figure 1 – Picture Diary, Sally: Pinterest quotes about God.

An interesting point of contrast here is to look at how the different belief systems of Islam and Christianity has led to the different kinds of content that people seek on the internet. The solutions proposed by each religion on what constitutes a healthy spiritual life differ. For Islam, as Tamar mentioned above, it is largely about correct practice – acting in a way that is right before God, and avoiding actions that are *haram*, or forbidden. For Christianity, as seen in the motivational posters in Sally's picture diary, the core message is about God's love for people, and building a relationship of trust with Him. Thus, while Tamar searches for the correct ways to perform religious practices, Sally's pinterest is full of posters that remind her to not be anxious or afraid but trust in God's love for her and let Him take over. The road to good well-being in Islam is practising a way of life, whereas in Christianity it is about an attitude change and acceptance of God's grace.

For other students, moving to Australia has afforded them opportunities to explore faiths other than the ones they were raised in, and develop a new religious identity. Carol, a young Malaysian-Chinese undergraduate, who converted to Christianity after coming to Australia, describes how her parents reacted to the news of her conversion, and how she uses the mobile phone to circumvent parental restrictions:

> **"Carol:** *I would say I'm fairly new, I'm a new Christian. And my parents don't- are not supportive. So they would ban [me] from going to church, and Bible Talks and… things like that. So I haven't been going to church for a while.*
>
> **Researcher:** *Okay. So because of your parents' disapproval you're not allowed to go to Christian activities.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> **Researcher:** *What do you do when you feel moody, or when you feel down, lonely or depressed?*
>
> **Carol:** *I just sit and cry. <laugh> Uh, or I read through the Bible. I didn't actually have a Bible, two of my friends gave it to me. I had two, but my Mum told me to return them. So as of now I don't have a Bible, but I've downloaded the [Bible] apps.*
>
> **Researcher:** *So you have the Bible on your phone?*
>
> **Carol:** *Yep.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> **Researcher:** *So then, how does reading the Bible make you feel afterwards?*
>
> **Carol:** *Uhm, it's- it's a bit more comforting."*

What is interesting here is the differing views on the expression of Christian identity. Carol's parents, not wishing for her to become a Christian, actively banned her from attending Christian community gatherings or having Christian Bibles. However, Carol still reads the Bible on her mobile phone, and uses that to sidestep the parental restrictions. Carol's case is illustrative of a number of Asian societies' understandings of religion. Religion is equated to participation in communal activities, and the possession of a visible marker of identity (like a physical Bible, or a cross necklace). By removing all these physical trappings of Christianity, Carol's parents are satisfied. However, for Carol, what matters to her is simply having access to the Bible. Her mobile phone affords her a private space to construct a religious identity,

while still outwardly honouring her parents' wishes to remove all visible markers of Christianity. Furthermore, the convenience and easy accessibility of her mobile phone allows her to read the Bible whenever she experiences negative emotions. That is what she values most about her newfound religion – the comfort it brings when trying to cope. Here, Carol demonstrates Hoover's (2003) idea of religion as a self-project. Carol values Christianity and the Bible for what it brings to her 'self' in terms of personal comfort, rather than losing herself in the traditional structures of Christianity, as that has been forbidden by her parents. In public, her familial identity has trumped the outward expression of her religious identity, but in the private space of her mobile phone, she builds a religious identity around comfort in times of trouble.

For the non-religious but spiritual person, media plays an even greater role in their search for spiritual identity and well-being. Odette, a postgraduate student from Russia, describes how yoga and meditation, and listening to spiritual gurus, helps her cope with negative emotions:

> **Researcher:** *All right. Let's talk then about the different ways in which you are practising your own well-being, or pursuing your own well-being. What sort of things do you do to make yourself feel happy or healthy or well?*

> **Odette:** *Hm. I'm doing yoga. And I'm listening meditation, or sometimes I like to read or listen audiobooks from different gurus. It's spiritual teachers, yes. Because I think it makes me more calm. For example, if I'm in bad mood, I can read- yeah, I can either do the meditation or yoga and it just brings me to normal condition, you know? And I think it helps me.*

> **Researcher:** *Okay. So you mentioned these spiritual activities. Are they- in your mind, are they tied to religion, or separate?*
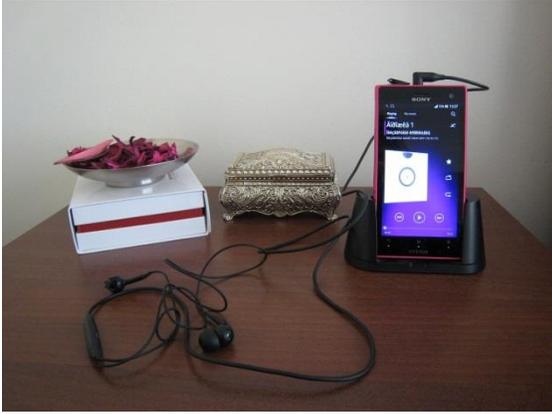
> **Odette:** *No, no.*

