7-1-2023

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Digital media, ageing and faith: Older Sri Lankan migrants in Australia and their digital articulations of transnational religion

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Abstract

To date, older adults have received little attention in the newly emerging technological narratives of transnational religion. This is surprising, given the strong association of later life with spiritual and religious engagement, but it likely reflects the ongoing assumption that older adults are technophobic or technologically incompetent. Drawing on ethnographic interviews with older Sinhalese Buddhist migrants from Sri Lanka, living in Melbourne, this paper explores the digital articulations of transnational religion that arise from older migrants' uses of digital media. We focus on how engagements with digital media enable older Sinhalese to respond to an urgent need to accumulate merit in later life, facilitating their temporal strategies for ageing as migrants. We argue that these digital articulations transform both the religious imaginary and the religious practices that validate and legitimize a life well-lived.

KEYWORDS
ageing, Australia, faith, older adults, religion, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

'I am very much invested in the dharma, and I practice renouncing worldly pleasures', says Sepali, a 72-year-old Sinhalese-Sri Lankan migrant in Melbourne. Although Sepali wished to become a Buddhist nun and devote her later life to religious fulfilment, Sepali's three children depend on her child-care, and she takes turns to live at their homes in Melbourne to look after the grandchildren. Her care role in later life provides limited time to engage with her

religious aspirations, one of which is to achieve a higher status of mind and enlightenment through regular meditation. She demonstrated a sense of urgency for fulfilling this aspiration and spoke with an awareness of her ageing self. 'It won't do if I have to wait until I am 80 years old; there are risks like Alzheimer's and dementia … I don't know how long I will live for', says Sepali. In the home country, Sepali says older adults like her have access to large communal networks and close-knit familial and social communities that enable religious engagements in physical spaces like temples. In the lack of such networks, in Melbourne, Sepali uses the 'computer a lot' to book retreats and participate in meditation groups, browse websites and YouTube videos produced by monks and temples in Sri Lanka, and contribute to online forums, sermons, and philosophical discussions.

The intersections of ageing, migration, digital media, and religion are evident in Sepali's urgency to fulfil religious goals using digital devices and media with the intensification of those goals in later life while living in a foreign land. This paper examines the transcendental role of digital media in shaping religious practices of migrants whose aspirations of later life are closely associated with religious fulfilment, by exploring how digital platforms and devices facilitate spatiotemporal strategies for ageing migrants, creating a sense of a life well-lived. This paper is based on ethnographic interviews with 25 Sinhalese older adults living in Melbourne. The interviews were conducted pre-pandemic through 2019 as part of a larger project on ageing and new media conducted between 2016 and 2019 (see also Wilding et al., 2020). This paper offers insights into how the lives of older migrant adults were already shaped through digital media practices pre-pandemic and the embedded nature of these technological practices as relational to processes of ageing, processes that have accelerated and expanded during the pandemic (e.g. Cabalquinto, 2022).

Both migration and the emergence of new communication technologies mean that the religious confluences and flows of older migrants have been undergoing a significant transformation (Wilding et al., 2022). In this paper, we draw on two strands of existing transnational research, transnational religion and transnational family scholarship, to examine these crossroads of faith, ageing, migration, and digital media. A growing body of research on transnational religion (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Khosravi, 2010; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2009; Valentine et al., 2013; Vásquez & Knott, 2014) emphasizes the role of digital tools in both connecting migrants to places of worship around the world (Habarakada & Shin, 2018; Vásquez, 2020), and also creating new opportunities to plan for the next life (Sampaio, 2020). However, given the relative exclusion of older adults from discussions on technological narratives, it is in the transnational family scholarship where the role of digital media in ageing lives has been a central thread of inquiry, examined through lenses of ageing, digital media use, migration, and mobility (Ahmed, 2014; Cabalquinto, 2022; Ho, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Merla & Baldassar, 2010; Ponzanesi, 2020; Sinanan & Hjorth, 2018 ; Wilding et al., 2022), including our previous research that focused on affect and emotions (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Wilding, 2018; Wilding et al., 2020). These bodies of research provide complementing inquiries to shape a discussion on religion, ageing, migration, and digital media use.

Habarakada and Shin's (2018) theory of 'transnational religious place-making' and Tweed's (2009) conceptualizations of religion as 'confluences of organic-cultural flows' embedded in the 'crossings' and 'dwellings' of movement are useful to this discussion. Transnational religious place-making offers an idea to examine how virtual and digital tools shape the religious practices of older migrants in our study in constituting ideas of place. Significant to migrant experiences, Tweed highlights that 'movement and relation' and 'dwelling and crossing' are embedded in religious cultural flows, flows which are constituted in and through the digital media devices and platforms that are increasingly relied upon to engage in religious practices that are both spatial (e.g. connecting to places in multiple nations), and also temporally significant (such as the Buddhist imperative to accumulate merit 'before it is too late', as Sepali suggests).

