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Aspirational Well-Being and Digital Media:

Southeast Asian international students' use of digital media and their pursuit of the good life in Melbourne, Australia

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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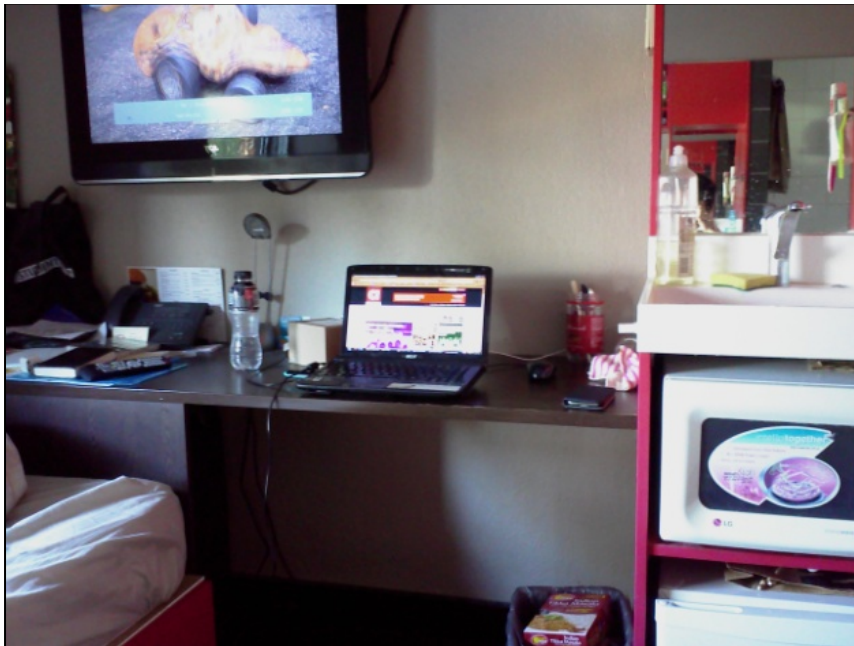School of Media and Communication

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Declaration

I certify that, except where due acknowledgement has been made, this work is of the author's only. It has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award. The content of the dissertation is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research programme. Any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is duly acknowledged. Ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Joshua Wong Wei-Ern
10th September 2019

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Lastly and most importantly, I would like to thank God and acknowledge Jesus as my Shepherd, Lord and Saviour. It is only through His abundant grace, divine favour and miraculous power that I have been able to accomplish this milestone.

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List of Acronyms

AWDM   Aspirational Well-Being and Digital Media

ASEAN   Association of South-East Asian Nations

HCI   Human-Computer Interaction

ICT   Information and Communications Technology

PD   Picture Diary

Abstract

International students are a significant component of the increasingly global mobility of people, technologies, and goods. As an important part of global education economies and networks, the growth of international student populations highlights the ways in which mobility, technology, and identity transition are entwined. In 2016, Southeast Asian international students represented 24.8% of the total international student population in the higher education sector, and international students made up nearly one-fourth (26.8%) of all higher education students in Australia. This phenomenon is indicative of the changing mobilities in the Asian region—especially in terms of economic, social and technological shifts that, in turn, are informing new class aspirations in, and through, media practice. It is these emergent mobilities that this dissertation seeks to understand through the guiding research question: *What role does digital media technology play in the aspirations and practice of well-being among Southeast Asian international students in Melbourne, Australia?*

This dissertation documents and analyses how international students from Southeast Asia incorporate digital media technologies in their pursuit of a better life while studying in Australia. Drawing from qualitative methods deployed in the field for two years (2014–2016), the research seeks to make an original contribution to how Southeast Asian international students are conceptualised in Australia. It highlights the need to incorporate the complex, dynamic, and divergent ways in which Southeast Asian international students represent broader regional movements in and around the interlinking of economic, cultural, and technological elements of mobility as they pursue their aspirations.

To understand the complex and dynamic ways media practices are involved in aspirational well-being, this dissertation, Aspirational Well-Being and Digital Media (hereinafter AWDM), deploys an interdisciplinary approach that includes media, culture, education, and migration studies to provide a nuanced and qualitative view of the topic. AWDM seeks to move beyond statistical studies of students' media usage and student well-being. It also seeks to move towards an in-depth analysis of the underlying motivations informing students' media practices and aspirations.

Introduction

This dissertation tells the story of international students from Southeast Asia studying in Australia and their aspirations towards a good life in an age of digital media and global mobility. As one of those international students, I remember that one of the first pictures I took in Australia was of my student hostel room, which I shared with my parents online:
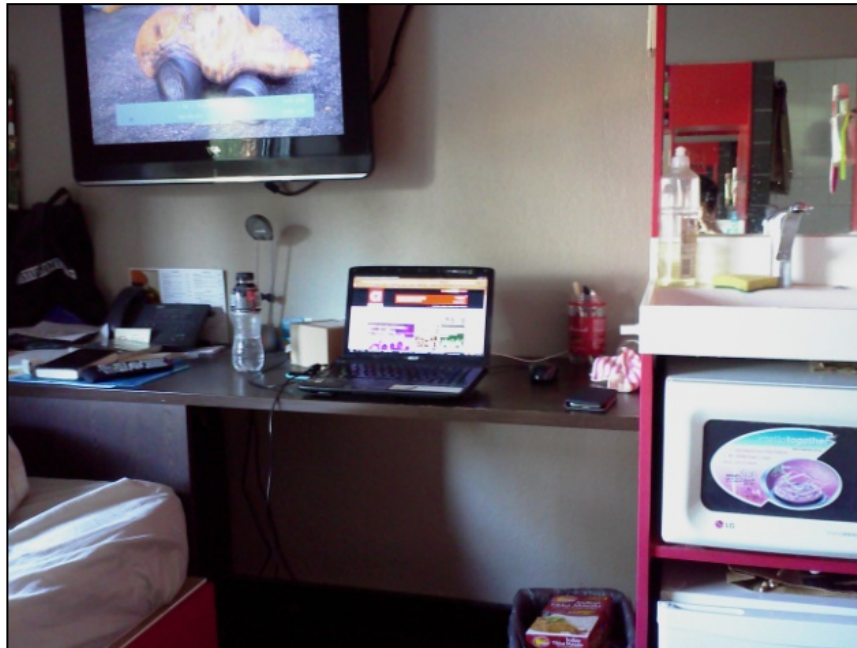
Figure 1.1. Student hostel room

In this picture (Figure 1.1), the television playing constantly provides the background ambience, while a laptop next to it is used for active internet browsing. Across the devices, transnational contestation is playing out—the TV plays 'Australian' media filled with 'Australian' aspirations and notions of well-being (such as diet and fitness, equality and liberalism, etc.), while the laptop provides access to 'Asian' media flows (such as Japanese and Korean shows with embedded values of social and class hierarchy). In between these contrasting media contexts, a microwave is on hand for any snack that might be needed.

This picture epitomised my everyday context in which contesting media images and aspirations shaped my life as an international student in Australia. As a student, I have led a peripatetic life across different cultural contexts, such as in Singapore, Fiji, and Malaysia covering different educational and disciplinary settings including human–computer interaction

(HCI) and media studies. Although I had experienced diverse educational and cultural contexts, the Australian environment presented some unique issues.

Returning to the above image (Figure 1.1), we note the challenges that the Australian context presents to the international students for negotiating well-being and belonging through media practice. In Figure 1.1 we see different types of media—what Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller call 'polymedia' (2012)—playing a crucial role in practices of identity, aspiration, and well-being. The Asia-Pacific region has been home to some of the key information and communication technology (ICT) innovations, such as smartphones. In an uneven media landscape, East Asian countries like Japan, China, and South Korea have been deemed as sites for ICT production (Chua 2004; Chua & Iwabuchi 2008), while Southeast Asia has been largely positioned as contested consumers of these soft and hard media flows (Robinson & Goodman 1996; Chua & Iwabuchi 2008; Kim 2008; Martin, Lewis & Sinclair 2013; Lewis, Martin & Sun 2016).

Australia makes a compelling site for understanding these media flows and their implication for international students as they grapple with notions of aspiration and well-being. Given that Asian international students comprise 26.8% of Australia's higher education sector (Australian Department of Education and Training 2017a), this phenomenon has attracted much research attention (Ramburuth & McCormick 2001; Hellsten 2002; Sakurai, McCall-Wolf & Kashima 2010; Marginson 2014; Martin 2014; Gomes 2015). And yet, in the field of media studies, Southeast Asian students have been relatively overlooked.

This PhD research seeks to address this gap by *focusing on how digital media technology impacts the aspirations and practice of well-being among Southeast Asian international students in Melbourne, Australia.* In this introductory chapter, I focus on defining the research question central to my dissertation, including some key terms and relationships. I will then provide an overview of the contexts within which this research exists—the mobility and migration patterns of Southeast Asian students to Australia as well as the proliferation of digital media within the Southeast Asian region. Finally, I will introduce some of the key theoretical concepts and frameworks I will use throughout the dissertation.

Research Question and Definitions

The key research question of this dissertation is this: What role does digital media technology play in the aspirations and practice of well-being among Southeast Asian international students in Melbourne, Australia?

There are a number of terms used in the research question that require more careful definition. Firstly, the term 'well-being' is a hotly contested one and has been studied in a variety of fields, including psychology (Ryan & Deci 2001; Diener 2009); health, medical, and social work (Waaktaar et al. 2004; Unterrainer, Lewis & Fink 2011; Levi & Drotar 2014; Zautra, Hall & Murray 2014); and economics and developmental studies (Nussbaum & Sen 1993; Diener & Suh 1997; Camfield 2014). However, this dissertation will largely focus on the concept of 'well-being' as 'the good life', which is more common within the fields of philosophy, anthropology, and cultural studies (Sen 1993; Appadurai 2013). Chapter 2 of this dissertation expands further on well-being and cultural ideas with specific reference to 'the good life'. Thus, the phrases 'the good life' and 'a better life' are used interchangeably to refer to the idea of well-being.

Secondly, I will consider **aspirations and practice of well-being**. This dissertation offers and uses a lens of **aspirational well-being** as the key motivator for understanding Southeast Asian international students' media practices as part of a pursuit of 'a good life' (Appadurai 2013; Fischer 2014). As discussed in the 'Key Theoretical Concepts' section below and Chapter 3 of this dissertation, aspirations towards a better life play a major role in the life choices of international students. These aspirations inform choices to go overseas to study as a fulfilment of past aspirations towards geographic and class mobility, and they begin to practise life habits in their new environment that are directly related to aspirations they have in the future, such as learning to cook or making a home for themselves in a new country. Many of these aspirations towards a better life now involve the use of media technologies in various forms, and thus this dissertation focuses on understanding the interactions between media, aspirations, and well-being in the lives of international students.

Finally, the relationship between **digital media technology and well-being** is a deeply contested space of inquiry. Early research on digital media technology and well-being focused mainly on the impact of internet usage and mobile phones on college students' well-being (Cotten 2008). Many of these quantitative studies in psychology reported that high levels of usage were associated with negative impacts on well-being, with a particular focus on addiction (Greenfield 2000; Nalwa & Anand 2003). There were also concerns that media multitasking and high communication loads would negatively affect the well-being of users (van der Schuur et al. 2015; Reinecke et al. 2017). More studies added complexity by showing that internal personality traits such as self-regulation and self-esteem (LaRose, Lin & Eastin 2003; Khang, Kim & Kim 2013) and external situational factors such as stress (Wang et al. 2015) also shaped the levels of engagement with these technologies.

At the same time, however, media anthropologists were also discovering that digital media technologies were being used by various groups to improve their life situations, ranging from Filipino migrants using mobile phones to parent their children from a distance (Madianou & Miller 2012); small businesses using mobile commerce to avoid exploitation and educational games for those deprived of formal schooling in India (Kam et al. 2009; Schwittay 2011); and new ways of fostering civic engagement and empowering the marginalised in China (Wallis 2011). The complex and ambivalent nature of the relationship between well-being or 'good lives' and usage of digital media therefore calls for further investigation in relation to the trade-offs and negotiations of media use among international students. We need to ascertain how much of the potential hazardous impact of the new media technologies are the students willing to accept to also reap the benefits.

While there have been numerous accounts of digital media being used by other migrant groups to improve their lives, there are relatively few accounts of how international students are using digital media and communications technologies to achieve the same, with most studies being tangential to the topic of well-being as they focus on maintaining connections with home (Hjorth 2007; Hjorth & Arnold 2012; Gomes & Alzougool 2013; Gomes et al. 2014; Peng 2016). This dissertation proposes to explore this under-researched area by providing empirical, ethnographic work on the relationship between digital media and the holistic well-being of international students, including *but not limited to* communications with home.

We now turn to the broader contexts of migration, mobility, and digital media that frame and inform the Southeast Asian student experience.

Southeast Asian Students in Australia

In the last 15 years, global migration has been increasing rapidly. A United Nations report placed the number of international migrants at 256 million in 2017, increasing from 177 million in 2000 (United Nations 2017). Of the 256 million migrants in 2017, 106 million (41%) were born in Asia, which comprises the largest chunk of the migrant population. These migrants can be subdivided into four major categories: refugees, migrant workers, migrant students, and those involved in human trafficking or smuggling. In recent years, much of the attention on migration has focused on the refugee crisis and on migrant workers. As migration has traditionally been studied in terms of labour and economic development, these two categories of people present the most obvious impacts on the relevant indicators. As such, there have been relatively fewer studies on international students within migration and mobility literature.

An International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF) Monitor report estimated the number of international students studying worldwide at roughly 5 million in 2017, with projections that it might increase to eight million by 2025 (ICEF 2017). Australia's market share in the international student space has been rapidly increasing, as it welcomed 11% of the total international student population as of 2016, sharing second place with the UK. At the tertiary education level, Australia is ranked third as a receiver country, hosting 8% of the global international student population in 2016 (Australian Department of Education and Training 2016a).

According to statistics released by the Australian Department of Education and Training, there were 391,136 international students in the higher education sector in 2016, comprising 26.8% of the total student population (Australian Department of Education and Training 2017a, 2017b). Although Chinese students formed the majority, Southeast Asian students were the second-largest group of the population of international students in Australia. A total of 97,304 students came from countries in Southeast Asia, thus comprising 24.8% of the total international student population in Australia's higher education sector (Australian Department of Education and Training 2017b). Figure 1.2 shows the top 10 countries that provided the highest number of international students in Australian higher education (HE) in 2016:

Country	No. of HE students enrolled in Australia
China	123,403
India	41,547
Malaysia	29,995
Singapore	25,284
Vietnam	19,486
Nepal	13,764
Indonesia	11,742
Hong Kong (SAR of China)	11,683
Pakistan	8,619
Sri Lanka	7,357

Figure 1.2. Top 10 countries of origin for overseas student enrolments in higher education (HE)

As shown in Figure 1.2, four of the top 10 countries are located in Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia). Because students from Southeast Asia make up such a significant percentage of international students, and because international students comprise more than one-fourth of Australia's higher education sector, they represent a key

population group that must be studied and understood. Thus, this dissertation proposes to contribute towards the research on this population group.

The region of Southeast Asia has had a relatively long history of migration to Australia for the purpose of further studies (Weiss & Ford 2011; Welch 2016). The first large group of Southeast Asian students came to Australia in the 1950s as a result of Australia's efforts to cultivate allies in the region for the Cold War, through the use of scholarships, textbook subsidies, and more (Altbach & Knight 2007). This was the beginning of the Colombo Plan, a multinational effort to channel developmental aid to South and Southeast Asia (including scholarships and educational training). This set the tone for Australia's educational engagement with Southeast Asia for nearly 35 years, bringing a total of 40,000 students from Asia to Australia (Kell & Vogl 2007)—primarily from former British colonies such as India and Malaysia. Many private students from Asia also came to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, in such numbers that the students from the Colombo Plan and other smaller scholarships only accounted for 23% of the total international student population (Megaritty 2005).

This educational exchange helped the various countries in different ways. For Australia, it generated goodwill in the geographical neighbourhood at the height of the Cold War, as Europe and the Americas were far away. For countries of Southeast Asia, this was the period of postcolonial reconstruction and development. Many of the students who benefitted from the Colombo Plan returned to their home countries. They took back much-needed skills for the developing countries as well as supplemented the lack of higher educational facilities in their home countries (Megaritty 2005; Welch 2016).

In the 1970s to 1990s, as the Cold War declined and the number of private fee-paying students from Asia continued to rise, the Australian government began restructuring its education sector. In 1989, the government announced the shift to a deregulated full-fee-paying system for international students. Over the years, this has slowly led to a change in the perception of higher education—from a form of foreign aid to an export industry (Sin 2006). Today, education remains Australia's third-largest export industry, with a record high value of $21.8 billion in 2016 (Universities Australia 2017).

At the same time, changes in immigration policy within Australia, such as the dismantling of the White Australia policy throughout the 1970s, also led to an increasing number of international students staying on in Australia as permanent residents. Most of Australia's needs for skilled migrants were fulfilled through drawing upon the international student population it had educated (Welch 2016). In 2012, the Australian Labour government under Julia Gillard published a landmark White Paper—*Australia in the Asian Century*—which

outlined Australia's strategy in relation to Asia through 2025. Within the sphere of education, the White Paper called for the teaching of Asian languages (primarily Mandarin, Hindi, Indonesian and Japanese) in schools and the development of a curriculum that promoted a broad-based understanding of Asia for general competency among the Australian population (Australian Government 2012).

The White Paper met with mixed reviews, as it was critiqued for being a document full of high ideals yet not matched with a commitment to funding or action. It was also criticised for being too narrow in its focus on Austro-centric concerns, instead of emphasising a vested interest in regional integration (Mascitelli & O'Mahony 2014). It also took a more instrumentalist perspective on Asia, reporting Asian-Australian relationships primarily in terms of economic partnerships and business association rather than true political alliances based on friendship or even social relations. More recently, with the incumbent Liberal government first steered by Tony Abbott, then Malcolm Turnbull, and currently Scott Morrison, immigration restrictions are again being severely tightened. The government is now seeking to shift Australia's internationalisation efforts away from welcoming immigrants to instead sending local Australians to the Asia-Pacific region for exposure and cross-cultural training under the New Colombo Plan.

The bulk of Australia's attention in Asia, and indeed, of the various countries in Southeast Asia as well, has been focused on China's rise in economic and political power within the Asia-Pacific region (Welch 2016). China, as Australia's largest trading partner and the biggest source of international students as well as investment, naturally warrants greater consideration. However, the focus on China implies that research on Southeast Asia has taken a backseat, despite the importance of the region towards Australia's trade and educational links. This dissertation therefore aims to make an original contribution to knowledge in this under-researched field and to update the current state of research on Southeast Asian students in Australia.

Southeast Asia, as a region, is incredibly diverse on multiple aspects—ethnic composition, religious makeup, socio-cultural values, political systems and economic development—such that an essentialised narrative of 'the Southeast Asian student' would be impossible. However, it is this very richness of diversity that makes it such an interesting and complex field to study, in relative comparison to the more monolithic countries of China and India. Despite their differences, the majority of nation-states that form the Southeast Asian region have come together to form one of the stronger regional political and economic blocs in the world—the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The ten member-states of ASEAN are, in alphabetical order: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. The diversity of relations on the ground juxtaposed with the larger political and economic attempts to achieve unity on a macro scale becomes fertile ground for the study of cross-cultural interactions. These interactions become particularly salient when international students travel from ASEAN countries to an extra-ASEAN nation like Australia, where they are often categorically lumped together under the generic term 'Asian' student. The tension in the individual student's construction of identity as 'Asian', 'Southeast Asian', or as a member of particular national, ethnic, or religious groups is informed in part by their experiences of mobility and globalisation.

Many students from Southeast Asian countries have already been exposed to the effects of mobility and migration prior to coming to Australia. The growing regional unity in ASEAN, and various initiatives to create free trade agreements—as well as a common economic zone—has led to an upswing in intra-regional migration, fostering a closer sense of personal and community ties (Kupa 2017) through the diaspora of ASEAN member-states. This ranges from foreign domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines in Singapore or Malaysia to low-skilled workers from the lower GDP countries such as Myanmar, Vietnam, and Laos moving to higher GDP countries such as Thailand or Malaysia, actively enabling modernisation projects in their new home countries. This trend builds on the already extensive record of migration from outside the region, such as traders from China, India, and Arabia, who settled in the region and built up the large diasporic ethnic minorities that exist in many Southeast Asian states. The proliferation of migration, and of migrant *stories* within the region, creates a culture in which aspirations for a better life and *class* mobility are often tied to geographic mobility. Moving to another country grants you opportunities to improve your life, either in diaspora or upon returning home. It is within this context that students from Southeast Asia come to Australia.