> **Researcher:** *Separate, okay.*

> **Odette:** *Yeah, it doesn't link to religion. It's just about your well-being, yes. Currently I'm listening to… um… name? erh? He was in Melbourne, he gave a lecture last week. And he's talking about how to be happy without anything. I mean, people are born happy and they have to maintain this throughout the life, without money, without the opinion of other people, yeah, just without anything. Because when we accept what we are given in life, it makes our life more easy, you know. Because when we accept, we are looking at it from the other side. And we understand it is not very difficult to meditate this world. If it seems to us maybe unacceptable previously, but if you think about it from the other side, you can understand that it's not. And you can achieve it, maybe easily. And yeah, for this, you have to be in harmony. You have to be sustainable, you know, you have to be on balance with everything – with people, with nature, even with different things.*

Odette outlines here the spiritual practices she uses to cope with negative emotions – namely, meditation or yoga ("If I'm in a bad mood I can either do meditation or yoga and it brings me to normal condition"), and also mentions the teachings of her guru ("he's talking about how to be happy without anything"). Religious/spiritual coping has long been studied as one of the primary ways in which religion helps with well-being (Koenig, King & Carson, 2012, p. 74). While religious coping offers a plethora of different benefits in established religious traditions including belief in a better future in the afterlife or finding

meaning and purpose in life through a Higher Power, Odette belongs to the "spiritual-but-not-religious" category of people, and thus the benefits from coping that she identifies are two: empowerment and control over one's self through meditation and yoga, and positive reframing of situations as taught to her by her guru ("when we accept what we are given in life, it makes our life more easy").

However, new media and mobile technologies are increasingly being incorporated into the use of religious coping methods. Odette's picture diary below is an interesting example of how media technologies like the mobile phone and the internet are transforming the experience of religious coping in different contexts:

	Usually when I have a break from my studies I do a meditation, or listen to a spiritual teacher chilling out on my bed for a half an hour. My mobile phone contains a very interesting audio book of a spiritual guru and approximately seven versions of a relaxing audio practice. I try to do this activity regularly (almost every day) even if there is no possibility to stay home for whole day. With my mobile phone I can meditate somewhere on a beach or in a park because it feels good and makes me calm and happy. Listening to these lectures in the public transport helps me to observe surrounding and people's behavior from outside the box.
	One of the regular day-to-day activities of my life is taking yoga classes. I am using my laptop to practice a set of asana that our coach provides us. It is very important to make the asana precisely and in a particular order, that is why it is convenient to practice with the laptop watching video from the previous classes. Beyond this I can download to my laptop many different videos of yoga positions from the internet if I am interested in a type of practice apart from my one.

Figure 2 – Picture Diary, Odette: Meditation and yoga on various devices.

It is clear from her description that her mobile phone and her laptop afford Odette greater mobility in her practice of religious coping methods. This new mobility allows her to change the contexts in which she practices these spiritual rituals. This recontextualization has many different effects: the park or beach creates an environment that "feels good and makes [her] calm and happy", further aiding her in the mastery of negative emotions. Being on public transport, on the other hand, allows her to observe the surroundings and people's behaviour from "outside the box", which can be interpreted as viewing things "from the other side" that she had mentioned in the excerpt from her interview. So, listening to gurus on her mobile phone while riding on public transport allows her to immediately put into practice the things that she is learning about spirituality and acceptance. It also teaches her to be more mindful, and "observe the surroundings", in order to be "on balance with everything".

Odette's second picture shows how media technologies allow for displacements in time and location of her yoga practice. Instead of practicing at yoga class, she is able to get the instructional material online through videos provided by the coach, which allows her to practice at her own convenience, while still maintaining the precision necessary for the correct *asana* (yoga postures) instead of relying on her own memory. Odette also mentions that she can download different yoga videos off the internet if she wants to try a different practice. Therefore, Odette both constructs a spiritual identity by picking from different yoga traditions which suit her 'self', as well as demonstrates how the spiritual practice of yoga has been mediatized by the perfect reproducibility of digital media at any time and place, and the democratization of spiritual instruction and information on the internet.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this paper I have presented an ethnographic account of several case studies where international students have used media technologies to negotiate religious lifestyles and construct spiritual identities. It is my hope that these case studies would be of use for practitioners in student support services in ministering to the needs of international students seeking spiritual wellness. The following recommendations are made:

(1) Firstly, be aware that media technologies play an increasingly large role in international students' experience of religion and spirituality, particularly those who do not have access to regular avenues of religious support (such as churches or mosques). It is important to engage with these students where they are, not expect them to come to existing traditional channels of spiritual support.
(2) Understand that an environment that facilitates spiritual growth or wellness includes both online media as well as offline components. For Muslim students especially, but all religious minorities to some extent, what may help would be creating a compendium of easily-accessible and visible online resources, and an online community they can connect to, feel safe in, and get encouragement from.
(3) As international students struggle through the development of a religious/spiritual identity outside of the home structures they grew up in, be aware that there might often be a tension between familial identities and individual religious identities. While Australian values may tend to promote the individual freedom and private practice of religion, realise that for many students from Asian backgrounds, religion is heavily-intertwined with family, and thus developing a religious identity which is different from one's family background would often need extra care to be paid in not dishonouring one's family, while at the same time pursuing spiritual growth.
(4) Lastly, as different religious and spiritual traditions may have differing ideas of spiritual growth and well-being, it is important to tailor any spiritual help or interventions according to the particular faith tradition of the student, rather than going for an ecumenical or nondenominational approach.

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