Underpinning these activities, as Tweed (2009, p. 68) suggests, are sets of 'cognitive (beliefs), moral (values), and affective (emotions) processes', all of which are rendered more complex by the unpredictable flows of emotions, affect, and culture across transnational borders (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015). For older migrants, these boundaries and homes are both spatial and temporal, referring to the transnational borders that must be crossed between here and there, and also to the temporal boundaries between this world and the next that becomes more prominent in later life. We reflect on how these digital articulations shape the individual, diasporic, and institutional practices of religion, driven by the social, cultural, and spatiotemporal processes of ageing as migrants in a foreign land. We draw particular attention to the role of affect at this intersection, such as affective economies (Ahmed, 2004, 2014) and transnational

affective capital (Leurs, 2014). Affect in migration settings transform into shared meanings for shaping emotive experiences of movement, mobility, and cultural flows. As Sepali points out earlier, renouncing worldly pleasures and seeking religious fulfilment in later life is a desirable emotive state of a minimal life, according to Buddhist teachings. We argue that digital articulation of religious engagement for older adults is not only a migrant experience or a means of accessing support, but also a set of spatiotemporal practices that enable the negotiation of emotional experiences in later life, which are shaped by and shape migrant articulations of transnational religion.

DIGITAL ARTICULATIONS, RELIGIOUS NETWORKS, AND OLDER ADULTS

Studies of migrant lives have long acknowledged the important role of religion (e.g. Habarakada & Shin, 2018; Levitt, 2001; Levitt, 2004). Migrant minorities often rely on religious communities to create a sense of home in a foreign land, to fill gaps in available social services, to access social networks for employment, and to provide a communal space within which cultural practices and ethnic identities can be passed on to the next generation (e.g. Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2009; Sampaio, 2020; Vásquez & Knott, 2014). Religion is important for the production of diasporic identities in everyday spaces, including households and communities (Vásquez, 2020; Vásquez & Knott, 2014). The expansion of religious lives into virtual spaces and online communities has created new opportunities for migrant reimagining of religious and cultural identities, including in relation to gender (Midden & Ponzanesi, 2013). At the same time, migration and mobility have facilitated the transnationalization of religious practices by generating the transnational social networks and motivating the digital media practices that extend religious activities and orientations beyond the confines of national borders (Valentine et al., 2013).

It has also long been established that religion provides an important coping strategy for older adults, both through private expressions of prayer or faith and through participation in social religious practices or group-related religious practices (e.g. Koenig et al., 1988). Older age is strongly associated with a search for meaning, often as a replacement for the loss of other sources of meaning previously acquired through work or childrearing (Dalby, 2006). Thus, religion has been identified as an important element of positive ageing, being a source of comfort, belonging and identity (Malone & Dadswell, 2018). Religion is also an important means of contending with the recognition in later life of the proximity of mortality, which can be evident both in the loss of close friends and family of the same generation, but also through the growing awareness that one is approaching the end point of later life, leading some to suggest that religion becomes increasingly significant in later life (Bengston et al., 2015; Johnson, 1995).

To date, there is limited focus on the intersections of these two bodies of literature, such that the particular role of religion in the lives of older migrants has not received significant attention. An important exception is research by Ciobanu and Fokkema (2017), which suggests that religion can play a very important role in protecting older migrants from loneliness. They argue that this protection comes in part from attendance at church and the sense of belonging and social benefits that derive from participating in religion alongside of others. It also comes from faith in a higher being in and of itself, which protects against the experience of loneliness as a feeling of being alone. For some older migrants, it is this relationship with the supernatural that is most important, more significant than being part of a social group with other human beings. Indeed, some older migrants choose to spend more time alone so that they have more time to spend with God (Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2017).

What remains absent in this account of older migrants and religion is the role of digital media in the religious and spiritual lives of older migrants. This is part of a broader pattern in which it remains common for studies of new technologies to overlook older adults as active users of digital media (but see Barbosa Neves & Mead, 2021). In contrast, recent scholarship on transnational families and the practices of 'digital kinning' and 'digital homing' (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Wilding et al., 2022) demonstrate that older adults, both migrant and nonmigrant, are keen to benefit from the connectedness enabled by digital media when their social and support networks are dispersed across distance (e.g. Ahlin, 2018; Baldassar et al., 2020; Cabalquinto, 2018, 2022; Sinanan & Hjorth,2018; Wilding et al., 2020;

Wilding & Baldassar, 2018; Wilding et al., 2022). In this paper, we explore how the role of digital media within transnational families and migrant communities is replicated in another domain, that of religion and spirituality.