Digital Media and Southeast Asia

The other major factor shaping the experiences of international students from Southeast Asia today is the proliferation of digital media. Southeast Asia is one of the fastest-growing markets for internet as well as digital and mobile technologies (Hollander 2017; Kemp 2017). Internet penetration in the region had reached an average of 53% (339.2 million people out of an estimated total 644.1 million) at the start of 2017, while mobile phone subscriptions were at

133% (854.0 million) compared to the population (Kemp 2017). However, while both regional averages are higher than the global averages (50% for internet penetration and 108% for mobile phone subscriptions), the distribution within the ASEAN region is fairly uneven. For internet penetration, Brunei and Singapore have the highest percentages—86% and 82% of their populations respectively—while Laos and Myanmar trail far behind at 26%. For mobile subscriptions, Cambodia leads with 173% of their population followed closely by Singapore at 147%. Myanmar and Laos again fall to the bottom at 93% and 85% of the populations respectively (Kemp 2017).

One of the more interesting statistics is that of the use of smartphones and mobile broadband (3G and 4G networks) for internet access. A recent study by Deloitte showed Australian smartphone penetration at 84% of its population (Deloitte 2016). This percentage is increasing as plans are rolling out to shut down the current 2G mobile networks throughout 2017 and 2018. However, in Southeast Asia, the 2G networks still play a significant role in the region, with only 53% of all mobile connections being 3G or 4G networks (Kemp 2017). On average, mobile broadband penetration sits at an average of 70% across the region, with Singapore leading at 146% of its population, followed by Thailand at 134%, and Malaysia at 104%. The other countries fall below the penetration rates of Australia, with Indonesia and the Philippines at 65%, Myanmar at 51%, Vietnam at 40%, and Laos at 30%.

However, regardless of smartphone ownership, mobile internet *usage* across Southeast Asia is one of the heaviest in the world. On average, consumers in Southeast Asia spend 3.6 hours per day on mobile internet, with Thailand leading with 4.2 hours per day, followed closely by Indonesia at 3.9 hours per day. By comparison, a Nielsen study in 2015 showed that Australians spent an average of 34 hours 55 minutes on mobile internet per month, which averages out to just about 1.16 hours per day (Smith 2015).

From these statistics, two possible hypotheses could be drawn. Firstly, while Australians may spread their internet usage over multiple devices, Southeast Asian international students are likely to rely on the smartphone and mobile internet in a much larger way as they come from countries with high smartphone penetration rates (such as Singapore or Malaysia). This mirrors the patterns of mobile internet usage that they are accustomed to and the nature of their living arrangements (favouring less clutter, such as desktop computers) in order to move houses easily.

Secondly, for students coming from countries where smartphone penetration is not as high, their time in Australia could be the first ever during which they start using smartphones. They are not only making major cultural adjustments, but they also need to rapidly adapt to a

new technological environment. At the same time, this new technological environment affords them new opportunities and resources that they previously did not have access to, and they learn to chart a course through the new media environment that could be the start to a better life. The main focus of this dissertation, therefore, is to investigate the various roles digital media technologies play in the students' aspirations to and practice of a better life.

Key Theoretical Concepts and Frameworks

This dissertation, AWDM, draws from a wide variety of interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks and approaches. It brings together debates in the fields of media studies and mobility and migration studies, as well as a cultural studies approach to understanding 'well-being' as 'the good life'. However, there are a few key concepts that guide this dissertation and will serve as an analytical framework for the rest of the chapters.

We begin with the theory of **polymedia**, as proposed by Madianou and Miller (2012). The theory of polymedia proposes media technologies as environments of communication affordances and considers their impact on personal and social communications. Instead of studying discrete media platforms and technologies, Madianou and Miller proposed that the increasing convergence of media and the rapid proliferation of multiple media platforms offers a plethora of communication opportunities, and new media could be viewed as an 'integrated structure' within which each medium or platform is defined relationally to all other platforms.

Therefore, the focus shifts from the particular qualities of a single media platform towards a more holistic approach of what social and communicative benefits/disadvantages it may offer to the user in relation to other media platforms available. The adoption and usage of a particular media platform over others, therefore, becomes a signal of social and communicative intent—for example, why is text messaging chosen over Skype videoconferencing when both are available? And what does that say about the users' intention to communicate with verbal, possibly time-delayed asynchronous messages rather than visual, real-time synchronous feedback? Is it an issue of avoiding seeing or being seen, a desire to seem polite and non-imposing on the other person's time, a careful management of relational distance with the other party, or something else? These are the questions that polymedia research seeks to answer.

The theory of polymedia bears some similarity to the concept of 'media ecologies' (Postman 1970; Slater & Tacchi 2004) in that both take a wide-angle view of the relationship between media platforms and the socio-technical contexts that they exist in. However,

Madianou (2014) has noted there are two key differences between the concepts, which makes polymedia a better fit for the purposes of this dissertation. Firstly, recent work in media ecologies, exemplified by Ito et al. (2010), has included an emphasis on place-based systems as sites for media environments. However, polymedia grew out of research work on transnational migrants and thus is more de-territorialised in nature, with less emphasis on the physical location or technological infrastructures and more on the transnational links of communication. Secondly, polymedia does not focus solely on the environment, but rather 'the emphasis is on how users exploit the affordances within the composite structure of polymedia in order to manage their emotions and their relationships' (Madianou 2014, p. 671). Thus, polymedia interprets the environment as one of media affordances rather than physical location, incorporating the idea of usage and exploitation of those affordances as a core part of the analysis.

It is also important to note that this idea of 'affordances', even though taken from the fields of HCI, has a slight variance of meaning when used in polymedia theory. When psychologist James Gibson coined the term (Gibson 1979), he was using it more generally to refer to all the interactions that are possible between the environment and the individual. When Don Norman (1988) appropriated Gibson's idea towards human–machine design, he focused on the concept of 'action possibilities' that are perceived by the user, and it was this understanding of affordances that became popular in HCI and industrial design. Usually, there is an emphasis on the product's features and how the tool/software/object's capabilities are made manifest to the user. However, when Madianou and Miller use the term 'affordances', they are not just referring to the software capabilities and properties of the media platform but also to the social affordances that a media platform offers its user. In other words, affordances are understood not merely as features or properties of the software, but rather what the media platform suggests you can do with it *socially.*

Lastly, Madianou and Miller (2012) name three preconditions for a polymedia environment to exist: access, affordability, and literacy. An environment of polymedia is said to exist only when users have sufficient access to multiple communications platforms so they can choose, when cost is not an issue, and when the communicating parties have sufficient media literacy to use the platforms well. A discussion of the technological configurations of study participants for this research project is included in Chapter 1 (Methodology) and Chapter 4 (Home and Family), where I outline why it is reasonable to assume that a state of polymedia exists for higher education international students in Melbourne, Australia.

The second key theoretical concept introduced in this dissertation is the concept of **aspirational well-being**. Given this dissertation is focused on the pursuit of 'well-being' as 'a good life', I draw upon work by Arjun Appadurai (2013) and Amartya Sen (1993) when discussing international student aspirations in Chapter 3. The idea of transitions, migration, and mobility in pursuit of a better life is also an important factor in the consideration of international student well-being. To this end, in my research, 'aspirational well-being' is defined both as an evaluation of well-being at present and also the well-being and 'a good life' visualised for the future. This concept is particularly suited to tertiary-level international students, as their lives are at a stage of rapid transition—moving from country to country, from students to working adults, and also possibly from singleton life to married life. As such, a lot of what concerns these international students is how to plan a better life in the future while enjoying (or surviving) their present circumstances.

A further trajectory to this topic is the issue of identity formation as an aspirational goal. 'A good life' can be understood not only in terms of the life situation that students want to ultimately attain but also the type of people (embodying certain skills, values or experiences) that they *want to be*. This collection of skills, values, and experiences is what Sen (1993) terms as 'functionings', stated as 'the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life' (Sen 1993, p. 31). From all the possible functionings a person could hope to achieve, the individual must then pick one subset on which they can direct their effort into developing. And the sum total of all the functionings they have achieved so far becomes a measure of the person's capabilities. Therefore, to become a 'capable' person as an aspirational goal, and the process by which media technologies aid or hinder the acquisition of capability in the students' life, is another key theoretical idea that underpins this dissertation.

Dissertation Structure

Central to this dissertation is the concept of aspiration as a contested and dynamic process. It takes many forms across well-being and transnational flows through past, present, and future contexts. Each of the following chapters will address this contestation through a different lens. The structure of this dissertation is outlined below.

In this Introduction, I provide an insight into the motivations for this research, the research question, a brief account of the interplay between Southeast Asian students and media, and an overview of the major theoretical concepts and analytical framework that I will be using.

In Chapter 1: Methodology, I will discuss in detail the methodological choices made in my research. I also discuss the technological, social, and cultural contexts in which my research exists and how they informed my methodology.

Chapter 2, entitled Contested Cultural Ideas of Well-Being, presents concrete data about my study participants' definitions of 'well-being' and 'a good life'. It also details an exploration of the socio-cultural contexts that can shape ideas and practices around well-being across different societies, in particular among Southeast Asian international students in Australia.

A theoretical exploration of the concept of aspiration and how it relates to well-being is the subject of Chapter 3: Contested Ideas of Aspirations and Well-Being. I explore some of the ramifications of international student aspirations, particularly with regard to their career choice and course of study, to show how multiple forms of aspirations can exist and overlap.

In Chapter 4: Media Practices of Family Aspirations and Well-Being, I examine how international students and their families employ digital media to 'do family'. This includes explorations of how they maintain connections to family members and how they practise caregiving with the help of digital media technology. I then discuss tensions in transnational familial relationships, as they negotiate between international students' individual and familial identities and aspirations.

In Chapter 5, communities and belonging take centre stage. I explore how students negotiate their sense of belonging and connectedness to larger communities and societies. This includes existing communities and also aspirational and imagined communities that students wish to identify with in the future.

Chapter 6 focuses on play, leisure, and learning aspirations. Here, I explore how playful leisure activities and entertainment technologies can serve as bridges to higher aspirations. This includes practices of learning life skills through media, as well as engaging in social adaptation through leisure and creative activities.

Finally, in Chapter 7: Discussion: Aspirational Well-Being and Digital Media, I return to my research question and discuss my findings. Here I expound on the patterns found in the relationship between digital media and aspirations. I also showcase the holistic experience of a particular international student to further explicate the intricacies of the aspirational process as it blends together different identities, contexts, and goals.

Chapter 1
Methodology

The key research question of this dissertation is as follows: What role does digital media technology play in the aspirations and practice of well-being among Southeast Asian international students in Melbourne, Australia? Through qualitative methods deployed over two years with 23 tertiary-level students from Southeast Asia (aged between 18 and 27 years), this dissertation seeks to provide nuanced understandings into how the use of digital media technologies in the everyday lives of students are providing new ways to frame well-being and mobility debates in terms of aspiration. This chapter describes in detail the ontological and methodological approach used, as well as the research process employed to answer this question.

In recent years, Big Data and the field of data analytics pose new epistemological challenges to existing paradigms within both computational and social sciences (boyd & Crawford 2012; Kitchin 2014). For positivist scholars, such as those in economics, political sciences, and human geography, Big Data offers more sophisticated, fine-grained models of human life, captured in quantifiable data from hundreds and thousands of human transactions made through digital devices. It is easier than ever to build a picture of human lives by analysing the digital data trail they leave behind. This empirical approach has been widely used in the advertising and marketing industries as well—tracking usage data to find correlations and forming useful conclusions about patterns of behaviour without necessarily having to go through theoretical models to find causation.

However, Big Data has been criticised for repeating the mistake of last century's positivism in the social sciences, as human society and human behaviour are not so easily reducible to quantifiable statistics; a reductionist model can never fully encompass the metaphysical (meanings, values, beliefs) and normative (ideas of what *should be* versus what *is*) aspects of human life. In studying international students and usage of media, there have been a number of studies that focus on the quantified usage of digital media in these students' lives. However, what is lacking is an in-depth understanding of the student motivations and the way in which they execute their aspirations in everyday contexts. Thus, in my dissertation, I focus on the meanings generated from their daily routines in which media play a role, rather than quantifiable data and patterns of behaviour regarding media.

Ontologically, this study sits within the paradigm of media and cultural studies, wherein I adopt a critical cultural lens to examine individuals and their interactions with the socio-cultural processes that shape their lives—specifically their usage of media and their practices of well-being. An early influence in the field of cultural studies was Raymond Williams, who emphasised the idea that 'culture is ordinary' (Williams 1989), meaning that culture could be found in the whole way of life of a people, the social meanings they create and circulate through their ordinary everyday interactions with other people and the forms of signs (e.g. paintings, fashion, language, music, etc.) they employ to communicate these meanings to one another.

Michel de Certeau (1984) further develops this idea by locating culture in the *practices* of everyday life—that is, he asserted that people *invent* everyday life (and hence culture) through the way they consume, appropriate, use or create resources in their environment. The ways in which people operate within the rules and structures set forth by societal institutions, in order to create their own paths through life, form a large part of the cultural constitution of everyday life. An example to illustrate this among international students could be the consumption of illegally downloaded ('pirated') movies and TV shows through the internet. The regular practice of consumption of these shows forms part of the everyday lives of these individuals, and if widespread, also forms part of the culture of the wider body of student, migrant, or diasporic communities.

What meanings can be ascribed to such a transitory practice? Is it merely an issue of having insufficient economic resources to purchase these shows legally, or does it represent a negotiation with broader cultural ideas about copyrights, politics, and the rule of law contrasted with the freedom and anonymity of the internet? Perhaps the users (as discovered in later chapters) are appropriating these shows for different reasons—to alleviate homesickness, to build family bonds through shared media experiences while being physically separated or even to learn English. The meanings that people create out of their digital media usage motivate this research project.

Given that I am studying how international students are using media in their everyday lives, I also draw upon Couldry's (2004) theory of media as a set of practices, rather than as texts or production structures. In the field of media studies, there are three broad paradigms for how 'media' can be studied: as texts, production structures, or practices. The study of media as texts focuses on how creators and consumers of media interpret, encode, or decode meaning in relation to particular media artefacts (such as a picture, song, published article, or TV show). This includes the fields of semiotic analysis that arose out of post-World War II literary theory,

research into media that came from postmodern symbolic anthropology, and critical research into media audiences. The study of media as production structures refers to the relationship between the institutional bodies that produce media and the wider society they exist within. This includes research from mass communications about the effects of media on society and societal institutions like democracy, as well as critical Marxist commentary on the relationships between media institutions and capitalism.

The study of media as practices refers to the things that people *do* or *say* in relation to media. This paradigm also embeds the relationship between media and culture firmly in observable practices and statements, rather than more intangible ideas or beliefs. It is with this relationship in mind that I observe the media practices of international students—what they *do with* or *say about* media technologies. Furthermore, these individual practices surrounding media constitute a significant part of the everyday life practices of my participants, which in turn constitutes the basic building blocks of culture.

This project is focused on the individualist perspective. Instead of taking the positivist approach of trying to find some generalised rule about a category of people—namely Southeast Asian international students—focus is instead directed towards the individual construction of well-being and the 'media-related practices' (Hobart 2010) that accompany it. The individual participants in this study are not meant to be representatives of the national or ethnic cultures that they originate from, which is a highly problematic assumption due to the premise that national, cultural, or ethnic identity may not be reduced to some essentialised quality in which a lone individual *could* represent adequately in entirety.

Rather, through the individual's negotiation of differing practices in their lives, we can see and identify the larger social and cultural trends that are considered relevant to that individual's construction of a good life. Thus, the contribution to knowledge of this dissertation is not about providing an answer to the question of whether media and well-being interact in positive or negative ways within the international student's life. Rather, the knowledge we gain from this study is *what factors are considered relevant and why*. What needs to be taken into consideration in future research work regarding Southeast Asian international students, media, and well-being or aspirations towards a better life?

Methodologically, I used a qualitative approach, drawing upon tools commonly used in the field of ethnography and cultural anthropology to conduct the research. This dissertation employed a combination of semi-structured group and individual interviews, photo diaries taken by the participants and participant observation. Although ethnographic approaches have rapidly become one of the more common methods used in media studies, the swift changes

brought about by the internet, social media, and mobile technologies have often left researchers searching for effective forms of ethnography for studying the communities that grow up around these technologies (Hine 2000; Hine 2008; Farnsworth & Austrin 2010). Coleman (2010) outlines three broad overlapping categories of approaches to ethnographic studies of digital media outside of the field of anthropology:

- the cultural politics of new media, which looks at how cultural identities and representations are constructed, subverted, and circulated through digital media;

- the vernacular cultures of new media, which explores the communication patterns and practices of groups or cultural phenomena that are entirely dependent on digital technologies to exist, such as hackers, bloggers, and internet memes;

- the prosaics of new media, which examine how digital media feeds into, reflects, and shapes other kinds of social practices, ranging from the economic to the religious.

It is this last category that this study is best situated within—that is, examining how digital media transforms and inflects the well-being practices of international students.

In their book *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*, Pink et al. (2015) highlight five guiding principles for engaging in ethnography among the digital: multiplicity, non-media-centricness, openness, reflexivity, and unorthodoxy. By multiplicity, they recognised that there are multiple ways to engage with the digital. Non-media-centricness highlights that it is important to recognise that media is inseparable from all the other activities that make up our daily lives and therefore cannot be studied in isolation. Openness refers to the unbounded and collaborative process of digital ethnography, where we make knowledge and ways of knowing alongside others rather than as isolated researchers. By reflexivity, they locate the practice of digital ethnography within the longstanding tradition of writing culture, in which the producers of knowledge must reflect on the subjective nature of their experiences, and the processes by which they encounter things, places, and people that enable knowledge production. Lastly, the principle of unorthodoxy recognises that the field is still nascent, and as such, digital ethnography often involves going beyond established norms and existing formal structures of research.

Pink et al. (2015) also developed seven conceptual categories or units of analysis through which digital media can be studied: as *experiences*, *practices*, *things, relationships, localities, social worlds,* and *events*. The categories that are particularly relevant to this dissertation are media as *practices* and media as *things*. The category of media as *practices* focuses on what people *do* with media and how those doings can reflect wider social norms,

contexts, and processes. This in turn ties into the performative aspects of media—to what extent is something (like 'a good life') made real through the *performance* of it (such as posting joyful pictures on social media), rather than the materiality of the objects that creates one's idea of a good life?

The category of media as *things* draws heavily on Silverstone and Hirsch's (1992) domestication approach, as well as the broader traditions of material culture, through which we can view media technologies as undergoing a process of appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion. Appropriation occurs when an object is brought in from the public space into the domestic spaces and daily rhythms of the household, turning from consumption of a commodity in a public space into a privately owned object that can be customised to suit the user (e.g. the purchase of a smartphone). Objectification and incorporation refer to the object's placement within the home in terms of aesthetics and functionality respectively—for example how the smartphone is decorated as an extension of oneself and how it is used to aid one's daily routines. Conversion is the process by which the technology mediates and articulates the relationship between the domestic private space and the public world outside—how the smartphone serves as a channel from the individual's private life to the outside world.

It is important to recognise at the outset that these categories of things and practices simultaneously interrupt and interweave with one another in the daily lives of the research participants. A smartphone may be a thing, an object, that is carried around by a person as they go about their daily lives and may represent meaning in and of itself in the domestic routines that the student has created. At the same time, it is also a part of multiple practices or routines through which the student constructs their daily life and participates in larger socio-cultural practices—serving as a means to communicate with home regularly, a scheduler, or alarm clock by which the student regulates their life, or the primary space where the student engages in entertainment and leisure practices consonant with their culture.

Physical and Technological Contexts of Research

In traditional anthropological or ethnographic research, the culture studied has usually been situated within a physical locality. However, Massey (1994) has argued that 'space' and 'place' are rapidly becoming decoupled in the age of globalisation. Instead of imagining 'place' as a physical location with fixed boundaries, 'place' can be better characterised in terms of social relationships—a network of shifting communities, identities, and ties that are constantly in flux

and continuously renegotiated. Therefore, the 'place' that my research participants inhabit is not bound and defined by a physical locality (i.e. 'international students in Melbourne'), but rather by the processes that connect them to meaningful components in their life—including mediated connections.