In common with transnational family research, our understanding of the digital articulations of religion relies in part on the emergent field of emotions and migration (Ahmed, 2014; Baldassar et al., 2020, 2007; Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Holmes & Wilding, 2019; Cabalquinto, 2020; Ho, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Merla & Baldassar, 2010; Ponzanesi, 2020). Transnational migrants—including older adults—are embedded in affective economies that span national borders, through which the circulation of emotions produces the 'surfaces and boundaries' (Ahmed, 2004, 2014) of spaces of belonging such as transnational families (e.g. Wilding et al., 2020). Affect in these instances transform into a kind of capital that acts as a 'repository of resourceful practices' and 'transnational connectivity' (Leurs, 2019). Such circulations of affect, we suggest, are also capable of producing the surfaces and boundaries of belonging to transnational religious networks, including spaces of belonging with networks of spiritual beings. In order to understand the digital articulation of transnational religious networks of older migrants, it is necessary to pay attention to their engagement in affective economies that mobilize families, communities, and the spiritual and the material in complex spaces of belonging. These include the digital devices and platforms that people rely upon and engage with in order to produce spaces of belonging (e.g. Wilding et al., 2020, 2022), but also, as we argue here, the supernatural and spiritual worlds with which people interact and engage on a daily basis. Motivating this engagement with the material and spiritual, we suggest, is not just a migrant articulation of transnational religious networks that are part of migrant, diasporic, or religious communities, or even transnational connections to place and people, but rather the desire for spiritual and religious fulfilment in later life, as a fundamental goal of emotional well-being.

In what follows, we examine the digital articulations of religion through exploring the lives of older Sinhalese adults living in Melbourne. Rather than as a direct or simplified migratory outcome, we seek to examine religious engagements of older Sinhalese migrants as relational to a process of ageing, experienced as both movement through the life course and as an emotional state of being embedded in physical, social, and cultural domains. We find that spatiality is transcended with technology-induced religious consumption of older Sinhalese adults, serving a temporal need associated with ageing, producing a spatiotemporal digital articulation of religion.

METHODOLOGY

Our analysis is based on ethnographic research conducted with 25 Sinhalese older adults in Melbourne by the first author (Shashini Gamage) as part of a larger study on ageing and new media (see also, Wilding et al., 2020). Currently, 145,000 Sri Lankan-born migrants reside in Australia with half of them living in Melbourne, and Sri Lanka is ranked among the top 10 source countries for migrants to Australia (ABS, 2021). In addition, Sri Lankan older adults is one of the most rapidly ageing migrant populations in Australia (Wilson et al., 2020). In the context of a relative lack of attention to older Sri Lankans in Australia, this paper helps fill an urgent need to understand their experiences, preferences, and practices of ageing in order to better inform future aged care policies and investment.

The interviews were conducted pre-pandemic through 2019, facilitating visits for ethnographic observations in the homes of participants. The sample includes eight men and 17 women, aged over 60–79. Participants are of Buddhist faith. Ethnographic observations and walks in homes and gardens were performed with accompanying field notes and photographs. Ethnographic interviews that lasted over an hour were conducted in the native Sinhalese language of participants, recorded, and translated into English along with field notes. Interviews included sections on life-story narratives, engagements with technology, and information on care networks. Transcripts, field notes, and photographs were analysed using NVivo for the purpose of this paper, examining their engagements and practices of religion.

All participants migrated to Australia in the 1980s and 1990s with the stated intention of escaping the armed violence and economic instability of the civil war in Sri Lanka that lasted from 1983 to 2009 (see Betts & Higgins, 2017; De Mel et al., 2012). Despite the war, participants had access to public primary, secondary, and tertiary education in their home country and, in Australia, to courses in universities, enabling employment in professions that were also

included in Australia's points-based migration system as jobs in high demand. Participants had professional experiences as doctors, teachers, scientists, accountants, nurses, mechanics, and engineers in their home countries while working in similar capacities in Australia. Many also arrived on student visas, carer visas, and permanent residency visas. At the time of interview, some had retired while others continued to work, nearing retirement. They had fluency in English and high levels of digital literacy, with all choosing to regularly use mobile devices, social media, and digital communication platforms. Participants lived in the homes of their children ($n = 12$) or individual houses ($n = 13$), including two participants who live independently in public housing. Regardless of living arrangements, all maintained close relationships with children and grandchildren and provided unpaid care work for the younger generations, in the form of cooking, cleaning, and attending to grandchildren. In addition to being valuable contributors to their families, all participants were active and engaged members of their local Sinhalese community organizations. They were physically mobile and in reasonably good health. Yet, all anticipated a future when their minds and bodies would not be in such good health, providing a sense of urgency to the accumulation of merit.

RELIGIOUS ARTICULATIONS AS AGEING MIGRANTS

A common refrain amongst participants was that acquiring merits (*pin*) has become the primary purpose of religious engagements in older age. Participants explained that the merits provide a pathway to a good 'next life' by negating any karma or bad deeds that might lead to rebirth in less fortunate or non-human life forms; in this life, meritorious activities offer some emotional reassurance of a life well-lived. Participants explained that merits are accumulated through philosophical activities, such as pilgrimage, meditation, observing Buddhist pledges (*sil*), listening to sermons (*bana*), and chants (*pirith*), as well as through performative activities, such as almsgivings to monks at temples, offerings (puja) to the sacred Bo-trees, and donating to social causes in Australia and Sri Lanka. Badra, a 76-year-old participant, encapsulated these philosophical and civic engagements with religion. Similar to Sepali she declared, 'I do merits and follow the *dhamma* … I am now slowly letting go of worldly pleasures', adding 'I am trying to move away from attachments. I fulfil my obligations. I don't try to do things, even for my children, in an overly attached way … That monk also says that we must move away from attachments'. Badra is referring here to the sermons of a popular monk in Sri Lanka she listens to on YouTube, which help shape her ideals of 'letting go'. Badra adds, 'You [i.e. the first author] can't do that because you are still young', thereby locating her practices temporally, specifically as an activity and desire of later life. Renouncing pleasure is an emotional state that signifies a productive later-life for Badra, which she believes a younger self is unable to achieve.

Similarly, Chethana, another 66-year-old participant says she lowers the sound of her iPad when listening to sermons and chants in the evening, as this is her daughter's 'family time' in the home. Chethana says that since 'they are young; they don't need to do that yet', adding that the sermons on You Tube help her to deal with the grief of her husband passing away from an illness. She explains, 'The sermons help us to understand the fragile nature of human life. We don't know when our time will be up'. This sense of contentment and detachment in old age is also reflected in Ratna, a 70-year-old participant, also a widow, who sees religion in older age as tied to a minimal life where she is able to help others. She says 'I have very few wants in life. It is nice to be contented. It is good to be happy with what you have. I want to help others. That is a good life', also adding, 'I don't want to dress attractively, get attention or positions. I am content from what I have'.

The desired emotional state of later life, described by Badra and Chethana as a form of renouncing pleasure, is enhanced through the conduct of meritorious activities and religious deeds. Familial relationships of older Sinhalese adults in Australia provide significant support networks for transforming the philosophical demands of religion in older age into action, particularly for older adults with limited mobility. Adult children, aware of the significance of merit to their ageing parents, provide support. For example, Shriya, a 68-year-old participant, has a daughter who takes her to the temple on every full-moon day to take part in dharma discussions, an activity she is unable to do on her own because she cannot drive. 'According to our culture, the relationships between parents and children are very strong',

Shriya says, locating these bonds in the home country culture as enabling supportive familial relationships in older age. For Sepali, the urgency to attend meditation retreats has increased with her age. Her three children take turns to drop her to meditation retreats that are held in outer-suburbs and require long-distance drives. Sepali adds, 'When I need to attend a retreat, my children, wherever I may be staying at that time, drop me off to the retreat', emphasizing her children's commitment towards fulfilling her meritorious needs.

Apart from such physical assistance, children and grandchildren also provide guidance for using devices and online platforms, facilitating older adults' digital engagements with religion. For some participants, old age poses challenges with navigating technology. However, mitigating this tendency was a clear desire by all participants who took an interest in learning, including both taking initiative in finding support for their own digital learning and also assisting others to learn using new platforms and devices and identifying new online religious resources. For example, using her laptop for the first time to access the internet, Latha has developed the skills to browse on YouTube to search for monks of her preference who deliver simple sermons in lay language. '[My daughter] wrote me the instructions to follow on a piece of paper to access those sermons on the computer', Latha says, adding, 'I don't understand a lot of things. [My grandson] has taught me a lot'.

This commitment to learning is often in spite of the ageist assumptions they face among their own family members. For example, Badra says that her son would constantly tell her that she is unable to use her iPad and laptop, which he nevertheless purchased as presents for her birthdays. Badra says, 'My son said that "Mother, you can't do it. Mother, you don't understand." He was not that keen to teach me. But my daughter-in-law dismissed that … I learned from her. After that I also learned by myself'. Now, the devices support her practices of religion. She listens to Buddhist sermons and chants on YouTube every day. Significantly, all of the participants were active members of Sinhalese diasporic organizations located in Melbourne, enabling further communal participation in meritorious and religious deeds in old age as well as the production of collective religious affect of merits and renouncing pleasure that was shared commonly across older adults who have reached later life. Participants have membership in up to three main associations. These associations consist of 50–200 members and access funding from local councils, state governments, and donations for activities that lend to cultural maintenance in Australia. Most gather fortnightly on weekends at community centres in local councils. Activities at associations include celebrating cultural events (i.e. Sinhalese new year), creating gastronomic experiences, consuming media from the home country (i.e. maintaining television soap opera clubs), fundraising and charity work, and religious activities (i.e. almsgivings and sermons) (Gamage, 2021). Their contributions to religious activities in these associations was not only a means of supporting the migrant community, but also perceived as diverse kinds of philosophical and performative meritorious deeds. Moreover, these contributions are identified as particularly important and relevant for older, rather than younger, migrants. For example, Ramya and Ratna, both heading committees of Sinhalese diasporic associations, are particularly attuned to their ageing selves when organizing meritorious activities. They note that many members of their community organizations are unable to drive in Melbourne due to age-related conditions. This places many older people at risk of being unable to attend religious events and diasporic events. They require the support and facilitation of other community members to help them participate in both their religion and their migrant communities.