The life of an international student in Australia today is connected via mobile internet technologies to a wide range of locations and social spaces and seamlessly transitions between offline and online lives and processes. Pink (2009) argues that 'ethnographic places' in new media research are not defined by bounded locations but by collections of things that become intertwined, often through the efforts of the ethnographer themselves. This definition of place, as Postill and Pink (2012) argue, includes ethnographic study of both offline and online contexts and allows us to follow the relationships between both offline and online processes—something that is very important for social media environments.

This is also coherent with the theory of polymedia, as explained in the Introduction. The 'place' or site of study is not necessarily a physical location, but rather the navigation of individuals through the structure of social and emotional affordances offered by an integrated, convergent media environment. However, as mentioned earlier, polymedia has three prerequisites—access to, affordability of, and literacy in communicative media platforms.

Madianou (2014) makes a compelling case for smartphones acting as an integrated environment for polymedia, with affordances that allow the user to rapidly switch between different communications apps, connecting users to the wider media environment of the internet that they can navigate through and representing the 'always on' and 'taken for granted-ness' nature of the mobile phone. Also, smartphones are relatively cheap in Melbourne, with some of the cheaper models costing less than AU$99 for store-bought phones, going down to AU$50 or lower for second-hand phones. While there is a limitation on data, most higher education campuses and some public spaces (such as restaurants and libraries) offer free Wi-Fi, so access to internet is quick and easy.

The only constraint may be the media literacies of the international students and of the person they are communicating with. While all participants in this project owned a smartphone, they came from a variety of backgrounds, with differing levels of exposure to mobile phones and communicative technologies. Some only learned how to use smartphones after they arrived in Australia and have since become so dependent on these phones that they have difficulties when they go home for holidays. However, most of those who came from the far side of the digital divide were well-versed enough to have taught their parents—the primary communication partners—at least one or two communication platforms they could use with

relative ease. The specifics of the communication platforms used and the social reasoning behind them are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

While we are primarily concerned with the media and environment of affordances it offers rather than the physical space that students inhabit, we should also consider the socio-cultural milieu of international students who are semi-bounded to a particular physical locality such as Melbourne city. Melbourne is a cultural centre for Australia and is home to a vibrant multicultural community. As such, cultural diversity and awareness of cultural differences may be more well-defined here than many other places in Australia. At the same time, because of the focus on multiculturalism, there is sufficient community support for certain cultural practices (such as festivals) which have an impact on international student well-being by providing continuity with practices from their home countries.

Furthermore, Melbourne is the capital of Victoria, which brands itself as the 'education state', suggesting a greater emphasis here on student life and development. In fact, in the 2015–2016 state budget for Victoria over AUD$4 billion was allocated for education across the state. Melbourne is also home to 7 Australian universities and hosts campuses of another 5, totalling 12 out of 41 universities—just over one-third of all universities in Australia have a presence in Melbourne. Three of the universities—RMIT University, Monash University, and the University of Melbourne—have populations of more than 50,000 students each. Therefore, Melbourne is an ideal site to recruit international students from all walks of life, and I deliberately restricted myself to the international students in Melbourne in my sampling.

Picture Diaries and Power Relations

In my research methods, aside from interviews, I also incorporated picture diaries assembled by the participants. This process of using photographs as part of ethnographic methods has been gaining widespread acceptance since Collier's (1957) original usage of photos in his anthropological studies. In *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2013), Pink outlines several ways in which ethnographers incorporate photos and pictures into their research, ranging from using the role of 'photographer' to open doors into a new community, to interviewing informants with the help of photographs ('photo elicitation') and to giving the camera to research participants and asking them to take pictures themselves ('picture diaries'). Photo diaries have been used in a number of research projects, including studies of homeless people's lives (Radley, Hodgetts & Cullen 2005), women's experiences of chemotherapy (Frith & Harcourt 2007), and perceptions of quality of life among Italian-Australians (Goopy & Lloyd 2006). In

all these cases, research participants received cameras, and they shot photos that were significant/relevant to the goals of the study, and the photos served as both a reference point and focus for the conversation when the participants were interviewed later on.

My methodology differs from these previous studies in two ways. Firstly, the contemporary smartphones are ubiquitous—especially among international students—so I did not give them a camera to take pictures. I simply asked them to send the pictures to me via email. Secondly, while I did discuss the images during the interview, the primary way I asked them to talk about the photos was through written texts next to the photos they sent (for example, see Appendix 2). The reason was I believed that the act of writing out the meanings of the images they took produced more reflective thinking than in face-to-face conversation and provided an alternative communication method that non-native English speakers may be more comfortable with. Nevertheless, where anything in their written narrative was unclear or intriguing, I followed it up during the face-to-face interview.

I hoped to achieve two things with the picture diaries. By asking the participants to take pictures of the things they considered important and relevant to the study, and then write about what it meant to them, I hoped to place the power to control the narrative in the hands of the participant. As much of the research on international students has been from an organisational, objective (and *objectifying*) viewpoint, the power distribution has mainly rested upon the researchers. These methods could be accused of subscribing to the traditional 'masculine' and 'colonial' gaze, where an outside researcher objectively assesses and categorises a passive population from a different culture (especially those deemed as non-Western). However, as my study hoped to unveil the cultural nuances of the pursuit of well-being and media usage, it was important that the students themselves chose how to represent their life and media practices. Although to some extent the power of selection and explication of these diaries still rested in my hands as researcher, I believe that the power distribution was far more balanced.

Additionally, by giving participants the power to construct their own narratives about how they interact with media in their lives, they also became active agents in thinking about the role that media plays in their well-being. This, in turn, could lead to greater reflective depth when answering questions in the interview—especially if they encountered someone whose use of media may be very different from their own. It has also proven beneficial for the participants, as some have reported gaining more self-knowledge about how media affects them.

Researcher's Positionality

In this research, I positioned myself as a Southeast Asian international student, writing about people like myself, and the modern-day experiences of transnational media, migration, and aspiration. This insider's perspective is particularly useful and relevant to the study of these topics because of the high levels of cultural context needed to understand the complexities of the interrelated factors influencing Southeast Asian student perspectives. This is most notable in the understanding of how race and religion informs the national discourse, visions of modernity, everyday practices, and formulation of aspirations in the lives of students coming from multiethnic and multifaith societies such as Malaysia or Singapore. Furthermore, methodologically, being an insider allowed me a greater level of access to communities of international students and a presumption of shared experiences that helped my participants open up more readily about topics which they might have considered too sensitive to discuss with an outsider. At the same time, this does limit my perspective to primarily the Southeast Asian student context. I do acknowledge this limitation and would welcome future research from other perspectives or regions.

Research Process

The research process was divided into two parts, both of which included investigations using qualitative methods into the life practices and motivations of international students. In the first part, I conducted a pilot study using semi-structured interviews, in which I examined the relationship between the well-being of 19 international students in Melbourne and their usage of media technologies for play and leisure purposes.

In the second part, I refined the scope of the research and conducted a mixed-method ethnographic study of how Asian international students pursue well-being and how different kinds of media technologies help them attain well-being in their everyday lives. The data from both of these studies have been used to furnish the qualitative accounts reported within this dissertation. A more detailed description of each of the two parts follows:

Part One: Pilot Study into International Student Well-Being and Playful Technologies
This pilot study was conducted between September and December 2013. The pilot study was an exploratory one, seeking to discover the problems participants faced as international

students; positive and negative influences on their well-being; and impact of their usage of media technologies for playful or leisure purposes on their well-being. Students were recruited through advertisements on job websites frequented by international students (such as gumtree.com.au) as well as through convenience sampling and word-of-mouth recruitment. A total of 19 international students were interviewed, in focus groups of 2–3 people, and also individually. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 60 minutes.

At this point the pilot study had not yet narrowed down in scope to students from any particular region. Students came from a variety of countries including Colombia, Fiji, France, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mauritius, the Russian Federation, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. With regard to ethnicity, Colombians identified as Hispanic, Russian as East Slav, Sri Lankans as Sinhalese, French as Caucasian, Vietnamese as 'Buddhist' (possibly a misunderstanding of the question), and the rest were ethnic Chinese of various nationalities. One Malaysian self-identified his ethnicity as 'Malaysian' rather than ethnic Chinese, which could possibly be linked to his political views.

The questions asked in the interviews roughly fell into three topic areas:

- **Descriptions of life as an international student and the challenges faced**. For example: 'Can you describe what your first few weeks in Melbourne were like as an international student?' and 'What were some of the challenges you faced as an international student, and how did you deal with them?'

- **Connections to sources of well-being**. For example: 'What are some things, activities or experiences that bring you the most happiness or pleasure?' and 'How connected were you to sources of social support—friends or family that you could go to for help or advice—in your early days in Melbourne?'

- **Usage of media technologies for playful or leisure purposes**. For example: 'Can you describe any electronic gaming habits you have? Where, when and how do you play?' and 'What role did new media technologies—such as mobile phones, the internet, or electronic games—play in your well-being?'

The results of this pilot study, while informative in their own right, also underscored many prospective questions that were outside the scope of the pilot study as formulated, and the complexity and multifactorial nature of the relationship between well-being and use of media technologies for different purposes (including play). The biggest insights from this study were that cultural backgrounds of the students shaped their ideas about well-being as well as

usage of media technologies. Interviewees were confused about what 'well-being' meant, and many of them provided their own definitions, which they ascribed to the cultural and social contexts of their home countries or in relation to their life aspirations and goals. For example, a number of students from religious families cited their spiritual activities and communities as core to their well-being and social support. Others cited 'culture shock' as one of the biggest challenges they had to overcome as an international student and compared the cultural differences between their home countries and Australia. This had an indirect impact on their usage of play media for well-being, as some acknowledged turning to games and social media for comfort, solace, or escape during the cultural adjustment process. Furthermore, friends and family also figured in their media usage, cautioning or encouraging specific types of engagement with media.

It was clear that studying play practices alone was insufficient to capture the scope of the interrelated nature of well-being among international students. It also became apparent that students had diverse ideas of what 'a good life' meant, and this needed further investigation. Therefore, to examine the relationship between culturally influenced ideas of well-being and usage of media technologies among international students in greater detail, a second study was formulated, with specific questions asking them to define and explain how they thought of 'the good life' or 'well-being'.

Part Two: An in-depth qualitative study into Asian International Student Well-Being and Media

In the second study I attempted to create a broad qualitative account of how Asian international students would interact with media according to culturally specific ideas and practices of well-being. Here I was interested in answering three interrelated questions: (1) 'What do international students from different cultures consider important for their well-being?' (2) 'How is media being incorporated into their pursuit of well-being?' (3) 'How do their cultural backgrounds or aspirations influence the way they use media?' The questions asked in this interview fell into three related categories:

- **Descriptions of aspirations and journey as an international student:** For example: 'How did your life's journey lead you to becoming an international student in Melbourne?' 'What do you hope to get out of your time here as an international student?' 'What are some challenges you faced throughout your time as an international student, and how did you deal with them?'

- **Concepts about well-being and how they were formed:** 'What does well-being mean to you personally?' 'Can you describe what it means to you to 'have a good life'? What does it include?' 'How do you think your life experiences, travels, or media you consume have influenced your ideas about a good life?' and 'Are there things which other people might include in their definition of a good life that you personally don't agree with or think is important?'

- **Practices of well-being and their relationship with media:** 'Can you describe some ways in which you are pursuing your own well-being or a better life for yourself?' 'What role do media technologies play in your pursuit of well-being or a better life?' 'Are there examples of how media technologies have negatively affected your well-being? How do you deal with those situations?'

This second study involved recruiting 20 participants through snowball sampling and recruitment advertisements on job websites. All were international students of a tertiary institution in Australia (mainly Melbourne) and had been in Australia for at least six months. The six-month limit allowed for sufficient time to settle down and gain enough first-hand experience of the cultural environment here in Australia, and thus being able to make useful comparisons to their home countries and cultures. I focused on recruiting students who came from countries in Asia because the majority of tertiary-level students in Australia are from this region and a limited geographic scope allowed for more participants.

Data were collected through two methods: picture diaries and group interviews. I asked each study participant to document their media usage in their everyday life through at least 10 images with accompanying descriptions. By asking them to take pictures of where, when, and how they use media (and especially when it has an impact on their well-being), I hoped to understand more about the situated use of media in their lives and the extent to which their cultural backgrounds shaped their usage of media. 'Media' included both digital media technologies, and to a lesser extent, any print and tangible media that they interacted with. Examples of pictures I asked them to take included

- their computer wallpaper backgrounds and screensavers;
- arrangements of their favourite apps on their mobile phones;
- the locations where they regularly placed their laptops or phones;
- frequently accessed websites and apps; and

- any decorative media that reflected their interests or well-being, such as motivational posters or pictures on their bedroom walls, stickers on phones, or toy figurines of characters from favourite games/shows.

(See Appendix 2 for an example picture diary)

After receiving the picture diaries, I interviewed the students either individually or in pairs, for roughly 1.5–2 hours. Through the interviews I attempted to understand how international students from different cultures think about 'well-being' and how they described their pursuit of it in their everyday lives (see Appendix 1). I queried them about how they pursue well-being through different activities and how their usage of media technologies played a role in their pursuit. In the interviews, I also asked them to talk about some of the pictures that they had taken and what these 'media-related practices of well-being' meant to them.

Unfortunately, closer to the end of the data collection period, I lost my mobile phone and consequently audio records of eight interviewees. Therefore, a situation arose where I had 18 picture diaries but audio records of only 10 people. To compensate for that loss, I conducted a few follow-up interviews over email and phone among the participants whose audio records were lost. Rather than re-creating the interviews, I used the opportunity to ask them in-depth questions on specific points of interest they had brought up in their earlier sessions and on their own picture diaries. I also extended the data collection period and interviewed more students to reach the desired total of 20 participants in the sample. Overall, a total of 20 students were interviewed and 28 picture diaries were collected for the second study. Participants came from Bangladesh, Brunei, China (including Hong Kong), India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Mongolia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

In the first pilot study, eight students who were interviewed came from countries in Asia. Together with the 28 students in the second study, a total of 36 students were from Asian countries. Of these 36 students, 5 were from Northeast Asia (China, Mongolia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong), 7 were from South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), and the remaining 23 were from Southeast Asia, with Singapore especially being over-represented. Unfortunately, this was perceived as a weakness in the sampling method used—snowball sampling and recruitment through English-language advertisements. Of all the nationalities in this sample, Singaporeans were by far the most articulate in English and therefore volunteered readily to be interviewed in that language. Also, my initial network of social contacts were primarily with Singaporean and Malaysian international student networks, which led to a bias in the snowball

sampling methods, as the initial Singaporeans and Malaysians I interviewed tended to recommend fellow nationals for the study. While I did request students from other nationalities to recommend their fellow countrymen for the study, I was not very successful.

Even within the Singaporean sample students belonged to all three major ethnic groups in Singapore—Chinese, Malay, and Indian. Therefore, moderate diversity in the viewpoints and cultural backgrounds of the participants was observed. Specifically, the Malay-Singaporean and Indian-Singaporean students went from being ethnic minorities in their home country to being 'Asian' or 'Singaporean' minorities in Australia, which yielded interesting insights on the nature of minority identity and aspirations in different contexts. To some extent though this skewed distribution does not matter as this study did not aim for representation of any particular essentialist traits or national context, but rather focused more on the individual and personal stories of the participants. The national and cultural backgrounds of these students served as a lens through which we could understand the individual's personal construction of ideas and practices around media and well-being and not vice versa.

As the cohort of Southeast Asian students has been relatively overlooked in the literature, my fieldwork covered this group quite prominently to address this gap. Thus, the sample used for this dissertation was narrowed down further to include only students from the Southeast Asian region. This enabled in-depth discussions of the regional and socio-cultural context of the milieu in which these students grew up and the factors they considered in their aspirations. Figure 1.3 shows the breakdown of nationalities in the sample:

Nationality	n	Gender	Age range	Education Level	Data collected
Malaysia	5	2M, 3F	20–24	2 Master's, 3 Bachelor's	5 Picture Diaries, 5 interviews
Singapore	10	4M, 6F	18–25	2 Master's, 7 Bachelor's, 1 Foundation Year	10 Picture Diaries, 7 interviews
Vietnam	2	2M	21, 27	1 Master's, 1 Bachelor's	2 Picture Diaries, 2 interviews
Indonesia	4	3M, 1F	18–24	1 Master's, 3 Bachelor's	4 Picture Diaries, 3 interviews
Myanmar	1	1F	21	1 Bachelor's	1 Picture Diary, interview
Brunei Darussalam	1	1F	18	1 Foundation Year	1 Picture Diary, notes from interview
TOTAL	23	11M, 12F	18–27	6 Master's, 15 Bachelor's, 2 Foundation Year	23 Picture Diaries, 18 interviews,

Figure 1.3. Breakdown of nationalities of participants

The data were collated, transcribed, coded, and analysed for common themes and patterns and formed the material for discussion in the remaining chapters. Each chapter of this dissertation focuses on one aspect of student well-being, such as home and family or play and leisure and shows examples of how students from different cultures use media in culturally nuanced ways to pursue well-being in these areas. Relevant theories will be introduced as appropriate throughout this dissertation to explain how those aspects of well-being interact with media and culture. The next chapters will focus on the role of culture and aspirations in the conceptualisation of international student well-being and ideas of a good life.

Chapter 2
Contested Cultural Ideas of Well-Being

In this chapter, I argue that ideas of what constitutes 'well-being' differ according to the discipline of study and culture. I first begin with an overview of the relevant literature around well-being, before narrowing down to the definition that I would be using in this dissertation—namely, the concept of 'a good life'. However, the elements that constitute 'a good life' are culturally bounded by the students' backgrounds and past experiences in their home countries. Thus, every individual had a slightly different definition of a good life and enacted the pursuit of that life through their everyday experiences.

In the second half of the chapter, I detail my participants' definitions of 'a good life'—illustrating the contested and ambiguous nature of the concept. I then discuss how these contested definitions of 'a good life' and 'well-being' reflect complex and dynamic transmedia flows in the Southeast Asian region and how those flows are magnified when explored from the perspective of an international student.

Different Conceptualisations of Well-Being and 'A Good Life'

One of the challenges of studying international student well-being is that 'well-being' is a contested term that can be approached from many different perspectives. In psychology, the dominant paradigms for understanding 'well-being' have been the *hedonic* approach, which looks at net happiness (affect balance) and life satisfaction, or the *eudaimonic* approach, which construes well-being as a measurement of one's growth and goals (Ryan & Deci 2001; Diener 2009). Among health, medical, and social work researchers, 'well-being' has been linked to health-related quality-of-life measurements (Unterrainer, Lewis & Fink 2011; Levi & Drotar 2014), 'resilience' (the ability to adapt successfully to adversity) (Waaktaar et al. 2004; Zautra, Hall & Murray 2014), and other stress-based or resource-based paradigms, such as 'salutogenesis' (the development of health rather than the curing of disease) (Antonovsky 1979; Eriksson 2014).

Within economics, public policy, and developmental studies, 'well-being' is linked to welfare and quality of life and measured through objective material indicators, such as income and access to resources such as food, water, and education (Nussbaum & Sen 1993; Diener & Suh 1997; Camfield 2014). However, this dissertation will largely focus on the concept of

'well-being' as 'the good life', which is more commonly adopted in philosophy, anthropology, and cultural studies (Sen 1993; Appadurai 2013).

A complicating factor in determining the concept of well-being is the role that cultural environment plays in shaping it. Empirical researchers find differences in the way well-being is measured and defined among people from different cultures. Within psychological research, cultural approaches to subjective well-being suggest that there are cultural factors that don't just co-vary with well-being, but these factors actually have a causal or determining influence (Diener & Lucas 2000).

Most cultural approaches have focused on exploring differences between cultures along the individualistic versus collectivistic dimension (Diener 2009; Pflug 2009; Kobayashi, Kerbo & Sharp 2010). For example, Suh et al. (1998) found that when measuring well-being, emotions and affect had a larger impact on judgments of life satisfaction among people from individualistic cultures than collectivistic ones. For people from collectivist societies, both emotions and social norms (i.e. what other people think you should be doing) were equally weighted for life satisfaction.