Networks of support and care within the associations are formed to provide this type of support. Ramya and Ratna, in particular, drive their friends from the associations to temples, almsgivings, and fundraisers. They also provide everyday support, helping people to attend medical appointments and attend to their banking or shopping needs. Even as they provide this support in the present, they remain constantly aware of their own ageing selves and the challenges this may pose to their mobility in the future. As Ramya says, 'I don't know for how long I will be able to drive … That is why I strive to do some service to someone every second that passes. I can reminisce about those if I get bedridden. We can think about the good deeds we did … If something happens, it will be because of bad karma from a previous life. We have to live through those and continue to be happy'. The contributions in the present are part of a larger mode of generalized reciprocity within the religious and migrant community that forms a sense of happiness. Commitment to merit thus enables the associations to draw on a wide network of people to provide transport for members to attend religious and cultural events, and to meet their everyday needs. This is particularly important in Melbourne,

in the migrant context. In Sri Lanka, religious activities typically take place within close-knit urban and rural neighbourhoods and communities, and villages are usually within walking distance of temples. In contrast, the dispersal of the Sinhalese community within Melbourne and the smaller number and geographic dispersal of temple locations in Australia present a significant challenge for older Sinhalese adults seeking religious fulfilment.

Sinhalese diasporic associations acknowledge and adapt to these geographic challenges. Associations are usually organized by local government areas affiliated to councils, particularly in areas with high concentrations of Sinhalese (i.e. Dandenong, Glen Waverly, and Bundoora). These associations work to ensure that dispersed community members are able to access vital support networks that help members to achieve religious objectives. As gatherings of members are held at a particular location, often at a community centre of a local council, associations are able to arrange carpooling and transportation for members if necessary as well as organize a range of activities that enable the accumulation of merits. These include 'hoppers nights'—ticketed fundraisers for charity where the traditional Sri Lankan delicacy 'hoppers'[1] is cooked, cultural events for fundraising, almsgivings to Buddhist monks, *pirith* chanting ceremonies, celebrating the Vesak festival, devotional singings, mediation sessions, retreats, and observing Buddhist pledges. Participants say that while individually it may be difficult to attend these religious events in Melbourne, due to their geographic dispersal across the sprawling suburbs, the associations counter this reality by facilitating their collective participation in meritorious deeds. The spaces also enable peer-to-peer learning and assistance when older adults require support operating devices or platforms, such as through phone calls made to peers.

DIGITAL ARTICULATIONS IN ONLINE RELIGIOUS SPACES

In this section, we examine how digital technologies have also become an essential tool for enabling older Sinhalese adults to transform their digital articulations of religion into civic and personal acts of merit. Here, we mean the adoption and adaption of digital technologies and new media as facilitators and motivators of transnational religion. Through digital media, religious articulations are able to extend beyond the diaspora as experienced within the suburbs of Melbourne, to also include transnational connections to Sri Lanka and Buddhism across the globe. In these settings of 'transnational religious place-making' (Habarakada & Shin, 2018), these practices deconstruct and reconstruct the idea of place as linked to religion; place as located in a home country, in Australia, and in a spiritual world.

The ubiquity of digital media and internet-enabled devices in the lives of the participants, both women and men, was particularly notable. These devices are important in supporting transnational familyhood (see also Wilding et al., 2020) and in enabling older adults to consume and engage with popular media, news, and other cultural products from Sri Lanka (e.g. Gamage, 2020, 2019). In addition, it became clear in interviews that mobile devices provide valuable opportunities for individual and collective engagements with religion. For example, 68-year-old participant Sumana says that operating digital devices can be 'tiresome' sometimes. Nevertheless, they provide her with access to religious comfort that makes the effort worthwhile. On the occasion of the interview, a chant continued to play from her iPad. She explains, 'I only bought my iPad to listen to Buddhist sermons'. By buying an iPad, she is able to access sermons and chants, which she plays throughout the day to bless her life and home. 'I keep them playing. There are enough and more sermons of monks. I just play those and listen', says Sumana.