In a similar vein, Tafarodi et al. (2012) conducted a comparative study among university students from four different nations—Canada, China, India, and Japan—to identify cultural differences in how these four populations constructed the notion of 'a good life'. They asked students to describe what they and others of their nationality would think of when describing a 'worthy' (made synonymous with 'good', 'successful', and 'meaningful') life. The aggregated results showed a list of 30 indicators that students attributed to 'a good life'. Sorted according to the top 10 indicators for each country, the results are shown in Figure 2.1. The list demonstrates that there is a growing convergence of factors among students of different nationalities (with only 30 indicators sufficient to capture the whole variety of open-ended responses from over 400 students), but the rankings of these factors still differ significantly according to culture. Most notably, the Chinese notions of a good life were heavily oriented towards family success and community participation, the Japanese weighed materialistic possessions and enjoyable hobbies relatively higher than the other nationalities, and the Indians had a strong emphasis on maintaining good relationships with family members.

Table 2 Ten most prevalent indicator categories by nationality

Canadian	
1. Having had a positive impact on others or having made the world a better place	46 (20)
2. Having had a good, loving marriage or romantic partnership	36 (42)
3. Having had lots of fun and other pleasurable experiences	34 (39)
4. A lot of wealth or assets	32 (64)
5. Having lived a moral life according to my personal principles	31 (15)
6. Having had close and enduring friendships	31 (38)
7. Having a happy and healthy family	30 (49)
8. Having achieved great things	28 (27)
9. Having gained wisdom	28 (19)
10. Good relationships with family members	28 (14)
Chinese	
1. Having a happy and healthy family	70 (71)
2. Having had close and enduring friendships	49 (52)
3. Having had a successful career	49 (57)
4. Having had a good, loving marriage or romantic partnership	40 (42)
5. Well-being and contentment	39 (44)
6. Having had a lot of involvement in my community	31 (20)
7. Having lived a moral life according to my personal principles	24 (11)
8. Having achieved great things	24 (31)
9. Having taken full advantage of opportunities and lived up to my personal potential	23 (14)
10. A lot of wealth or assets	17 (38)
Indian	
1. Having had a positive impact on others or having made the world a better place	48 (22)
2. Good relationships with family members	42 (20)
3. Well-being and contentment	40 (34)
4. Having had a successful career	35 (51)
5. Having lived a moral life according to my personal principles	33 (22)
6. Having had a good, loving marriage or romantic partnership	30 (39)
7. Having achieved great things	30 (31)
8. A lot of wealth or assets	29 (58)
9. Having had close and enduring friendships	25 (38)
10. Having travelled the world	20 (07)
Japanese	
1. Having had close and enduring friendships	54 (62)
2. A lot of wealth or assets	48 (68)
3. Having had lots of fun and other pleasurable experiences	43 (43)
4. Having gained wisdom	39 (31)
5. Having a happy and healthy family	35 (45)
6. Having taken full advantage of opportunities and lived up to my personal potential	33 (22)
7. Having achieved great things	29 (35)
8. Having had a positive impact on others or having made the world a better place	29 (19)
9. Well-being and contentment	28 (29)
10. Having had a good, loving marriage or romantic partnership	24 (25)

Column values represent percentage of national sample with one or more responses in the indicator category.
Values in parentheses represent corresponding percentage in the average peer condition

Figure 2.1. Top 10 indicators of a good life, by nationality (Source: Tafarodi et al. 2012)

However, a criticism of the studies cited above, which are located within the psychological well-being research paradigm, is that their view of 'culture' tends to be essentialist and monocultural—reducing a society to a single defining set of traits that represents all the people within that culture, such as the individualistic versus collectivistic duality. When discussing the relationship between culture and subjective well-being or happiness, Hommerich and Klien (2012) point out that this research is highly contested because of the differing definitions of 'culture' among the disciplines.

While psychologists and sociologists tend to think of culture as 'a shared system of values' and thus look for patterns or commonalities with values in cross-cultural research, anthropologists and ethnographers see culture not just to be 'a way of life of a people' that occurs naturally but rather as something that is constructed out of an array of choices. Instead of looking for patterns that stretch across cultures, anthropologists argue that each culture is unique and has its own original construction of well-being that must be understood within that specific cultural context.

Some anthropologists and ethnographers have pointed out that culture influences the manner in which well-being is *defined* (and not just measured). Montgomery (2013) showed in an ethnographic study of Central Asian cultures how notions of well-being can emerge from culture, pointing out that the people there understood well-being not as 'happiness' but as 'contentedness'. This frames against the positive psychological emphasis on happiness maximisation, although it makes perfect sense for people living under difficult conditions in Central Asia. Other researchers are starting to explore how different cultures understand what 'happiness' (Pflug 2009) and 'goodness' of life (Smith, Smith & Christopher 2007) mean, according to the laypeople of that country.

In his book on 'the good life', Fischer (2014) highlights three subjective components that arose out of his ethnographic research among middle-class urban shoppers in Germany and lower-income farmers in Guatemala. Fischer's model of well-being highlights the central importance of aspiration (desire for a better future) and agency (ability to act to bring about that better future). He points out that most economists have focused on objective *material* aspects of well-being—such as health and physical security, material resources, and opportunity structures—but have neglected to deal with the subjective aspects of well-being. Fischer then outlines three concepts which are important in the construction of well-being across the two cultural groups: (1) family and social relations; (2) fairness and dignity; and (3) commitment to a larger purpose or project.

In this dissertation, 'well-being' is most often referred to as 'a good life'. This may seem a little vague as a definition, but I still use it anyway for two reasons; firstly, because by being ambiguous, I leave the interpretation of 'well-being' open to my participants to define and co-design however they wish. It highlights well-being as a space for ambiguity and contestation. It is that very definition, and the processes by which they arrive at that definition, that I am interested in studying to understand how culture influences ideas about well-being.

Secondly, the notion of 'a good life' has been used fairly often in popular media, which helps participants recall instances where media or culture have shaped their ideas about 'a good life' and is more easily relatable term to the average layperson rather than the slightly more technical 'well-being'. It also carries connotations of a moral dimension ('good' as 'righteous' as well as 'satisfying') that may bring out notions of altruism, spirituality, and social responsibility—all of which are important aspects of thought to capture about the generation of millennials. Furthermore, the twin connotations of 'satisfying' as well as 'morally right' cover both *hedonic* and *eudaimonic* perspectives. Lastly, 'a good life' adds the idea that it is a goal that everyone should aspire to, and this notion of aspiration towards a good life is important.

I interviewed participants about what constituted well-being or a good life for them—allowing them to co-design their definition subject to their own cultural background and experiences. Out of the 23 Southeast Asian students in the sample for this dissertation, only 8 students were involved in Part 2 of the study and were formally asked to give their definitions of 'well-being' and 'a good life'. Figure 2.2 shows a summary of their answers:

Participant Details (Name*, Age, Country, Ethnic Group, Major, Study duration)	Definition of Well-Being	Definition of A Good Life
Keith (27, Vietnam, Vietnamese, Computer Science, five years as an international student)	You can support yourself. You live independently.	Have a house, a family, and kids. You have enough. You can eat well, support your family. You can buy your kid good education. You can play in a good environment—not much crime in the neighbourhood.
Paula (18, Singapore, Indian, Foundation Year, one year as an international student)	Being well fed. Being happy. Not having panic attacks and hallucinations. Having a secure roof over your head. Not being bullied. Security in knowing bills have been paid. Having my own space to sleep.	Want to be like my English teacher: comfortable with who she is, authentic and funny. To reach a place in life where you are just content with your life, your family, friends, and job. She is content enough to share of herself with friends and family.

Samuel (22, Singapore, Malay, Physiotherapy / Health Science, eight months as an international student)	Health, emotional well-being, social well-being, spiritual (religion) for some people.	Good work-life balance. Minimal stress. Confidence you have a roof over your head. Financial stability to a certain extent.
Kristy (24, Malaysia, Chinese, Accounting, five years as an international student)	If my family can stay in Melbourne with me. Find a stable job. Graduate so that I don't waste parents' money. Having friends and good food to eat.	No need to work every day, and can travel around the world. No financial strain. Have family stay with me and don't live apart. Relationships—maybe in future. Right now, independence.
Yohann (21, Malaysia, Chinese, Architecture, six years as an international student)	Freedom of choice to be alternative, freedom of speech to demonstrate in public. Less racial and religious sensitivities and censorship. Open-minded society.	Freedom, being able to choose your own course in life. Good facilities and advanced technologies to make tasks easier and more convenient. Good education for kids. Relationships make you happy. Culture in a society, accepting of other races.
Simon (21, Indonesia, Chinese, Philosophy, two years as an international student)	Indonesia is more absolutist. Fundamentalist thinking, while here no one cares and simply accepts all sorts of thinking. Here it is very liberal. Indonesia is quite conservative. Also, traffic is scarier there.	No inner contradictions, inner harmony. Relationships help you focus on the real world. Religious faith, richness in your inner life.
Adam (22, Indonesia, Asian, Publishing and Communications, four years as an international student)	Having enough food and shelter, having enough to go on day-to-day financially. Living happy and healthy. Happiness is time alone, as an introvert—music, internet games, books, and a small close group of friends. Family not that close.	Closely related to well-being. Having enough to go on day by day. Just be happy and healthy.
Janet (21, Myanmar, Burmese-Chinese, Construction, one year as an international student)	Health, even though I don't eat healthily. Emotional and mental well-being—being content and not depressed, even if you're not happy. Don't do things if you don't feel like it. Going to gym and exercising. Self-improvement. Emotional well-being includes going with friends to eat out, shutting alone in my room to watch TV, online shopping. Avoiding situations and people that are negative.	Dependent on age: - Now: financially independent, well-off.- In 20s: family, my own house, stable with no worries, successful job. - Retired: grandchildren, kids, bake for them. Live in a quiet suburb, have own garden, car. Family living close-by.

Figure 2.2. Indicators of 'Well-Being' and 'A Good Life' by Southeast Asian students 2014–2015.

* All names used are pseudonyms

There are a few common patterns of thought in these definitions. Firstly, the importance of family is strong—both in terms of dealing with current family members and their desire for a better life for their children in the future. These are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. Secondly, their social environment and relationship with larger community figures prominently in many of the participants' definitions of well-being and a good life, ranging from Keith's dreams of a low-crime neighbourhood, to Yohann's desire for less racial and religious sensitivities, Paula's hope to not be bullied and have a space to sleep, Samuel's desire for good work-life balance, and Simon's contrast between the conservatism of his home country and the

liberality of Australia. This relationship to country and community is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

And finally, leisure activities, a work-life balance, and the maintenance of positive mood states are mentioned quite often in their definitions of well-being. This is covered in more detail in Chapter 6. Although these broad categories do not encompass the entire international student experience of well-being, this is not the intention. The categories do, however, reflect the vast majority of their discourse about well-being and 'a good life', based on the data collected from participant interviews and picture diaries. Thus, each of the empirical chapters later in this dissertation will focus on one of those aspects.

As these students form definitions and aspirations, much of these emergent desires and conceptualisations of 'the good life' are shaped and informed by past experiences in their home countries and the cultural environs they grew up in. In the next section, I explore the socio-cultural contexts that shape Southeast Asian international students' ideas about well-being.

International Student Well-Being: A Southeast Asian Perspective

International student well-being is a topic that has been quite widely researched—both globally (King & Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Yeh & Inose 2003; Gu, Schweisfurth & Day 2009; Iwamoto & Liu 2010; Kobayashi, Kerbo & Sharp 2010; Miller et al. 2011; Rienties & Nolan 2014) and with regard to Australian education (Burns 1991; Quintrell & Westwood 1994; Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock 1995; Ramburuth & McCormick 2001; Hjorth 2007; Khawaja & Dempsey 2008; Tran 2009; Tran 2011; Kell & Vogl 2012). However, paralleling the rise of social media, the focus of research on international students has been changing.

Earlier research on international student well-being at the turn of the century had primarily concentrated on the socio-cultural adjustment issues that students faced in transitioning from their home countries to Australia, and ways in which these problems could be overcome. These adjustment problems included language difficulties with the speed and slang of Australian speech (Burns 1991; Kell & Vogl 2012), balancing their studies with part-time jobs for meeting expenses (Burns 1991; Mori 2000), lacking common ground for forming social ties with local Australian students (Yeh & Inose 2003; Gomes 2015), and having to adjust to a different pedagogical style (Burns 1991; Tran 2009).

When trying to cope with these adjustment issues, Russell, Rosenthal, and Thomson (2010) found about two-fifths (41.2%) of international students had negative patterns of adaptation—feeling disconnected to or distressed by the host country. Khawaja and Dempsey

(2008) also pointed out that in comparison to local students, international students had less social support and used coping strategies that focused more on avoidance and repression rather than active problem-solving. Mori (2000) also showed that counselling and other official mental health services were underutilised by international students for various reasons, including differing cultural perceptions of the consequences of seeking aid for psychological distress, as well as misconceptions about what counsellors actually do. Rather, they tended to rely on friendship and kin networks for social support and help or advice (Yeh & Inose 2003; Menzies & Baron 2014; Rienties & Nolan 2014).

More recently, however, there has been a gradual turn in the study of international students towards transnationalism and transnational meaning-making. Rather than conceptualising international students as coming *from* one socio-cultural context and then being transplanted *into* a different context and having to adjust to it, the ubiquity and pervasiveness of transnational media means that international students are inhabiting and negotiating both contexts simultaneously. Notions of 'place' and 'home' become fragmented and syncretic (Martin & Rizvi 2014), students negotiate statuses of being both 'home' and 'away' (Hjorth 2007; Hjorth & Arnold 2012), and they balance their existing social ties that can be carried forward through digital media while adapting to new social relationships formed in the host country (Gomes & Alzougool 2013; Gomes et al. 2014). At the same time, transnational education programs and strategies (Huang 2007; Wilkins & Huisman 2012) have been growing, enabling even more cross-border and globalised experiences of education, and further complicating what it means to be 'an international student'.

This transnationalism, facilitated by the spread of globally networked digital media, also has consequences for international student well-being. As the introduction's opening vignette for this dissertation which I continue to argue here, contemporary experience of international student well-being is one of contesting images and representations of 'the good life', where the individual student must formulate a path based on self-chosen goals and appropriation of available resources. This contestation plays out on multiple fronts simultaneously—it happens through the students' consumption of media flows from various nations and through the everyday life practices engaged within the disparate socio-cultural contexts they inhabit both online and offline. It also occurs within internal processes as they forge an identity for themselves and decide what is important.

This transnational determination of well-being is complicated by both the Southeast Asian student context and the Australian context. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the nations of Southeast Asia have largely been positioned as consumers of the media products

from the Asian nations surrounding them, such as anime or manga from Japan, and dramas, music, and films from Korea, China, and India (Chua 2004; Chua & Iwabuchi 2008; Martin, Lewis & Sinclair 2013; Lewis, Martin & Sun 2016). These media flows are in contestation with the cultural flows from other 'Western' regions such as Anglo-American TV shows and films, Latin American *telenovelas* (soap operas) that are popular in the Philippines and Indonesia, or even locally produced media that attempts to chart the nation's own story in the midst of such cultural complexity (Kim 2008; Nilan 2006; Martin, Lewis & Sinclair 2013). Thus, unlike students from countries such as Korea, China, or India that have strong national cultural industries that put forth competing visions of Asian modernity and cosmopolitanism to counteract the global dominance of 'Western' Anglo-American media, students from Southeast Asia have to appropriate from the competing voices of other nations to formulate their own identity and ideas of modernity and progress (Nilan 2006; Kim 2008).

The second context is that of Australia's place in this contested space for transnational meaning-making. Gomes and Alzougool (2014) found that very few international students from Asia actually consumed any Australian-made entertainment media, even while living in Australia. This was partially due to the difficulty of understanding Australian accents and slang, as well as the prevalence and conflation of American shows with Australian TV programming. Those who did consume Australian media primarily did so for instrumental purposes—they wanted to understand more about Australian culture. In the Asian international student's social imaginary, 'Australian media' and 'Australian people' merge with more general ideas of white Anglo-American 'Western' culture. And yet, because of Australia's obvious geographic proximity to Asia, much of Australia's media influences (Japanese *anime*), lifestyle (stir-fry cooking), and general population originate from Asia. While expecting Australia to align more with 'the West', many students found themselves in socio-cultural contexts that highlighted how Australian society itself struggles with multiculturalism, as Eric attested:

Excerpt 2.1 Interview with Eric, male Singaporean-Chinese undergraduate, Architecture

Eric*: Um… I think the culture shock was like, from our own culture more than anything. Like, I came, touched down expecting like… to be seeing whites everywhere. What I found was people from Mainland China in the city. [laugh] Everywhere I stand in the train, I got shocked, like 'How come got Mainland Chinese people here?' Uh… the other culture shock was um, you think they're Mainland Chinese and then all of a sudden, they have an Aussie accent. So, like, really fascinated with how the*

country itself has so many different races who are Australians as well. Quite interesting. I mean, in Singapore I thought it was quite multicultural with four races but like, in here it's like, even more.

What Eric's story illustrates is a student's reflexivity about his expectations of a cosmopolitan, multicultural society—how that was supposed to play out in a 'Western' country like Australia and then how his expectations were subverted not just once but twice. This reflexivity about everyday events and practices is a key part of contemporary theories about reflexive modernity, in which the individual manages one's existence in an increasingly 'post-traditional society' (Giddens 1994), where sources of meaning (such as gender, ethnicity, religion, class, etc.) become less certain and fixed. Insofar as well-being involves the creation of a meaningful place for oneself in the world, students must engage in a reflexive process.

However, Nilan (2006) points out that the reflexive process of young people from Southeast Asia differs markedly from the prevailing Western conceptualisation of the 'freely-choosing, isolated individual' (Nilan 2006, p. 117). Instead, she suggests that young people from Southeast Asia have a much more collective praxis approach, in which the determination and working out of the self does not arise from private reflective thinking but through constant communication and feedback with friends, family, and community. Among Southeast Asian students, the working out of who they want to be and what constitutes 'a good life' for them does not happen out of an individual's personal responsibility for their own life choices or actions, but rather as a result of multiple collaborative meaning-making dialogues with friends, families, and peer-based social networks. Unlike previous decades where the international student was more likely to be cut off from social ties due to geographical distance and relative slowness of the feedback loop, new social media platforms enable the collective reflexive process to continue through transnational digital channels.

In summary, the conceptualisation of Southeast Asian international students' well-being is no longer simply about socio-cultural adjustment to a new environment and coping problems. Instead, in an age of ubiquitous transnational media, it becomes more about dealing with contesting transnational inputs about what 'a good life' means and how to negotiate the balance between inhabiting several online and offline spaces simultaneously. As these Southeast Asian students undergo a reflexive process to figure out what holds meaning in life for them, they are in constant collaborative dialogue with friends, family, and community members, facilitated by social media and other ICT channels across national borders. By examining their media practices, we gain insights into their collaborative reflexive processes by which they define and pursue their ideas of 'a good life' amidst all the various competing definitions.

Chapter 3
Contested Ideas of Aspirations and Well-Being

In Chapter 2, I discussed how ideas of well-being and the good life are influenced by cultural contexts and transnational meaning-making practices. In this chapter, I focus on the role of aspiration in the pursuit of well-being and 'a good life' and how this relates to the specific experiences of Southeast Asian students in Australia.

The Capacity to Aspire to a Good Life and the Capabilities to Live It

So far, most of the literature involving aspiration and well-being has come from the fields of economics and developmental studies, suggesting these disciplines are very interested in how people act to achieve goals in life to better their situation. Recent innovations in theory have centred on the works of two notable scholars—anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's linkage of culture to aspiration through the 'capacity to aspire' and welfare economist Amartya Sen's capability approach.

In his book *The Future as Cultural Fact,* Appadurai (2013) has noted a tendency in many anthropological and developmental studies to view 'culture' as a thing primarily concerned with the past; habits, heritage, traditions, and so on, which usually stand in opposition to the future-oriented concept of 'development', such as plans, goals, hopes and fears. However, Appadurai goes on to suggest that one aspect of culture that is often neglected in anthropology is the capacity to aspire. Aspirations are not just formed from within an individual but arise out of the cultural contexts in which that person exists. What they dream of becoming and what they hope to achieve is partly influenced by the consensus in society on what is deemed worthwhile to achieve and what the individual perceives as the opportunities society offers. This capacity to aspire is considered as a navigational tool that helps one envision the goals they want to achieve in life and plot out a pathway to achieving that goal.