Following recommendations from her friends about Buddhist monks, Badra says, 'They tell me about good Buddhist monks and then I search for them on YouTube. If he is not on YouTube, I Google to find [him]'. She interchanges between YouTube and Google to search for the recommended monks. 'I type on YouTube and get the sermons. I also Google. If the sermons are delivered by a particular Buddhist monk, I type his name and get the [sermons]'. Badra has preferences for choosing monks and sermons. She says that she does not like to 'listen to monks who just says the *jathaka* stories' or narratives of Buddha's past lives. 'I like to listen to the monks who say some logical things—things that are more

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[1] Hoppers or *aappa* are a crepe like Sri Lankan delicacy made with a rice flour and coconut milk mixture. It is cooked in deep bowl-shaped pans and eaten as cooked. It is a popular food item at community events.

realistic', she says. Quoting the name of a popular monk from Sri Lanka she says, 'I like that monk very much. A lot of people scold him, but I think what he says is good'.

For Sepali, religious consumption also means listening to sermons streamed by a Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka where online discussions on the sermons are facilitated through a Q&A page. 'Devotees can post questions that arise about meditation techniques and philosophy. The monks then provide answers to those questions in that page. I listen to the recordings … When I have a question, I can find answers from that page', says Sepali. With her sense of urgency to achieve a 'higher status of mind' through meditation, Sepali follows up in her home on complex mediation practices she learnt from monks at retreats using videos on YouTube. 'As we meditate, our philosophical knowledge improves. With this, I go back to the computer and search for information', she says. Like Badra, Sepali, too, has preferred monks. While the monk she frequently listens to has passed away, the online videos recorded before his death still provide her access to his sermons. She says the 'computer is very useful' to learn about Buddhism and to also access books and publications online that help her to extend her knowledge.

Badra has also progressed to using her devices to organize donations through daily communications with family and community members in her home country. Using her devices, Badra collaborated with her brother in Sri Lanka to support the livelihood of a gardener in her home village. This included sending money to buy him tools and a bicycle as well as a mobile phone to communicate with his clients. Badra conducts these meritorious deeds from a pension she receives from teaching in Sri Lanka. 'I don't use that [pension]. I spend it on meritorious work in Sri Lanka. I donated tools to a gardener in Sri Lanka … That has given him a job. I sent money to my brother and he bought the gardener a bicycle. I also bought [the gardener] a mobile phone. I told him to put a notice to every home in the area with his phone number, stating that he is able to mow grass. I do a little meritorious work like that', says Badra humbly but with a sense of fulfilment. On one occasion, she coordinated through Viber with a friend in Sri Lanka to build a house for a family in a rural village. 'I saw an advertisement in a Sinhalese paper about a man who had paralysis, living with three small children in that hut. I got the house built for them in bricks, with two small windows and a door', she says showing photos of the completed house her friend has sent her on Viber. Another time Badra donated her laptop to a Buddhist monk in a temple in Sri Lanka who was well known to her and with whom she communicated. Badra says the monk needed the laptop for a school where he taught.

Ramya communicates through a WhatsApp group 'Darwin-Melbourne-Sri Lanka' where her relatives in the three locations connect. She retells her experiences of sharing Vesak celebrations with dispersed family members by circulating images and videos:

> This is a photo of Vesak in Darwin. [My nephew] has arranged these decorations at the temple in Darwin very beautifully … My younger brother and sister-in-law are there [in Sri Lanka]. They have made seven lotus flower shaped lanterns [for Vesak] to reminisce Buddha. These are the celebrations in our temple [in Keysborough-Melbourne]. We held a *dansal* (food stall). Here are photos of our almsgiving. Here is a picture of preparations to make lotus flower lanterns [in Sri Lanka].

Telephone calls on WhatsApp have also helped another participant, Neela, to organize meritorious deeds with a friend in Melbourne. As Neela does not drive, her friend is a vital member of her support network, and the mobile phone enables her to connect with her friend. With her friend, Neela is able to attend and help out with cooking at almsgivings to Buddhist monks. She also helps prepare meals for devotees who attend sermons at the temple. Furthermore, Neela is a well-known poet in the diasporic community. She is writing a book of poetry for the main purpose of funding rural temples in Sri Lanka with proceeds from selling copies. For this, she uses email to communicate with a printer in Sri Lanka about layout and printing matters. She explains, 'I am 73 years old now. I will face things as they may come … The only aspiration I have is to publish my book somehow and provide a benefit to the society', locating her desires within a sense of urgency in relation to her age.

For 71-year-old participant Nihal, meritorious activities are also based in his following of Indian guru Sathya Sai Baba's teachings. Apart from Buddhist activities, he devotes most of his time to engaging with the Sai program.