However, Appadurai also points out that the capacity to aspire is not evenly distributed throughout society—the richer and more powerful you are, the more conscious you are of the link between immediate objects of aspiration and future goals. The more exposed one is to the wider world, the more one can see how their immediate goals can lead to better futures in the long run. The more one engages in the practice of planning pathways of aspiration, the more paths can be seen. The less privileged one is, the fewer paths one sees. Globalisation has

afforded the disadvantaged some new resources for aspiration, in the form of imagined worlds brought to them through the globalised media network. This, according to Appadurai (2013), was important in strengthening the *capacity to aspire,* by providing the resources necessary to fuel imaginings of a better future. Appadurai's idea for international students implies that those who have been more exposed to an international education, broader mobility, and more diverse media resources are better positioned to visualise the relationship between their personal goals and the wider society they live in. They would also have future aspirations that are larger in scope and would consider more options when pursuing paths to success.

While Appadurai focuses on the larger implications of culture and aspirations in society as a whole, Amartya Sen outlines a 'capabilities' approach when discussing the individual's pursuit of well-being. In his paper on Capabilities and Well-Being, Sen offers a definition of capabilities in terms of what he defines as 'functionings':

> *Functionings* represent parts of the state of a person—in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. The capability of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection…. The approach is based on a view of living as a combination of various "doings and beings", with quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings…. Some functionings are very elementary, such as being adequately nourished, being in good health, etc., and these may be strongly valued by all, for obvious reasons. Others may be more complex, but still widely valued, such as achieving self-respect or being socially integrated. Individuals may, however, differ a good deal from each other in the weights they attach to these different functionings—valuable though they may all be—and the assessment of individual and social advantages must be alive to these variations. (Sen 1993, p. 31)

The capability of a person is defined as the total range of 'functionings' that they can achieve or be, from which they choose one particular combination of 'functionings' to be active in their life. When applying the capabilities approach to well-being, Sen noted that 'well-being' comprises many different functionings. These occur across a variety of areas including the individual's own version of the construct of 'well-being' or 'a good life' or the differing weight of the functionings (for example, one may prioritise 'getting a university degree' over 'having a large group of friends'). Sen's approach to well-being is one in which the individual

determines which functionings are important to their personal concept of 'well-being', and then chooses or works towards gaining the capability to have those functionings active in their life.

Sen's approach is particularly useful when examining the relationship between media and well-being. Media technologies massively expand upon the set of capabilities that a person can have. For example, consider the capability of 'communicating with family members in a different country'. Media technologies not only increase the range of choices to fulfil that particular functioning, where phone calls and snail mail letters become mobile text messages, social media updates, video chat, emails, and so on, they also actively transmit knowledge through the mediated process of information dissemination. The information and communication affordances of new media technologies serve to expand the capability of international students in communicating with family members overseas. However, it must be said that these are just capabilities—*potential* functionings, if you will—and the specific form of 'communicating with family members in a different country' are still determined by the student.

Sen distinguished between four interrelated but distinct notions when applying capabilities to well-being (Sen 1993, p. 35):

1. *well-being achievement*, which are those functionings in the person's life that are actively contributing towards the person's well-being or quality of life;

2. *well-being freedom*, which is whether or not the person is freely able to choose to have those well-being functionings active in their life or not;

3. *agency achievement*, which are those functionings which are active in the person's life that are not related to well-being, but which are related to some goals determined by the person themselves as a free agent;

4. *agency freedom*, which is whether or not the person has the freedom to choose to have those functionings related to their agency goals active or not.

Too often, when we consider well-being, we often think only of the first category— well-being achievements. In other words, what the person already has functioning in their lives contributes to their well-being; alternatively the absence of those functioning from the lives of people is considered 'not well'. However, a more holistic view of well-being would also consider the freedom to choose potential alternatives to the currently selected functioning. The person who has the *capability* to achieve a particular functioning but chooses not to, may still

be better off than a person who does not even have the capability to achieve that functioning. Consider the case of 'being well-nourished': a student who has access to nourishing food but chooses not to consume it (fasting or dieting) can still be considered as being better off than a student who has no access to nourishing food (because of lack of income or food outlets). In both cases, the students are not consuming nourishing food and thus have not achieved the functioning of 'being well nourished'. But the first student has the capability to be well nourished and therefore has better well-being than the second.

This distinction is important because for international students, their situation involves trade-offs between different functioning that all contribute towards well-being (e.g. spend money now to get a good degree which will allow you to earn better income in the future), or living under constraints which may limit their freedom to choose between alternatives (e.g. academic requirements, financial constraints). Therefore, when considering aspirational well-being, it is important to understand that students are actively balancing ideas around 'a good life' here in the present and 'a good life' in the future. They may choose to give up on certain functioning, giving value to the present moment in pursuit of other functioning (ways of living) that would bring greater rewards in the long term.

This is also related to agency achievement and freedom. While agency and well-being are usually correlated, where the fulfilment of agency goals can lead to an increase in the person's quality of life or well-being and vice-versa, Sen argues that these are not necessarily one and the same. There are occasions when one may voluntarily choose to degrade one's own well-being in pursuit of a goal that has been deemed worthwhile, even if it involves some sacrifice. Volunteering and altruism are good examples of this.

Another interesting example comes from the tension between individual goals and family collective goals. As mentioned in Chapter 2, students from Southeast Asia often work out their goals and practices through a collective approach that involves family members and friends from the home country (Nilan 2006). Sen's paradigm primarily comes from the perspective of economics and thus treats the individual as an autonomous person making rational decisions about their own self-determination. However, in my interviews with students, I have noted that many of them consciously think about themselves as a part of a family with a responsibility to contribute to the family's goals over their own well-being. This is particularly apparent in the children of family businesses, as highlighted when Kristy was interviewed about her recent shift to study accounting:

Excerpt 3.1 Interview with Kristy, female Malaysian postgraduate, Accounting

> **Interviewer:** *Why the shift [to Accounting]?*
>
> **Kristy:** *[...] My father is actually doing business in Malaysia from- I think that's another reason why I choose Accounting. From my course right, after I graduate, I can go for education or be a social worker and then just in case I want to go back to Malaysia I still can have some business knowledge or background to help my father.*

Kristy came from Malaysia in pursuit of her dreams for a multinational career—she wanted to travel the world and meet people of different cultures. However, she also recognised the possibility of helping out her father in the family business, and that fed into her determination to pursue a masters' degree in accounting rather than continuing with her bachelor's degree in International Studies. In this case, she compromised her freedom to choose the path that would lead to her greatest well-being, because she thought her freely chosen agency goal of helping her father (which does not necessarily relate to her own individual well-being) was worth the sacrifice of changing her major. In other cases, the increase or maintenance of one's own personal well-being may sometimes involve the deliberate curtailing of one's agency freedom. This is particularly true in cases where security is a concern—by restricting one's freedom to act or go wherever one pleases, a person may enhance their security and thus well-being. This is made apparent in the following comments from Samantha:

Excerpt 3.2 Interview with Samantha, female Singaporean-Chinese undergraduate

> *Because everyone was back home, sometime my parents would like just be ... they just switch on the Skype and I just switch on my Skype and then, whether is it we're talking or not, it's just switched on. I know that they worry, cos I'm alone in the room, with four walls and all, they just... I think they just worry I'll just [go] crazy out in the quietness, and you know, want to go out, cos not familiar too much and usually after school it's quite late already. Five-thirty, six, yeah.*

Samantha talked about choosing between staying home alone and possibly going crazy with the quietness versus going out into an unfamiliar city late at night. Samantha came from Singapore, a city which is generally considered safe for women to walk alone at night—recently ranked at the top globally for personal safety, while Melbourne was ranked eighth

(The Economist Intelligence Unit 2015). However, in travelling to foreign countries, many Singaporeans are aware of the difference in safety, knowing that they may lack the instincts to keep themselves safe on the streets because of the environment they grew up in. Thus, most Singaporean migrants tend to err on the side of caution, choosing to carefully and slowly explore their environment rather than dive straight into the risk of danger. However, Samantha's personality was also extremely extroverted, and she hated being alone at home, which she viewed as detrimental to her psychological well-being. The lack of agency freedom both preserved her physical well-being as well as damaged her mental well-being. The solution that she arrived at, with the help of her parents, was to have them constantly connected via Skype, to maintain her physical safety while alleviating the quietness that drove her crazy.

International Student Aspirations

While Appadurai and Sen form the foundations of much thinking about aspiration, there have also been numerous developments in theory about student aspirations since then. Sellar and Gale (2011) outline three existing fields of study with regard to aspirations in higher education: Firstly, research that evaluates current governmental policies or programs to raise aspirations among students from lower Socio-Economic Statuses (SES) (Gale et al. 2010); Secondly, research focused on identifying students' aspirations for education, career, or life trajectories, and the factors that are involved in the formation of those aspirations (Khoo & Ainley 2005, Pyvis & Chapman 2007, Gu, Schweisfurth & Day 2009); and thirdly, the body of work where critical literature draws on a Bourdieuan analysis to examine how structural inequalities, such as class or gender, shape aspirations to reproduce or reinforce existing social structures (Archer, Hollingworth & Halsall 2007; Findlay et al. 2012).

In a similar vein, Zipin et al. (2015) noted three kinds of logics found in discourses about aspiration. The first is a *doxic* logic (stemming from Bourdieu's idea of *doxa*), grounded in populist-ideological mediations, in which certain goals and aspirations are deemed universal norms and 'common-sense', and therefore shared among the populace through media artefacts. These can include popular representations in films, books, or advertisements of 'the ideal life', or 'the dream career', and the logic that 'if you work hard enough, you can live your dream'. The second logic is what they term a *habituated* logic (again, drawing from Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*). In this logic, the aspirations of any given person need to be tempered and shaped by the objective socio-economic position they find themselves in and the lifeworld they

inhabit—they should not aim for 'the impossible dream' but to achieve only something reasonable given the current situation they are in.

The third logic, which Zipin et al. suggest is quite hard to identify through empirical interviews, is what they term an *emergent* logic of aspiration. Here, these aspirations are emergent, in the sense that they are in the process of being formed, not yet fully articulated, concerning possible futures that may be alternative to the dominant norms of aspirations found in the *doxic* popular discourse. These emergent aspirations may partially draw from existing dominant norms about aspiration, but could also draw from past aspirational norms that are no longer popular, or even new values and new relationships found in the developing identity of young people.

While Sellar and Gale (2011) and Zipin et al. (2015) draw largely from their research among lower-SES students in Australia, much of their framework can still apply to the context of international students. My argument is that international students, because of their transnational position and experiences, are much more likely to develop and vocalise emergent aspirations rather than subscribe to any particular *doxic* discourse of aspiration in either their home country *or* their host country's norms. Their notions of 'the ideal home' or 'the ideal life' may draw from none of the popular ideologies circulating in these nations, or may draw from both as well as from migrant experiences and amalgamate into a unique aspirational future born out of contested and contrasting visions of the future.

At the same time, the transient nature of their migratory experience also works against the habituated logic of aspirations that are grounded in past-to-present evaluations of their position in life. A commonly found aspiration is to reach or surpass one's parents' educational and living standards. However, in the context of rapidly globalising education, their parents' educational standards no longer serve as a reliable evaluative measure. Is a three-year undergraduate degree with one year overseas in Australia better than a parent's four-year honours degree that was done wholly in Malaysia?

Furthermore, while they are temporarily existing within Australian society and hence may be exposed to the aspirational norms that are common in Australia for people in their socio-economic class bracket, these brackets may not actually be permanent. Due to currency exchange rates, migrant employment laws, and differences in the developmental states of their home country versus host country, students may temporarily belong to a lower SES bracket in one country while actually belonging to a much higher bracket upon return to their home country or subsequent transfer to a third country for career opportunities. In addition, their exposure to the aspirations of a different SES bracket during their temporary stay in the host

country may also grant them resources for aspiration which would be different to those of their co-nationals who had never left their home country to study. Thus, international students have to negotiate aspirations based on life position in a much more complex fashion.

The Transformative Potential of an International Education

Within the interviews I conducted, one of the most cited reasons for coming to study in Australia was the importance of an international education to students. However, what an international education signifies to people may differ according to their cultural and national backgrounds, or even their individual pursuit of capabilities. These include accumulations of cultural capital in the form of degrees from 'Western' universities in Asian societies (Waters 2006), acquisition of new languages and exposure to different cultures, mobility aspirations for future international careers (Findlay et al. 2012), and the development of a multicultural or cosmopolitan identity (King & Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Gu, Schweisfurth & Day 2009). At the same time, there are also problematic assumptions about international student mobility as being great equalisers of socio-economic class distinctions. Findlay et al. (2012) show that more often than not class distinctions are extended and reproduced through the globalisation of higher education, with students from well-to-do families having more opportunities and aspirations to seek an international education and thus maintaining established class differences.

Pyvis and Chapman (2007) have argued that international students pursuing an international education in Australia can be grouped into two broad categories—those who seek a *positional* advantage and those that seek a *transformative* experience. In the first category, students were looking to acquire social or economic capital through investment in a foreign degree, in order to better their chances at employment back in their home country and therefore improve their social position. In the latter category, however, students were more interested in the international education as a way of transforming themselves, casting off their old (possibly provincial) identity and rebranding themselves as a global citizen.

In an extension of theory, Tran applied the theoretical lens of Bourdieu to international students studying in the vocational education and training (VET) sector of Australia, and reconceptualised mobility as a process through which students become who they want to be (Tran 2015). She discovered three perspectives that were driving VET international student mobility to Australia—the *profession-based* perspective, the *instrumental-pragmatic-based* perspective, and the *migration* perspective. In the profession-based perspective, students saw international education in Australia as a way to progress in their chosen career path. In the

instrumental-pragmatic perspective, students viewed education in Australia as a tool to acquire better material resources or become the chosen successor of the family business. In the migration-based perspective, students aimed to migrate to Australia and chose their education paths according to what would benefit their chances of obtaining permanent residency. However, these perspectives were not mutually exclusive, and in fact many students operated in more than one perspective at the same time.

Similar to Tran, the findings from my study also echo the three perspectives that students are operating under. To illustrate, I contrast the stories of Yohann, an architecture student from Malaysia and Janet, a construction student from Myanmar. The architecture and construction practices in Australia are considered by many Southeast Asian students to be more advanced than available in their home countries, so students deliberately seek out an international education that provides innovative methods and perspectives that cannot be learned at home.

For both Yohann and Janet, the dominant reason why they chose to study in Australia as opposed to their home countries (or even other countries) was due to Australia's advanced green construction techniques and sustainability practice. Both participants demonstrate a commitment to environmentalism, strengthened by the cultural contexts they lived in. Janet learned about the green movement through a project at her international high school, which afforded her a different view of the world than if she was educated through local schools. Yohann, on the other hand, came from Sarawak, a state of Malaysia known for its natural resources and a large indigenous population but which has an ongoing political narrative of being exploited for resources by the government and multinational corporations without proper recompense, particularly in terms of investment into infrastructure or bettering the lives of the local population (King 1993). However, even while seeking the same kinds of content, the thought processes of these two students differed:

Excerpt 3.3 Interview with Yohann, male Malaysian undergraduate, Architecture

> **Yohann:** *For me, what I'm trying to get from there is mostly um, design, I guess. Or how people actually get engaged into building design, or design of different buildings. So, yeah, most of the things I'll go for is experience. 'Cause you can say that you can learn things in Malaysia and pick up all the stuff working in Malaysia. Basically, it's best to adopt that culture of study in universities in Malaysia also, 'cos they do do that. But I believe that, due to overseas—especially in Australia—*

you get a better technology, better experience, more exposure towards other countries or different styles in design. Yup, so this is what I'm going for—how to say—experience, or probably a new knowledge, to help me develop or move on from where I am right now.

Interviewer: *So you felt that the stuff you get in Malaysia is not adequate to what you want to achieve?*

Yohann: *Yes, it's not adequate at the moment. […] I don't think it's high education standards in… um, probably there is, but the thing that they may be focusing on is not what I'm willing to or what I'm interested in. Which I think we can push it more, based on what we have in Malaysia.*

Interviewer: *So what are you interested in then?*

Yohann: *I'm more interested basically in how—architecture-wise—how to generate sustainable buildings around the environment. Because for me, the major problems for buildings right now, is basically through profit. They are mostly controlled by the developers. There's not much interesting buildings around I guess. To be exact, to answer my problems, there's not much sustainable buildings around. So yup, that's what I'm trying to go through, what I'm trying to pick up.*

For Yohann, architecture was his passion and chosen vocation, and he pursued it whole-heartedly. He pursued an overseas education in Australia because he wanted to get exposed to the different design innovations and facilities that he was unable to access in Malaysia. Very much a profession-driven student, he was not just content to absorb what he could from his university education, but he also utilised social media to enhance the capabilities he desired at his job, as shown in his picture diary (Figure 2):
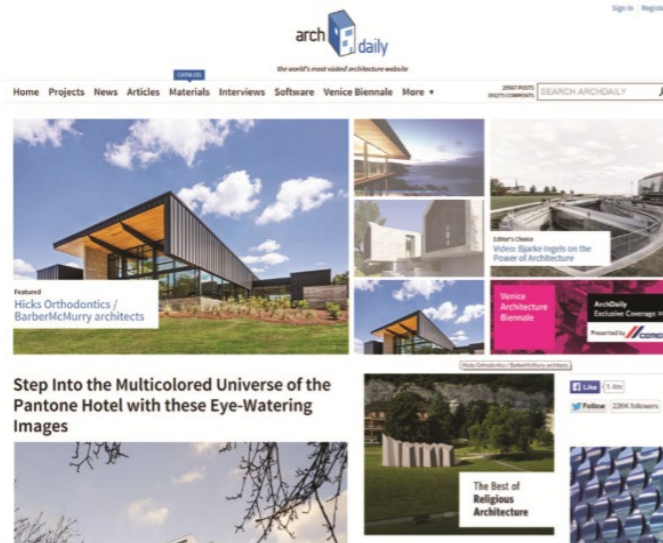
> ▲ One of the websites that I often visit is the "Archdaily" website. This is an architecture website where many brilliant ideas or latest architecture design/books/arcticles around the world are being published. I keep myself up-to-date with the latest technology and ideas in architceture through this website which has been a very good source of information for my architecture course.

Figure 3.1. Yohann, architecture website.

Here, Yohann used the internet to consciously shape himself into a knowledgeable architect, by keeping up to date with the latest developments in his field as well as inspiring his own creativity. At the same time, Yohann's definition of well-being focused around his profession: 'I would go back to freedom. That's one. Second one is good facilities. Or technology. And third of all it's I guess good education'. He wanted the freedom to choose instead of being restricted by Malaysian society—good facilities and education to help him along his career path. Yohann's aspirations mostly revolved around his work and the social injustices he perceived in his country, as well as learning how to live independently. While transformative, his capacity of aspiration was largely personal in nature. This, however, contrasted quite sharply with that of Janet:

Excerpt 3.4   Interview with Janet, female Myanmarese undergraduate, Construction

> **Interviewer:** *Okay. And you mentioned your father wanted to quit school after high school right? What was the reason behind that?*

Janet: *[…] He thought it'd be nice if I could take over the business early, to work for him. […] Yeah, I'm really interested in construction but since my country is still a little sexist on that field, I figured it would be really helpful if I gained education and experience in like a more neutral country first. And since Australia's really advanced and really innovative, I find it very interesting. I liked it a lot. Because my country's ways is rather traditional – they aren't really open to researches or innovations from other countries. […]*

Interviewer: *Interesting. Can you tell me some examples of stuff that you find Australia is very innovative in? And then things that would be very traditional in Myanmar?*

Janet: *[…] I guess the services sector is really wider here than back home. Because I feel like we're still in the—we're Third World country, so our main sector is in the secondary industry. So we're mainly like manufacturing plants, all those. […] Which does not mainly seem amazing to me because I'm used to seeing it. And it's also like a negative connotation to me because of my own point of view. Because since I was exposed to all those going green, green energy, all those things since I was young, I'm like, 'My country is very polluted.' […] So since then I've been like, 'You should be using these green ideas instead of normal fundamental, plain pollution whatever thing. So I always think how it should be more advanced rather than the normal traditional way of things. […] But really, I don't think my country can afford to go really advanced as well.*

Interviewer: *Okay. Now that you're in Australia, do the green technology and green innovation also apply in the construction industry?*

Janet: *Yeah, it does. And there's so much more innovation in the construction industry compared to what we have back home. Because, like, here we have all those little instruments for each specific reason, where it's like very specific and very efficient. But back home they'll just do whatever so it's like, as an engineer you have to calculate like, fifty per cent more than the normal load that it should be applied on, and all those stuff. So I find it really inefficient.*

Janet is a wealthy heiress to one of her father's construction companies in Myanmar, together with her brother, and so the education she sought out in Australia is informed by that choice. Here, she explained how she viewed the construction practices of her home country and what she hoped to get out of her education in Australia. Note that she very much viewed

her education in Australia instrumentally—as a stepping stone for her future role as successor. Because she is female, and her country was considered 'still a little sexist' in the field of construction, she wanted to get the social status and positional advantage that a foreign degree and work experience in a less sexist country would give her, before returning to take over the company.

At the same time, she had a much broader view of her country's complex economy and industry than Yohann had and had strong views about what they 'should' be doing, even though she acknowledged the limitations of her country's finances. Her focus was on efficiency and cleanliness, both systemic problems that she, in her future capacity as a company head, might be able to influence practices. Therefore, her aspirations were not merely on a personal level like Yohann but also on an organisational and possibly even national level.

It is important to note that neither of these students in their aspirations was considering staying in Australia permanently. A broad strand of research in Australian education persists in thinking that international students are mainly in the country to seek permanent residency. While that is somewhat true of a significant number of students, these two examples and others in the literature above highlight a shift in such thinking. There are other narratives at play here, and not all international students have the end game of permanent residency in mind.

Pyvis and Chapman (2007) suggested that student aspirations could be split into either seeking positional advantages or transformational experiences. However, the excerpts above illustrate a much more complex picture. In Janet's case, she sought *both* a positional advantage as well as a transformational experience. Aspirations are not singular and divorced from each other—they are overlapping, multifaceted constructs that may not yet be fully formed upon entry to university but could be expected to develop and emerge out of new values and experiences. Janet wanted exposure to green technology and practices, but she also gained knowledge about innovations in tool design and now has inklings of how to develop better tools for her father's company—an aspiration she may never have thought of when applying for her course of study.

At the same time, we also see how Yohann's and Janet's aspirations developed partially as a counter-current to the *doxic* logic of aspirations in their respective home countries. When developers in Malaysia pursued profit at the cost of the environment, Yohann came to Australia and aspired to study sustainable architecture. While her father wanted her to stop her education after high school and the construction industry in Myanmar was sexist, Janet aspired to establish herself as a university graduate in a country which did not restrict her opportunities and influence because of her gender. Migration afforded them the ability to acquire capabilities

that were not included in the *doxic* 'common sense' aspirations ascribed to young people in their home countries.

Multicultural Aspirations

An international education is not the sole aspect of the international student experience in Australia. For many students, what they are seeking is also a network of international contacts and a global experience of multiculturalism. Kristy from Malaysia talks about how she pursued that idea:

Excerpt 3.5 Interview with Kristy, female Malaysian postgraduate, Accounting

> **Kristy:** *I did my foundation in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia but then like after a year, I still insisted that I come to Australia to study because what I think was: what is here is more multicultural, and also it's an English speaking country, and the cultural practices is totally different with Malaysia so that's why I want to come here [to] study. […] When I was studying in my Bachelor degree, I chose the course called International Study. In that course there wasn't a lot of like Asian people but a lot of like Caucasians here doing the course.*
>
> **Interviewer:** *Ok. Alright and why did you choose International Studies?*
>
> **Kristy:** *I like language studies. […] Ya, that's why I chose that course and I like History as well.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> **Interviewer:** *Are there any forces outside the university that you also learn from?*
>
> **Kristy:** *I think at times I mix with the friends from other countries as well. I actually join as member of an organisation called Language Connection. From that organisation, because the organisation offer language exchange for students – maybe not the students but like adults – for members they want to meet friends and they have a few groups. Like if you want to study Japanese, you can mix with the Japanese group and Japanese who want to learn English they will just form into a group and exchange their language knowledge. This organisation do also provide a few other languages sections as well like Korean, Arabic ah… what else …Chinese... ya.*

Interviewer: *Ok.*

Kristy: *So, from this organisation, I met a lot of friends from other country. So, sometimes I did ask them like 'Oh how can you like get a part-time job?' or 'How do you meet other friends from other country?' Ya, from my point of view I don't want to mix around with just my own country friends. Ya, because I just to like know more about other cultures.*

Kristy talked about how she came to Australia specifically to be exposed to other cultures and pursued a course in international studies as part of that course. Furthermore, she also joined other organisations that allowed her to meet people from other countries as an extra-curricular activity, and she also employed various internet-based platforms (Figure 3.2) to further this goal:
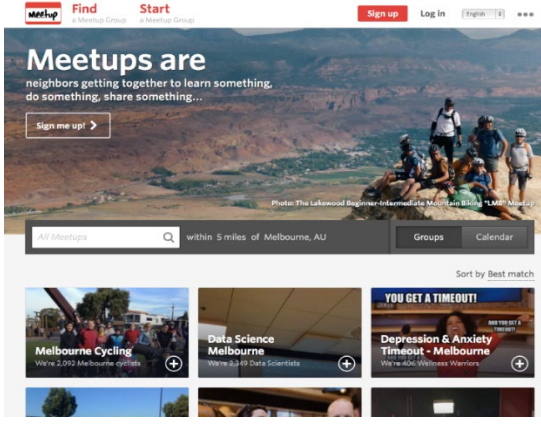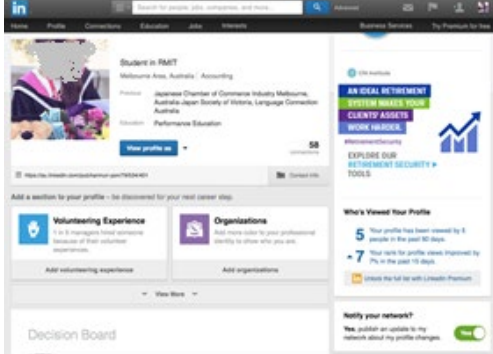
	This is a social network website that allows the local community to attend social events organized by the different organizer on this webpage to meet new friends and who are currently living in Melbourne but originally from overseas. I meet most of my Japanese and Korean friends through attending the events posted on this webpage for e.g: Progressibu, or any other meeting groups!
	LinkedIn is a business-oriented social networking platform that allows me to portray my education qualification, work experiences and volunteering experiences to my future potential employers and mainly for professional networking. I access to LinkedIn quite often to read the current employment trends and follow different multinational firms so that I can receive notifications about the new recruitment and offers available.

Figure 3.2. Kristy, networking websites

For Kristy, although she came from a multicultural country, her goal was to be exposed to even more people from other cultures, and she used the Meetups website to broaden her social circle, alongside using LinkedIn to widen her professional career options. From the description of her reasons for using LinkedIn, it is clear that Kristy aimed to work at a multinational firm as part of her life trajectory in international studies. However, she then switched to doing a master's degree in accounting instead, and explained her reasons why:

Excerpt 3.6 Interview with Kristy, female Malaysian postgraduate, Accounting

> **Interviewer:** *Why the shift [to Accounting]?*
>
> **Kristy:** *Ya… they say that it's because I want to migrate that's why…<laughing>. So, ya… and my father is actually doing business in Malaysia from I think that's another reason why I choose Accounting. From my course right, after I graduate right I can go for education or be a social worker and then just in case I want to go back to Malaysia I still can have some business knowledge or background to help my father.*
>
> **Interviewer:** *Right. So, you chose Accounting because you wanted to migrate…*
>
> **Kristy:** *<laughing> … I am not saying my country is not good... hahaha… but there is just like I want to have more opportunity to work in different countries. Ya, and also like, maybe like education or qualification I receive from overseas or Australia is like more… ah… how to say the word… renowned? It's like globally qualified.*

Here we see a complex range of reasons behind Kristy's choice of major for her master's degree. On the one hand, she was operating from a migration perspective—choosing a major that would help her qualify for migration to Australia, which still has accounting on the Select Occupations List for preferred professional migration. At the same time, as part of her filial duty as a Chinese daughter who had strong family-centric notions of well-being, she was also thinking about helping her father run his own business, so there was also a pragmatic element to her choices. Kristy operated from a professional perspective as well—a degree from Australia is globally recognised, and accounting could pave the way for her to work in different countries, which still helped her towards the path of multinational firms and global travel that

she aspired to. Needless to say, in Kristy's definition of 'a good life', the first things that came into mind was not needing to work every day and having the luxury to travel around the world.

Temporal Aspects to Aspirational Well-Being

The balance between 'a good life' in the present and 'a good life' in the future is often extremely complex and delicate, which international students must repeatedly negotiate. While this balance between present and future is perhaps the most obvious of the temporal aspects to aspiration and well-being, it is also important to highlight a lesser process: namely, that well-being in the present is often a result of aspirations formed in the past. Many of the examples given in this dissertation have international students talking about how they currently practice well-being in their everyday lives. These practices have arisen out of past experiences, which has shaped their desire to live life as they do in the present.

The journey of international students towards a better life does not begin when they land in their host country and officially have the status of 'student living abroad'. Rather, it begins in the past. For some, it began in the previous countries they were living in—as my personal story in the introduction attests to, and for others it may have begun during their childhood, or even with their parents' generation. Just to *become* an international student can be, in and of itself, an aspiration towards a better life.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the major discourses around aspiration, especially in the context of international students. Central to this chapter is the idea that aspirations are complex, multilayered constructs and are sites of contestation between past, present, and future, as well as ideological norms of 'common sense' life goals circulated by the media or ascribed to people in particular life situations. However, aspirations can also emerge out of new values and experiences gained throughout the international student experience.

The transient nature of international student experiences and their position on the fringe—not belonging to one country or another but enacting a transnational bridging of both—allows for greater complexity in negotiating and forming new emergent and unique aspirations in life. These visions of 'a good life', or of well-being in their current life, may be difficult to articulate in words, because of the generative nature of their experiences. Thus, to capture these aspirations to well-being both now and in the future, we now turn to examining the practices

by which students embody these goals. In the next few chapters, we shall examine how students put into practice, through digital media, their aspirations towards a better life.

Chapter 4
Media Practices of Family Aspirations and Well-Being

In the previous chapters, I expanded on the idea that 'well-being' and 'aspirations' are concepts that are contested and negotiated across a variety of media and relationships both home and away. These contestations occur at both individual and collective modes, in ways that are heavily facilitated by new digital media technologies. In these interweaving settings, we see new forms of transnational configurations emerging. As mentioned earlier (Figure 2.2), a number of the participants highlighted the importance of family in their definitions of 'well-being' and 'a good life'.

In this chapter, I will be focusing on how international students from Southeast Asia negotiate their relationships with family members through media practices. I begin with an overview of the relevant literature on transnational families. Then I highlight two aspects to focus on: transnational media connections that facilitate the circulation of family care and transnational media practices as a site for negotiating family versus individual identities and aspirations.

Transnational Family Life
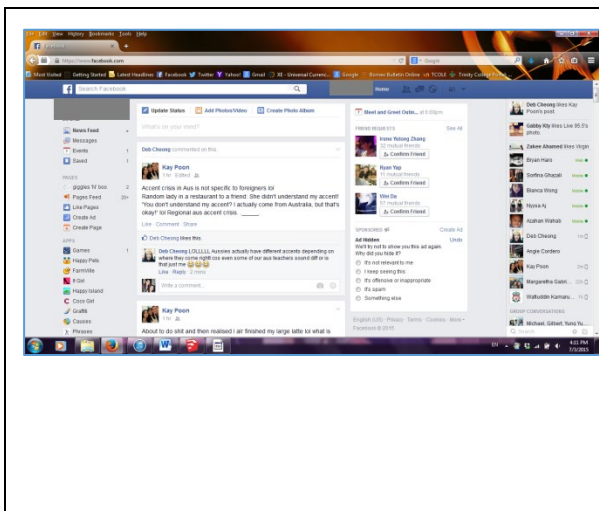
Facebook is another way I communicate with my family and friends, especially my grandparents who live in Los Angeles and my aunts and cousins from my mother's side who live in the Philippines. I have not seen my aunts and cousins for about 10 years now and only got a visit from my grandparents 2 years ago after 8 years apart. Facebook is how my mother's side of the family maintains contact since we all live in different countries.

Figure 4.1. Tamar, female Bruneian undergraduate, on connecting with family in diaspora

As Tamar's picture (Figure 4.1) illustrates, there are more instances of families living in geographically disparate locations, bound together only through rare visits and communications via media technologies. The 'triple revolution' of the internet, social media,

and mobile phones has radically changed the way in which families communicate with each other (Rainie & Wellman 2012). Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of international students, and how they use these new communications media platforms to maintain connections with their families in diaspora.

Rainie and Wellman (2012) have argued that the changing demographics and structures of households in the United States—more single-parent families, more families in which both parents are working outside the home—have resulted in families increasingly using ICTs to maintain family ties. Families can be seen now as a network of individuals bound together by communications and media technologies. While Rainie and Wellman state that this change in household usage of ICTs is primarily driven by changing marriage and work patterns in the United States, similar patterns of ICT use can also be seen in families who are separated by global migration, like Tamar's maternal family. Tamar reflected a more individualistic view of family, where she was a single node in the network, loosely connected to other relatives through peer-to-peer connections rather than being part of a tightly knit group that shared the same household space.

Alongside exploring the change in family configurations and what comprises membership in a family, sociological enquiry has turned towards studying 'family' not as a noun, but rather as an adjective to describe a set of practices (Morgan 1996, 2011; Cheal 2002; Seymour 2007; Becher 2008; Jones & Hackett 2011; Hall & Holdsworth 2014). The focus thus changes from *what* a family consists of, to *how* individuals engage with other people whom they consider their family members and the myriad ways in which they can 'do family' together. Conceptualising family as practices becomes especially relevant when discussing families that are highly geographically mobile or dispersed transnationally.

Despite being located in different places, members of transnational families still strive to maintain a sense of 'family-hood' (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002)—that is, belonging together despite their geographical separation. As Baldassar, Baldock, and Wilding assert, 'the resulting idea of the 'transnational family' is intended to capture the growing awareness that members of families retain their collectivity and kinship in spite of being spread across multiple nations' (2007, p. 13). This sense of belonging, of being part of the family, is heavily influenced by the practices associated with caregiving, which Baldassar and Merla (2014) argue is central to sustaining transnational families. They define this familial caregiving as being asymmetric (one side gives more care than the other) and reciprocal (both parties are expected to provide care, though perhaps at different stages in life). Inherent in this idea is the expectation that parents do the bulk of the care work for their families when their children are young, and that children

will eventually reciprocate by caring for aged parents—what is referred to as the 'generational contract' (Bengtson & Achenbaum 1993).

In recent years, the study of the circulation of care cultures among transnational families has risen to prominence as a field. Finch (1989) identified five types of caregiving or 'mutual support' that family members provide for one another: economic, accommodation, personal ('hands on'), practical and child care, and finally emotional and moral. Each of these five types of care has been studied fruitfully among transnational migrant families, particularly among migrant families where one parent has to leave for work overseas. These range from studies of the meanings and emotions involved in sending remittances to family members back home among Filipino and Indian diasporas (McKay 2007; Singh, Robertson & Cabral 2011), to explorations of the changing roles of gendered childcare and parenting relations among Filipino, Vietnamese, and Indonesian labour migrants (Parreñas 2005; Silvey 2006; Baldassar 2008; Hoang & Yeoh 2011; Madianou & Miller 2012).

While providing financial support, securing accommodation, and engaging in hands-on care for one's family members are much more visibly embodied and material forms of care work, providing emotional and moral support are more nebulous care practices. The study of care and care practices has often been relegated to the sidelines of scholarly interest, which has tended to privilege rationalist and factual 'logics of choice' (Mol 2008) over embodied, emotional perspectives that Mol describes as 'logic of care'. Household and familial care practices in particular are feminised forms of labour that are often overlooked compared to wage-earning work (Mol, Moser & Pols 2010; Martin, Myers & Viseu 2015).

However, a recent wave of scholarship, mainly from feminist, STS, and medical/nursing perspectives, have pointed out that care is increasingly becoming more important and intertwined with media and technological practices (Mol, Moser & Pols 2010; de la Bellacasa 2011; Martin, Myers & Viseu 2015). Modern-day familial care practices can be shaped by communications technologies and interweave between real-world and virtual or digital contexts. They involve the building of emotional intimacies and family bonds through a variety of mediated practices and exchanges of information or affective messages. The first section therefore explores how these care practices happen among international students as they engage with digital media technologies in order to 'do family'.

Moreover, the work in formal care settings can be adapted into informal domestic contexts. For example, Jeanette Pols explores how digital media are imbricated in ways to 'care-at-distance' (2012) as part of emerging intergenerational domestic practices. While Pols' model was in palliative care settings, she noted that the use of technologies only worked to

strengthen care if people were involved (rather than replaced). Informal notions of care-at-a-distance can often be found in and through social media practices. These are crucial to navigating the home and away.

The majority of studies of transnational families so far have focused on one of two types: families where one or more adult parents are overseas with young children left behind in their home countries, or families where adult migrant workers have elderly parents and siblings overseas. Relatively few studies have looked at the family lives and relationships of young adult international students, who are in transition from student-child (to be taken care of by their parents) to full adult workers (who then have an obligation of care for their ageing parents) (Martin 2014). It is this transitional space that I explore in the second half of this chapter, as students struggle to define their identities as individuals, as members of a family, as a *resource* for achieving their family's aspirations.

Transnational Media Connections and the Circulation of Care

For many students, especially in their first year, homesickness is a common problem. Separation from home entails the loss of many markers of identity as well as a loss of their perceived place in society. To alleviate homesickness, students surround themselves with media environments that remind them of home. Through studying the lives of transnational migrant professionals, Nowicka (2007) began to conceptualise 'home' not as a fixed place, but rather, as a focal point of stability through which individuals and families interact with the world—they go out to the world from 'home', and they return from the world to 'home'. When migrants speak of home, they are not necessarily referring to a physical location, although that is what 'home' is often pictured to be like in the migrant imagination. Rather home is an emotional space for belonging. Being 'at home' can be framed through various rituals and practices.

As Nowicka discovered, 'home' is actually comprised of a set of practices and material objects that in the migrant's mind constitute stability, familiarity, and a reference point around which they can build a family. This concept of home detaches the sense of 'home' from a particular physical location (which is fixed and sedentary), and instead reconfigures it as a set of familiar practices or objects which can be mobile and reconstructed in whatever place the migrant wishes to settle down. When migrants move countries, they are engaged in the process of 'home-*making*', or re-creating the patterns of life that they are familiar with in the new space they now inhabit.

Therefore, when international students express a longing for home, or homesickness, what they are actually referring to is a desire for the familiar practices and objects, which for them constitute the sense of 'home'. In today's mediated, globalised society, we must examine not just the material practices and possessions which constitute 'home' for the individual but also the media artefacts and practices that are incorporated into the students' sense of 'home' and 'family'. While they may be physically living in one country, the communications and entertainment media that they engage with allows them to reconstruct a sense of 'home' which includes not just familiar ways of using media that was learned in their native country but also access to other material and immaterial aspects of 'home' *through* the media. This can take many forms, but in this section, I will be focusing on family practices that make up the feeling of 'home'.

One of the most striking methods employed by the participants to overcome homesickness came from Carol, a 20-year-old Chinese-Malaysian student, who talked about her difficulties adjusting to life in Australia during her first year and how she would deal with it through maintaining a Skype connection with her family home:

Excerpt 4.1 Interview with Carol, female Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate

> **Carol***: Yeah, usually I would Skype my family – you know, like just leave it on the whole day while I do my work and they do their thing. Just like you know, the sound of home and the noises and their voices, and things like that.*
>
> **Interviewer***: And who was on the other side of the Skype connection that you turned on?*
>
> **Carol***: Anyone. Like my sister, my father, my mom… sometimes they're just busy — no one's actually sitting in front of the computer, they're just moving around, things like that, but I just leave it on.*
>
> **Interviewer***: Okay. What made you decide to use that way of doing things rather than just talking face-to-face on Skype?*
>
> **Carol***: Well we talked, but after a while obviously everyone's going to get on with their own things, so we just left it on. And like if anyone has anything to say to me, just come over and talk to me, things like that.*
>
> **Interviewer***: Right. How did you feel then, using that way of-?*
>
> **Carol***: It was a bit comforting. It was like… my sister was initially supposed to stay with me, but she missed her enrolment so she had to go back to Malaysia and do another semester there. So, like, we rented a place that was fairly big, for the two*

of us. So the house was just very very quiet, for just one person. So like, the noise
back at home, seeing home and stuff, was just very comforting.
Interviewer*: Okay. What were some of the noises that were comforting for you?*
Carol*: My dog. I could hear him. The computer I usually Skype them faces the*
dining table, so they eat and things like that. They sometimes talk to me while
eating, and things like that.