Accessing the organization's website in India from Melbourne with his PC, laptop, iPad and tablet, Nihal listens to talks and devotional songs known as *bhajan*. He explains that the different devices enable him to consume material from different rooms in the house, depending on his mood and where he is at during a particular time of the day. 'The phone is essential' says Nihal, to organize spiritual journeys and pilgrimages as well as to share devotional messages, videos, texts, and images with his sister in Sri Lanka, also a devotee. 'We are searching the spiritual way towards nirvana. We organize spiritual activities over the phone before we go to Sri Lanka. Straight from the airport we go to my younger sister's home. We then go off to the spiritual centres', says Nihal. A closed WhatsApp group of members from a Sai organization in Melbourne also share similar content with Nihal and he responds. Members of this group have also formed a vital support network and help each other in times of need, and Nihal says this care work enables them to accumulate merits.

Another participant Sarath is 75 years old and takes a laptop every day to the aged care facility where his wife is permanently lodged due to illness and plays Buddhist sermons and chants. Sarath says, 'I play Sinhalese sermons on the laptop for her. She listens to the sermons. She is not able to walk. That is how life is. More than when we are young, we begin to think about life when we are old'. He speaks with an awareness on their ageing selves and the need age has created to achieve religious objectives. Sarath says listening to sermons on the laptop provides a sense of religious fulfilment to his wife while having lost her mobility, making her unable to take part in religious activities at communal and institutional levels. 'The sermons that are preached in Sri Lanka yesterday evening, we can access from here today morning', adding, 'when you become ill these things impact you further. The worth of religion increases in such a situation. It becomes a solace to your mind'. Illness and loss have similarly made Chethana reflect on life through the Buddhist sermons she listens to on YouTube. 'I have a lot of grief with my husband passing away. I think about his disease. The sermons help us to understand the fragile nature of human life. We don't know when our time will be up', she says. Similarly, Badra experiences grief as a result of her former husband's abduction and disappearance during a series of youth uprisings in Sri Lanka in the late 1980s and her present husband in Australia undergoing an illness that has impacted his mobility. 'That is why I listen to Buddhist sermons and songs now. I have many regrets in life. Now I feel very sensitive towards the needs of others. That is a good thing', she says.

Diasporic associations in which Sinhalese older adults are the dominant membership extend these religious engagements at community levels. They use websites, social media, YouTube, and communication platforms to organize larger scale meritorious activities, such as almsgivings, fundraisers, and celebrations of religious festivals. Phone calls on platforms such as WhatsApp and Viber enable participants to assign and divide tasks for such events. For instance, as president of a diasporic association, Ramya organizes a monthly meditation program. She calls her friends at the association, asking them to bring meals, dishes, cups and plates, desserts, and alms to monks. 'I have to always have the phone in my hand. If not, I will miss calls. I have to communicate a lot to organise that meditation program these days', says Ramya, adding, 'I do very valuable things for the community by just using the phone and communicating'. Holding a similar position at an association, Piyal, uses a WhatsApp network and websites of overseas Sinhalese diasporic associations to organize international scale fundraisers to contribute to rural schools and temples in Sri Lanka. Apart from this, Piyal is involved in several committees at Sri Lankan temples in Melbourne, contributing to organizing activities to link the institutions to dispersed associations and their members. Such meritorious activities, he says, help to create a sense of community for Sinhalese migrants in Melbourne.

TEMPORAL STRATEGIES: AGEING AND DIGITAL ARTICULATIONS OF RELIGION

Sinhalese migrants living in Melbourne are active participants in migrant community organizations, transnational families and migrant transnational religious networks. These are significant social, cultural and spatial strategies that are informed by their identities as migrants. However, our analysis of the everyday religious lives of older Sinhalese migrants indicates that there is another identity that is also significant, if often overlooked. The participants in this research helped us to understand that an equally significant identity is that of being older adults in later life. This stage

in the life course brings with it a clear set of obligations, to perform actions aimed at accumulating merit. The migrant identity remains significant because it is their migrant biographies that have created new challenges in accumulating merit, challenges that must be negotiated and overcome. These challenges include, for example, the loss of mobility and the ability to drive, particularly as temples are often located great distances away and the resultant isolation of older adults who must rely on other to facilitate their social and religious engagement in community. As a result of these challenges, the accumulation of merit is not embedded in the structures and routines of everyday life in Australia as it is in Sri Lanka. In response, older Sinhalese migrants take responsibility for identifying and participating in alternative practices of accumulating merit. These alternatives are accessible within transnational families as well as local and transnational migrant organizations and religious networks. In addition, older Sinhalese migrants have mobilized digital media to help them access new opportunities and contexts in which to accumulate merit and achieve their spiritual and religious goals, fulfilling emotional needs of religious association with a life well-lived.

In migratory contexts, religion and religious engagement offer vital spatial strategies of identity and belonging (Habarakada & Shin, 2018; Orsi, 1999; Vásquez & Knott, 2014). In addition, for the Sinhalese older adults of our study, religious consumption is also clearly a vital temporal strategy of ageing and later life. Processes of ageing have created a sense of urgency for acquiring merits that are intended to bless their afterlife and rebirth. This has in turn intensified religious consumption through digital media and mobile devices. The use of new technologies is particularly important in responding to one of the conditions of ageing, the new challenges of mobility that many older adults face, as well as in responding to one of the conditions of migration, the loss of collective and institutional participation in religion that predominates in close-knit communities in the home country. Their geographic dispersal across the suburbs of Australia and the lack of institutional and structural reinforcement of their religion in mainstream Australian society create the conditions in which older Sinhalese migrants are motivated to generate alternative articulations of religion that are transnational and virtual. It is in this context that digital media and communication technologies, and the 'connected migrants' (Diminescu, 2008) they support, facilitate religious fulfilment within a spatiotemporal context that is outside place-based institutional religious consumption in later life.

As members of the transnational affective economies within which older migrants are embedded, the non-human actants of mobile devices and digital media also warrant closer attention. These tools of everyday life are essential to the articulations of transnational religious networks. They are both objects of affection and emotional attachment in themselves (Wilding et al., 2020), but are also used by older people to meet emotional needs and access alternative religious practices and networks. The affordances of diverse technologies ensure that, with the touch of a button or the typing of search terms, older adults are able to access Buddhist philosophical teachings of detachment and contentment. These tools are used to activate feelings of well-being that derive from the moments of religious reflections provided by Buddhist sermons, chants and meditations on YouTube, Websites, and Facebook. Sharing religious imagery, videos, and texts using communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Viber provide further civic connections to spirituality, pilgrimage, and meritorious activities. These engagements also enable these older adults to mitigate feelings of loneliness, loss arising from the illness/death of partners, illnesses and hardships and prepare for afterlife, as demonstrated in the ethnographic accounts of participants. These technological engagements with religion address a sharpened sense of ageing selfhoods and growing awareness of mortality, demonstrating how the philosophical experiences of spirituality in old age have transformed to produce emotive responses through the use of technology.

These personal, private articulations of religious transnationalism intersect with, shape and are shaped by the support networks that form through diasporic associations, which act as collectives of religious consumption that link individual, community, and diasporic and institutional actants of faith. Such connections bridge the dispersal of older Sinhalese in Melbourne, linking them not just with each other, but also with other sites around the world, expanding religious networks to meet individual preferences and needs that reinforce but also transcend links to specific institutional and physical sites of religion. Meritorious deeds such as almsgivings, fundraisers, sermons, and religious festivals conducted at the associations provided older Sinhalese adults opportunities to further contribute towards accumulating merits, and mobile technologies played a crucial role in organizing these activities. Transportation and

technological support available to older Sinhalese adults through diasporic associations enabled them to mitigate challenges of mobility and learning in old age. At the diasporic associations, civic, digital, and institutional forms of religious practices merged. As participant accounts show, contributing to diasporic meritorious deeds and charities in the home country provided a sense of further accumulation of merits, bringing to light the significance of the intersections of individual, communal, and institutional religious actants in contributing to religious fulfilment in old age.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the articulations of religion that we highlight in this paper can be explained across two intersecting spatiotemporal processes—ageing (temporal) articulations and digital (spatial) articulations. Scholarship on religion and migration point to the significance of religion as a spatial strategy in migrants' lives. Our research extends this by also drawing attention to migrants' religious practices as a temporal strategy that enables a sense of fulfilment and a life well-lived in later life. While the migrant condition of older Sinhalese adults in this study is vital to shaping religious networks and meritorious practices in diasporic spaces, the desire to accumulate merits and the associated sense of urgency to do so is intensified in older age leading to the increasing use of digital technologies and new media to facilitate religious practices. In the process, older Sinhalese adults challenge ageist assumptions about older people's lack of technological knowledge. They are willing and active users of digital media and new technologies when those tools support the achievement of emotional and spiritual goals that are relevant to later life. Mobile technologies enable the negotiation of limits in mobility that are commonly experienced with older age. They also enable people to navigate the spatial dispersal of their religious networks. These physical constraints of distance and movement, which might otherwise prevent older adults from practicing religion in collective and institutional spaces, are reimagined, transformed, and newly articulated through digital media. Digital articulations of transnational religion do not require travel to dispersed locations in Australia, and enable participation in opportunities to accumulate merit in Sri Lanka, in collective religious activities that are performed in (digitally) proximate community environments supported by transnational kinship networks.

It is these multiple articulations of age and religion, enabled by digital tools, that transforms not just the ageing condition but also the migrant condition. In this sense, older Sinhalese adults' digital religious practices also create spiritual roles for non-human actors, such as mobile devices, new media, and communication platforms, transcending suprahuman imaginaries of religion into digitally sacred spaces. What is significantly alternative in these articulations is that organizational and institutional religion is surpassed by the older Sinhalese adults who exert agency in response to their life stage and the opportunities created by digital media to produce their own religious networks—both interpersonal and suprapersonal/non-human.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Research data are not shared.

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