Ralph and Staeheli (2011) have argued that the concept of 'home' among migrants is one that is both sedentary and mobile—both bounded by the local as well as extensible transnationally. In Carol's case we see a depiction of that phenomenon. For Carol, Skype was used primarily to bring the immediacy of the home environment—particularly the sounds of home like her dog's barking—into her life to stave off loneliness. The everyday noises and routines of home gave her a sense of comfort, of familiarity and stability. Being ambiently there or 'always on' (Baron 2008) are key features of contemporary new media—characteristics that bring with it both positive and negative affordances. Social media like Skype provide a type of ambient meeting up that allows a more varied range of co-presence than previously afforded. As noted by Hjorth and Arnold (2013) in their study of university students studying away from home, media such as online games afforded a type of ambient co-presence that served to ease feelings of loneliness and sadness. While her home was still situated in the house in Malaysia, Skype allowed that sense of home to extend beyond national boundaries into the space she currently inhabits in Australia.

Carol also mentions that the computer in the family home faced the dining table, so this was a way in which her family included her in their daily lives when they ate. The practice of a family dinner is one of the main ways in which many households in Malaysia spent time together and constituted a part of what Carol thought of as 'home'. Thus, even though Carol was in another country and time zone, she still participated actively in her family's construction of home through the stability-promoting practice of family dinners. This was her way of ritualising her membership in the family—joining them for dinner over Skype. Other students employ more conventional approaches to maintaining family ties:
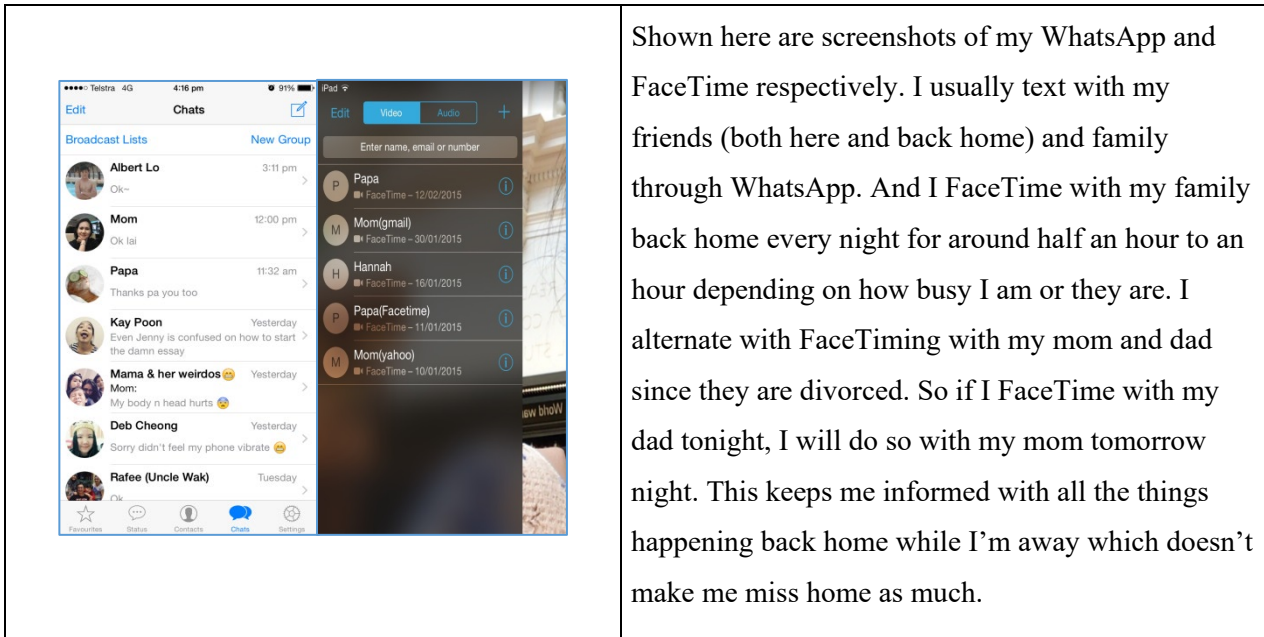
| | Shown here are screenshots of my WhatsApp and FaceTime respectively. I usually text with my friends (both here and back home) and family through WhatsApp. And I FaceTime with my family back home every night for around half an hour to an hour depending on how busy I am or they are. I alternate with FaceTiming with my mom and dad since they are divorced. So if I FaceTime with my dad tonight, I will do so with my mom tomorrow night. This keeps me informed with all the things happening back home while I'm away which doesn't make me miss home as much. |

Figure 4.2. Tamar, on maintaining family ties and homesickness

In Figure 4.2, we return to Tamar, the Bruneian undergraduate with a networked family in diaspora. Here, we start to see the most common way in which home is re-created through familial ties—regular conversations with each of her parents every night, as well as text messages throughout the day. These conversations accomplish a range of things—they maintain emotional intimacy through frequent contact, and they keep her informed of things happening back in her home country, which gives her a sense of co-presence and currency in her family members' lives. This sense of currency—of being involved as things are happening in her parents' lives—is what contributes to the alleviation of homesickness.

Christian Licoppe (2004), when studying the use of the mobile phone for maintaining close social relationships, discovered two main modes of usage—that he terms the 'conversational' and the 'connected'. The conversational mode is one in which attention is focused on each other, such as a phone conversation that usually runs for a fairly long time, and the time and place of the conversation may even follow a standardised ritual. In this mode, care and intimacy is shown through attention and effort devoted to the conversation, to the exclusion of other distractions. The connected mode, however, comprises of shorter but more frequent communicative messages being exchanged, and the frequency and flow of these messages are what determine the level of intimacy in the relationship. In this mode, the act of calling or text messaging is just as important as the actual content of the message itself, and a

sense of connectedness or co-presence is established through frequent sharing of emotions or states, rather than the events or news that may be shared in the longer conversational mode.

In Tamar's case, she used a mix of methods—both conversational through FaceTime and connected through WhatsApp—to maintain a sense of emotional intimacy. Other students, such as Adam from Indonesia and Sally from Singapore, also had dedicated times of conversation with their parents and expanded on the benefits of such interactions further:
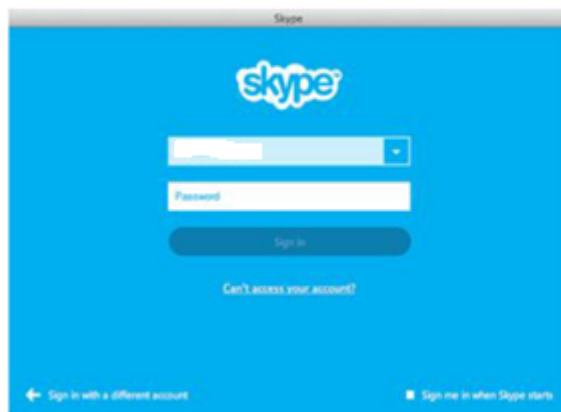
Skype is my preferred service to do video call with my family. The schedule is somewhat irregular – it can range from once to twice every month. It helps keep myself updated with what my parents have been doing, and I suppose it can give me a warm feeling knowing that I have a place to call home when talking to them.

Figure 4.3. Adam, male Indonesian undergraduate, Skyping with family at home
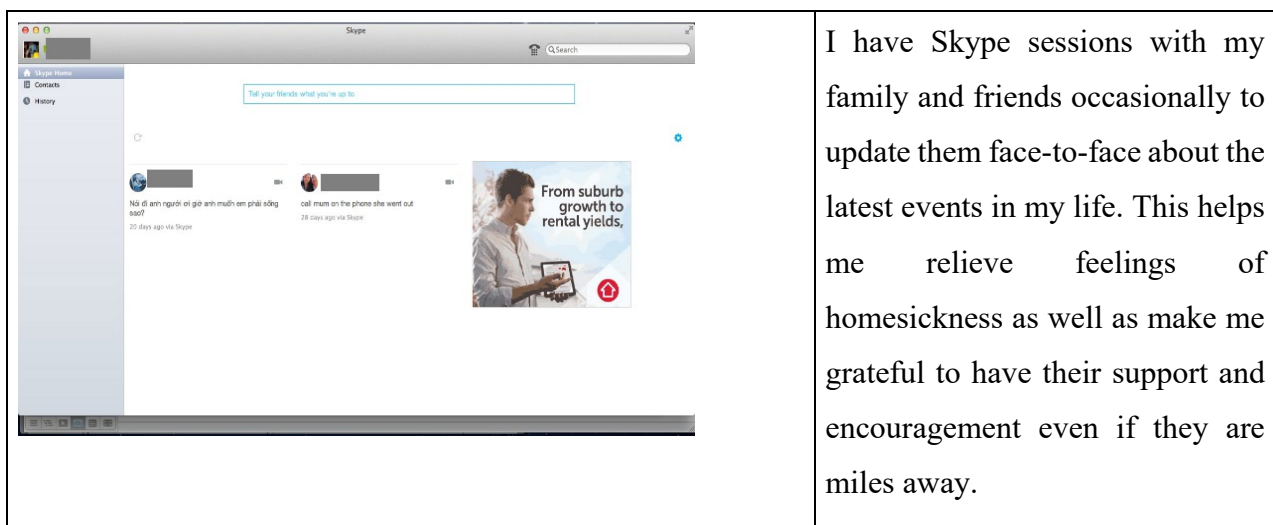
I have Skype sessions with my family and friends occasionally to update them face-to-face about the latest events in my life. This helps me relieve feelings of homesickness as well as make me grateful to have their support and encouragement even if they are miles away.

Figure 4.4. Sally, female Singaporean undergraduate, Skyping for homesickness.

In Adam's and Sally's picture diaries (Figures 4.3 and 4.4), besides staying informed about events back home, both students also mentioned the emotions that Skyping home gave them. For Adam, it was a sense of stability and security 'knowing that [he has] a place to call home'. This again ties in to Nowicka's argument that 'home' is a point of stability, to which they can retreat in safety, which serves to anchor the mobile international student who may feel adrift at times. In Sally's case, it was about the messages of support and encouragement she

got from her family and friends, which made her feel grateful. This indicates the affective component to care—it is not just about feeling involved or providing a safe place to retreat, but the emotional and moral support offered by messages from family members also plays a role. However, notice that Sally distinguished this separately from the feeling of alleviating homesickness. Here, we begin to see explicit outpourings of care through verbal messages.

These messages of care and information do not just go one way. As mentioned earlier, transnational families involve a reciprocal relationship of care. Janet, the construction student from Myanmar, shared how she took care of her mother and involved her in her life:

I use Viber to keep in touch with my mother the most because she only knows how to use Viber and knows how to make calls to me. I usually send her pictures of what I am doing, or little things I find special or things that she might want to do if she ever visits me. She cannot read English, so I either text her in Burmese or send her pictures first and then tell her about each photo I sent when she calls me every night. She would always remember how many photos I sent during the day and she will remember each little details and ask me about them.

Figure 4.5. Janet, female undergraduate from Myanmar, Viber conversations with mother.

In Figure 4.5, we notice that Janet and her mother used only one platform—Viber— but for a variety of different modes. She sent a stream of pictures to her mother throughout the day, to maintain a sense of connected presence in everyday life, and then they had more structured conversations at night. Also notice the type of pictures she was sending. These are images of food that she was eating or a thought that her mother would enjoy. The sharing of food pictures allows for the audience to vicariously enjoy the taste alongside the sender. It is also telling that it is images of food that are being passed from child to mother—subliminally, it is a reassurance that the child has taken up responsibility to feed herself now, instead of relying on the mother, as well as the beginnings of reciprocity on the mother-child bond.

The most important thing that is happening in this picture diary, however, is that Janet used images as a way of planning or coordinating the future—exploring what her mother would

like to do in Melbourne when she visits in the future. In one sense, the pictures are a way to build up concrete embodiments of a collective aspirational future where she and her mother both enjoyed time together in Australia. This shared aspirational future also helped to build intimacy between the mother-daughter pair, as they learnt to relate to each other as adults reciprocating care in a more symmetrical fashion.

Janet's picture diary excerpt also illustrates that familial bonds and expressions of care are *mediated*—in that, the exchange of media artefacts (located in words or pictures) becomes the way that care is shown. However, this mediation does not simply stop at words or pictures. In fact, nearly any form of media artefact can be exchanged or shared via the internet and used in order to promote familial bonding:
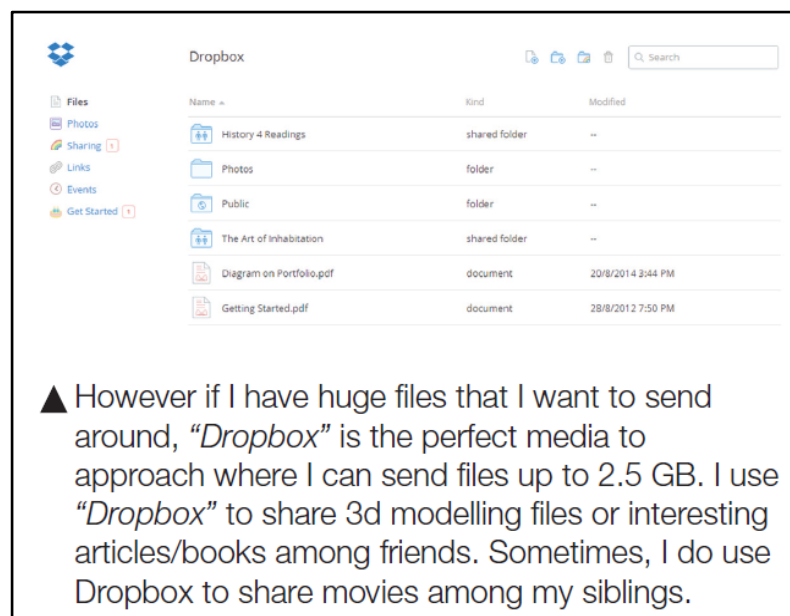
Figure 4.6. Yohann, male Malaysian undergraduate, Dropbox movie sharing with siblings

As a movie enthusiast, Yohann is used to media environments where he was able to download and share movies online (Figure 4.6) through the internet in his home country (Malaysia). The cultural practice of freely sharing copyrighted materials online is rampant and rarely questioned in Asian countries for a variety of reasons including the collectivist view that individual creators are obligated to contribute to the enjoyment of the collective whole; poor enforcement of copyright laws leading to lower moral development among youth; and lack of social pressure against digital piracy (Ang et al. 2001; Hill 2007). Therefore, even when living in a country like Australia—which has stronger copyright protection laws for individual creators and a sense of justice requiring fair payment for services/goods provided—many

international students continue the practices around media content carried over from the cultural values of their home country.

Beyond those regulations, Yohann's regular sharing of media content with his siblings back home also formed a tangible connection that allowed him to inhabit the same mediated environment as his siblings—liking the same movies and shows, keeping up with the same TV drama series and hence being able to talk and discuss things even while never actually physically watching a movie or show together. In both cases, the students are repurposing the affordances of cloud computing technology to enable this practice—storing a shared database of media content online while allowing access and contributions to it from a variety of places and devices including PC terminals (Tan & Su 2011).

Speaking from my own lived experiences and practice as an international student from Malaysia, I also share media artefacts with my siblings, as a way to show care for them. Interestingly enough, while I hold regularly scheduled conversations with my parents through Skype, I do not do the same with my siblings. Instead, the lateral bond we share is built on shared interests in media entertainment products, rather than daily news and updates. My brother and I would buy each other computer games on Steam, an online game distribution platform, as an expression of our shared interest. This is also a continuation of an earlier familial practice, when as young siblings we would play video games together in front of the TV.

In a similar vein, my sister and I would email each other e-book copies of fiction novels that we recommend to each other, having a shared interest in reading which developed partially from me reading her bedtime stories. There is also an asymmetrical relationship of care shown here—as the older brother, and one who has had more exposure to a wider range of novels, I end up sending more recommendations and books to my sister than the other way around. However, I experienced moments of gratification and intimacy when my sister either responded positively to the books I had recommended, or became independent enough to recommend me books that she had been reading which I had not yet encountered.

In the sharing of media artefacts as expressions of care, we can see an open field for further anthropological and sociological exploration. Previous work on transnational families and migrants have focused on financial remittances and practical aid or advice as being one of the primary ways to show care in non-verbal forms. However, the sharing of media artefacts suggests that as family practices and rituals become increasingly permeated with media technologies and practices, new non-verbal forms of communicating familial care amongst adults who grew up in the digital age can be found through sharing of tangible or virtual media

products. Media—as artefacts and practices, not solely as communications channels—could become an integral part of 'doing family'.

Transnational Media Practices: Negotiating Family-Individual Identities and Aspirations

While new media technologies serve to connect international students to various aspects of their home environment and family, they also fulfil another purpose—they are sites at which identity and meaning are crafted. When students post narratives of their lives onto social media platforms, they are engaging in 'identity work' through the narratives they construct—they are presenting to their communities back home not just what they are doing but also *who* they are. Self-narratives—stories that people tell about themselves—can serve as a powerful bridge to help people in transition make sense of their changing lives, roles, and contexts (Ibarra & Barbulescu 2010). However, the affordances of social media to allow rapid feedback from multiple publics become a double-edged sword when it comes to the construction of identity.

A large part of identity formation and construction has to do with the contexts that people surround themselves with. When friends and family back home ask for narratives of the students' journey in their new country, they are not merely asking for interesting stories. They are also asking for permission to continue to shape the identity of the student through the comments they make on the student's constructed narrative. Therefore, by sharing narratives of life in Australia through social media, students are effectively giving power to the multiple instantaneous and intimate publics to reshape their migrant identities. Furthermore, because of the rapid pace of communicative activities online, the shaping of identity is much faster and more fluid and involves a variety of media. It is important to realise, however, that these narratives of meaning and identity are not ones solely constructed by an individual in isolation, but rather, as the nature of *social* media demands, narratives that invite input and dialogue, particularly from family members.

While the earlier section talked about the sharing of daily news and events between family members as expressions of care, this section will explore how these communicative practices can also be instruments of power and control, as well as collective aspiration. While familial monitoring in many Asian families is apparent, social media apps now allow families to keep a 'friendly eye' on children (Sengupta 2012). In a large part, this monitoring takes place through the sharing of daily life activities online:

Excerpt 4.2   Interview with Carol, female Malaysian-Chinese undergraduate

> **Interviewer**: *Okay. Did you use Facebook for posting your own photos, or-?*
>
> **Carol**: *I did. Because my Mum uses Facebook as well — she would always ask me to upload photos so she could see… and things if I, you know, go out with friends or things like that, then I would post it up for her to see.*
>
> **Interviewer**: *I see. So it was primarily a way to update your mother… what the things you were doing?*
>
> **Carol**: *Yeah.*

Carol, who in her first year had spent the whole day connected to her family home through Skype, now primarily stays in touch with her family through Facebook and WhatsApp. For Carol, her use of the video platforms was a way to let her mother see what was happening in her life, at her mother's request. On the one hand, this is part and parcel of the reciprocity of care—expressed through the sharing of information—and necessary for 'doing family' together. For parents who might be worried that their child may be going astray or encounter troubles, this almost instantaneous feed allows them to be actively involved in giving advice, monitoring for trouble, and generally fulfilling their parental roles while they are still in a position to influence the future events in the child's life story. On the other hand, these social media narratives also serve as a tool for parental monitoring because of the relative immediacy of the feedback loop.

As Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan note in *Webcam* (2014), the 'always-on' nature of webcams exemplifies a theory of attainment that views media technologies as an integral part of being human. In these technologies, uneven power relations are amplified with those seeking to watch (namely parents) becoming more apparent. For many young people, negotiating their parents watching over them and also using social media to construct notions of self beyond the parental eye is a balancing act (Clark 2013). This has implications for when the child may deviate from familial norms in order to try to pursue individual aspirations and well-being. In Carol's case, an important point of contestation between familial identity and individual identity arose when she converted to Christianity in Australia:

Excerpt 4.3 Interview with Carol, female Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate, Christian

> **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.*

> **Interviewer**: *Okay. So because of your parents' disapproval you're not allowed to go to Christian activities.*
>
> *…*
>
> **Interviewer**: *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.*
>
> **Interviewer**: *So you have the Bible on your phone?*
>
> **Carol**: *Yep.*
>
> *…*
>
> **Interviewer**: *So then, how does reading the Bible make you feel afterwards?*
>
> **Carol**: *Uhm, it's—it's a bit more comforting.*

Carol's parents, not wishing for her to becoming a Christian, actively banned her from attending Christian community gatherings or having Christian Bibles. Even though her friends gave her physical copies of the Bible, her mother told her to return them. Their monitoring of her activities via social media facilitated this. By requiring her to post pictures of where she went out with her friends, they indirectly were also able to tell whether she was involved in Christian activities or not.

Note that in this last excerpt, Carol shared that reading the Bible was an important part of her emotional well-being, in helping her deal with times of stress or depression. Even though her mother requested her to return all the physical copies of the Bible that she had, Carol still read the Bible on her mobile phone and used that to sidestep the parental restrictions. The mobile phone afforded Carol a version of privacy and empowerment that allowed her to still pursue the religious practice of reading her Bible through it while honouring her parents' wishes in the removal of all public outward trappings of her conversion to Christianity. Thus, she was able to negotiate her dual identities as a faithful new Christian as well as a filial obedient daughter.

Underpinning this conflict between parent and child are Chinese notions of filial piety. Filial piety—respect, love, and honouring of one's parents and ancestors—is one of the key virtues of Chinese and Chinese-influenced cultures (including the Malaysian-Chinese and Singaporean-Chinese communities) and is also an important part of Buddhist and Confucian philosophies, to which Carol's parents subscribe. Children raised in those cultures are taught

from a very young age to obey and honour their parents' wishes as much as possible, and thus notions of seeking independence away from parental influence is extremely counter-cultural for them, even as adults.

Western ideas about an 'age of independence'—where a child is considered to be a mature adult who no longer needs parental input—often clash with Confucian ideals of a chain of filial relationships, where the child respects and honours the wishes of the parent, the parent honours and respects the wishes of the grandparents, and the grandparents honours the ancestors. Rather than seeking independence, the traditional cultural 'family values' of the Chinese place emphasis on seeking interdependence with one's family members. Thus, for Carol, even when she was immersed into her new life here in Melbourne, her family still expected her to adhere to traditional values of seeking their input and obeying their wishes. In return, the parents or elders were obliged to protect, teach, and guide.

Religion and family are often inextricably intertwined in many Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, where 99.3% of the population claim religious affiliation (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2011). By converting to a new religion, Carol could be perceived as unfilial, in that she had deemed the religion of her ancestors as unworthy enough to continue, casting doubt on their decisions. Thus, her parents tried to enforce adherence to the family's religious norms, both as part of their parental duty to guide their daughter and to reinforce the cultural importance of Confucian filial piety as a counteraction to 'Western' ideas of liberal independence. A contrasting example came from the neighbouring country of Singapore:

Excerpt 4.4 Email correspondence with Sally, female Singaporean undergrad, Christian

> *I'm not particularly proactive in participating in anything that is not compulsory (e.g. classes) and won't introduce myself to people unless they come to me. [...] The first time I visited CrossCulture [note: name of her church in Melbourne], it was an unwilling attempt but one that was prompted by my parents. I had no prior intention of going back to church. It was also a one off visit just so I could tell my parents honestly that I went to church. But I obeyed my parents cause they ROCK. *true* They are awesome people who are very lenient with me except that I go to church.*

Here, we see Sally's account of how her family, although lenient in many ways, insisted on her attending church. Note that although Sally's parents had just one religious rule—go to

church—she had intended to merely honour their wishes once before abandoning the practice, as it didn't fit with her ideas about herself or her identity as an introverted person who is 'not particularly proactive in participating in anything that is not compulsory'. However, through a series of warm and friendly encounters with different members of the church and cell groups, she was drawn into the religious community and later ascribed this entire process due to God working in her life. This became part of her construction of a personal narrative of faith and identity as a Christian, reaffirming her faith.

In both Carol's and Sally's stories, we see the struggles of students who are negotiating building a new, individual identity for themselves while maintaining as much of their familial identity as possible. The new contexts and opportunities brought on by the migration process afforded new aspirations that were perhaps orthogonal to already established identities and patterns of reinforcement in their old communal contexts, thus providing space in which to define a new individualism. A particularly poignant example of this is in Janet's life. Janet, the only daughter of a wealthy father who built up a construction company in Myanmar, decided to leave her home country and life of privilege to learn how to be independent, as a stepping stone towards fulfilling her familial obligations in the future. And yet, that very aspiration to be independent brought her into sharp conflict with her father:

Excerpt 4.5 Interview with Janet, female Myanmarese undergraduate

> **Interviewer:** *Given that there's a lot of pressure to stay with family—was that something you also agreed with, that you should be with family? Or why did you choose to come here and be separated?*
>
> **Janet:** *I guess I wanted some air. Well, you could say that's one of the reasons. Because I wanted to know how my life would be to not depend on my parents all the time. Because back home I really didn't have to do anything—I've never cooked before in my life before I come here. I was never asked to even fold my laundry. I wasn't even expected to do my bed, or anything. So, I was like—what if one day my parents are gone and I'll be so lost without. And maybe like I would want to know— like I want to see how independent I am. So, like, with studying and doing my own things, I guess, that would show that I have my life together. So, I had like quite a fight with my father to leave home. It wasn't just that I got into the uni that I wanted, it was a lot of things. Like, I had to defer one semester because my family don't agree, and all those stuff. It was just try to break out of the comfort zone.*

Like, as some parents would, they don't want their kids to do all the work. You know, like, 'I got so much money for you to spend, so you don't have to worry about it.' That's what my father's mindset is. 'Why do you want to work? I'm paying you enough. And I'm working so hard so that you guys can live comfortably.' So he was like, just live comfortably. But I'm like, 'Dad, it's not that. It's not that simple. What if one day, you gone? And I will be left alone without any guidance. And I won't know anything. No matter how much money I have or how much reputation, everyone will know that I don't know shit. Everyone will bully—like, use me. And I wouldn't know it. So, I need to be able to stand on my own feet.' […] I want a real life. He was like, 'I'll give you a real life back home.' Back home, he will still spoil me. I don't want that. So I guess, I got sick of being spoiled.

Here, Janet narrated the argument that she and her father went through, highlighting the thought processes involved. It was important for Janet to be prepared for a future where she would not have her parents' guidance anymore, and so she chose to come to Australia to learn how to live independently. And yet, notice how she couched her reasoning in terms of her future obligations—she was the heiress to the company her father built, and she knew that she had to prepare herself against being bullied, or used by others in the business world. Maintaining and building up her family company was an act of filial piety for Janet—it was a way to preserve and honour her father's life work and legacy. And yet at the same time, that necessitated her separation from her family members, in order for her to build confidence in herself and the person she wanted to be. You also see the disparity in her father's thinking—the reason why he had worked so hard was because he aspired to give his children a life of luxury, and yet the ungrateful daughter refused to accept his gift and instead put herself through suffering instead.

What is also interesting is how the different aspirations are conflated and successive in Janet's thinking. Her aspiration to gain the life skills in order to live independently was conflated with the ability to do business and handle the company. Nevertheless, in Janet's case, the process of building her self-confidence and identity in one arena would eventually lead to a more comprehensive development of her mental maturity that enabled better decision-making overall. Later on in her interview, Janet gleefully described her adventures in learning how to balance her budget, clean the house, and even Skyped her mother back home to learn how to turn on the kitchen stove for the first time:

Excerpt 4.6 Interview with Janet, female Myanmarese undergraduate

> **Interviewer:** *Okay, so besides house chores, any other challenges that you find interesting, that you want to reveal here?*
>
> **Janet:** *Cooking. Um, like, the very first day I got my old apartment, I don't know how to turn on the gas stove. [...]*
>
> **Janet:** *That was why I had to Skype my Mum, <in a whiny voice> 'Mum, how do you do this thing?' And my Mum said, 'What is that?' 'It's a gas stove.' 'Oh, you don't know how to do that?' I'm like, 'I don't know. You never told me. I never went into the kitchen.' <laughing> So, that was like, oh my god. I didn't know I was supposed to press, because it makes noise when I press it. I'm like, 'It's not supposed to make noise, right?' So I started panic, 'It doesn't work.' I started freaking out. And, yeah, that was like- so since that, I try to cook like, I looked up whatever I want to eat on internet, Google. I used to live beside the Vic Market, so would stop by the market on the way back home and just like buy whatever I want to eat just go around buying stuff. And try to cook back home. Since then, I've been quite good at cooking and baking now. Like after almost two years. I'm really proud of that. I started from like, don't know how to turn on the gas stove, to like learning really fancy dishes. Not bad. <laughs>*

Janet's story describes a common pattern among many international students about learning how to cook. But note how she seamlessly weaves the usage of modern ICTs into the narrative. She Skyped her mother so as to learn how to turn on the stove; she also looked up recipes and food on Google, rather than traditional recipe books or learning from other people. Increasingly, the ways in which she fulfilled her aspirations to cook were through media. And yet, at the same time, she also relied on traditional parental care and teachings of her mother, conveyed through long-distance communication media. Digital media technologies therefore became both a source for information and life skill training that supplemented or sometimes supplanted familial instruction, as well as a channel for more traditional forms of mother-daughter instruction and caregiving.

Another way that digital media technologies have played a role in the identity work of international students is through tracking their progress made towards their aspirations. The construction of personally meaningful narratives through pictures is something quite a few international students report as being an important source of motivation and encouragement,

as they think about media affects their well-being and aspirations. Some, like Samuel, used pictures to document their life journey as well as their relationships with significant others (Figure 4.7):

	I use social media often. More recently, I started an Instagram account where I can post pictures online. Most photos that I uploaded are the ones here in Melbourne to document my life here. I also use Instagram to look at my friends' pictures back in Singapore and other parts of the world.
	I use a traditional print media to document my past. I absolutely love this pin-board that was done by my girlfriend. Here, she pinned pictures of both of us. Tickets to various events were also pinned onto this board as momentos for the time we spent together. On the top right hand is a countdown calendar to whatever we are looking forward to. This pin-board truly is important for me.

Figure 4.7. Samuel, male Singaporean undergraduate, photos tracking life narratives

Here Samuel comfortably interwove physical and digital collections of pictures to document his life and relationships—an amalgamation of traditional media (print) and new media (Instagram). This construction of identity through a narrative of pictures has been linked to *eudaimonic* well-being (Bauer, McAdams & Pals 2008), as it allows people to create a story of personal growth for themselves and transform the perception of negative incidences in life

into stages of a journey through which some measure of personal growth can be attained. Thus, while ostensibly using media technologies to construct a narrative of their lives to stay connected with family and friends back home, international students are at the same time making sense of their life journey and learning to reflect on how they have grown.

In Samuel's case, the fact that the pin-board was made by his girlfriend to document their relationship also became a visible marker of his aspirations towards family in the future. It marked goals achieved and progress made towards eventually *becoming* a family, with conjoined aspirations and collective goals. In Samuel's language describing his pictures, we can see a lot of references to time—looking at his friends' photos *back* in Singapore, using the pin-board to document his *past*, with a calendar to track events they are *looking forward* to. This language speaks to a sense of life as a continuous journey of moving forward towards one's goals and aspirations, while keeping mementos of the past to spur one on. There is a sense of growth, change, and identity transformation. Here, his relationships with friends, family, and family-to-be, served as the signposts by which he realises who he is becoming. Thus, social media, and other media, become the mirror by which he contrasted his past with his present and future and finds out that he is living 'the good life'.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on the way digital media technologies have allowed international students to negotiate their relationships with family. Firstly, by conceptualising both home and family as set of practices rather than fixed spaces, we saw how these concepts intertwine with the practices surrounding media artefacts and channels of communication. By taking advantage of their polymedia environments, international students and their families negotiate the care practices that bind them together as a family. Secondly, media technologies serve as a space in which these young adults can perform identity work, negotiating and defining their individual and familial identities in contestation with their family members' visions of their roles.

In this chapter, we saw how polymedia environments allowed for a greater blurring of lines between what was a traditional separation between familial caregiving-in-the-present and caregiving-at-a-distance. Baldassar (2016) has suggested that the experience of co-presence, as facilitated by ICTs, has transformed our understanding of distant care provided by families, allowing greater effectiveness at 'being there' for our distant kin, while also imputing a moral dimension to the choice of communications tools. It allowed for students like Tamar to maintain a familial network of kinship ties over multiple countries and alternate

communications with divorced parents. While polymedia theory has been primarily focused on communication patterns using media, here I also highlight the fact that polymedia environments allow for other ways of participating in the practice of family beyond just sharing news or 'being there'—such as eating together over Skype as part of Carol's family ritual or sharing media artefacts as a form of building relationships through shared interests.

At the same time, the greater closeness facilitated by the polymedia environments has also added another wrinkle in students' work to create an individual identity outside of their family. Because polymedia environments allow for greater enmeshing of distant family members' lives with each other, a more delicate balance needs to be struck when negotiating expressions of care that overlap with parental control. Parental ideas about how to express filial piety and providing security for the child are in contestation with the child's desire to find meaningful individual identities, such as in Carol's use of her smartphone to sidestep parental demands to conform to the family's religion. Polymedia environments can also be useful in supporting activities to build independence—Janet learned how to cook through a combination of Skyping with her mother as well as recipes from Google—which in turn helped her fulfil her own aspiration to be a filial daughter and preserve the legacy of family business that her father wished her to have, despite verbally contesting his desire to keep her sheltered. And lastly, polymedia environments also work in helping track and keep records of the transition from individual aspirations to shared lives when building new families, as seen in Samuel's documentation of his relationship with his girlfriend.

This in turn brings us to the topic of the next chapter, which is how polymedia environments can shape or influence international students' belonging to large communities.

Chapter 5

Beyond Imagined Communities: Aspirational Belonging, Connectedness, and Disconnection among Southeast Asian students

The key theme of this chapter is how do Southeast Asian international students answer the questions 'What is my imagined community?' and 'How can I maintain a sense of belonging that negotiates my past, present and future lives?' While Chapter 4 focused primarily on connection with home and family, in this chapter I will discuss connections to larger social structures such as communities (local, global, transnational, online, and offline) and countries (or nation-states). As this chapter's title suggests in evoking the work of Benedict Anderson (1983), notions of community and belonging often operate upon multiple levels of belonging. Writing at a time of predigital media, Anderson's notion has undoubtedly been impacted by the growth of the digital media as both part of the 'imagined' and 'community' dimensions.

This chapter brings together theoretical perspectives on globalisation, transnationalism and transnational social fields, and migrant and diasporic identities to analyse Southeast Asian students' aspirations and practices to forge a sense of belonging to various communities. At the same time, I will also trace the ongoing dialectic between connection to community and development of personal identities within the students' lives.

Belonging, Connectedness, and Transnational Identities in a Globalised Age

The rise of globalisation and transnational migration has provided some significant challenges to previously held ideas of 'belonging' and 'community'. Prior to the 1980s, most social scientists (particularly geographers, anthropologists, and sociologists) had viewed the nation-state as a good methodological unit of analysis for community and society. However, this view became increasingly challenged by rising scholarly interest on emerging diasporas, cosmopolitanism, and transnational flows of people, information, and media across the globe (Anderson 1983; Hall 1990; Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc 1994; Beck 1994; Appadurai 1995; Castells 1996; Vertovec 2001; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004).

Firstly, ideas about communities are changing. Starting with Benedict Anderson's (1983) reconceptualisation of nation-states as 'imagined communities' and Anthony Cohen's (1985) idea of examining communities in terms of their symbolic elements rather than

structural elements, there has been a wave of scholarly interest in the de-territorialisation of 'community'—that is, separating the idea of community from being built around geographic places and fixed localities. Work on globalisation and transnationalism has studied the ways in which communities are constructed across, outside, and interstitially between national borders, facilitated by communications media. Castells (1996) suggested that as networked media became more prevalent, society would be structured in terms of networks rather than groups.

Meanwhile, studies of online space charted the development of virtual communities (Fernback & Thompson 1995) that were entirely based around relationships and shared interests rather than geography. Similarly, work done in the transnationalist paradigm examined how migrants and diaspora still maintained connections and a sense of participation in communities despite being geographically distant and suggested that individuals could be members of multiple overlapping communities simultaneously (Vertovec 2001). However, some scholars also stress that while some aspects of sociality and social spaces are no longer reducible to geographic territory, territoriality has not become irrelevant (Guarnizo & Smith 1998; Scholte 2000). Instead, the new and complex relationships between global flows, social and relational spaces, and the physical territories they inhabit and interweave should be understood and contextualised.

In trying to understand and conceptualise new structural models of community and social relationships, one of the concepts developed was the idea of transnational social fields. Levitt and Glick Schiller defined the concept as follows:

> *[A] social field [is] a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed… National boundaries are not necessarily contiguous with the boundaries of social fields. National social fields are those that stay within national boundaries while transnational social fields connect actors, through direct and indirect relations across borders.* (2004, p. 1009)

Levitt and Glick Schiller go on to distinguish between *ways of being* and *ways of belonging* in a social field:

> *Ways of being* refer to the actual social relations and practices that individuals engage in rather than to identities associated with their actions… In contrast, *ways of belonging* refer

to practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group. (2004, p. 1010)

For example, a person may eat Chinese food in Chinatown without necessarily signalling their identification with Chinese heritage or ancestry. They are merely *being* part of the social field that constitutes the Chinese diaspora, but not *belonging* to it. On the other hand, if they consciously choose to identify themselves as Chinese and enact their heritage through consumption of Chinese products or display of Chinese iconography, they are engaging in *ways of belonging*.

Belonging, as a concept, has often been taken for granted by social scientists and deemed almost too common sense to undergo much deep theorisation and is often uncritically conflated with identity or citizenship. However, after a review of the literature in a number of disciplines, Antonsich (2010) provided a strong theoretical framework for the concept of 'belonging' as having two major dimensions of analysis: the personal, intimate feeling of 'being at home' (place-belongingness) and the discourse which surrounds forms of social inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging). Antonsich suggests five factors which all contribute to the sense of 'place-belongingness': autobiographical factors such as one's personal or ancestral history, relational factors such as relationships with family or friends, cultural factors such as language or religion, economic factors to create stable and secure material conditions, and legal factors such as visas and residency status.

At the same time, there are also prominent discourses surrounding the politics of belonging, which conceptualise 'belonging' and membership as social resources that can be controlled and distributed amongst a community or society. Thus, there exists a struggle between those who claim membership in a particular group and those who have the power to grant membership—discourse arises around issues of social inclusion/exclusion and boundary maintenance. There is often also a problematic conflation of 'belonging' with 'sameness' in hegemonic social discourse, where rhetorics of assimilation compete against rhetorics of multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism.

However, scholars are beginning to explore possible alternatives to the existing discourses around belonging. One movement has been to separate the notion of 'place' from the notion of 'belonging', paralleling the rise of de-territorialisation in globalisation and mobility studies. Some scholars are suggesting changing from examining 'belonging to a place' to 'belonging to a situation', looking at contingent life factors and status rather than focusing on the physical locations and communities that people are surrounded by. Others, such as

Probyn (1996) conceptualise 'belonging' as a process (*becoming*) rather than a status (*being*). 'Belonging' thus becomes an ongoing journey rather than a fixed destination, and the focus of study shifts away from boundary maintenance or inclusion/ exclusion, to an examination of the practices that are performed to *enact* and *express* 'belonging'.

Belonging as a process also ties into the larger theme of aspiration. People aspire to belong, and they will often journey to find or create a space where they feel they can belong. This ties into to Benson and O'Reilly's (2009) ideas of 'lifestyle migration', where people migrate in search of a better life for themselves. Benson and O'Reilly describe a few inter-related phenomena that occur amongst these lifestyle migrants. Some of them migrate to escape from negative situations in their home countries in search of a more meaningful life—whether they are city-dwellers retiring to the countryside in pursuit of a rural ideal, or youth in pursuit of a particular career aspiration.

There is also a rhetoric of lifestyle migration as a process of self-realisation—migration is a chance for them to change their identities or reforge who they are as a person, to see themselves as pioneers heading off on an adventure unlike those who stay behind. However, most lifestyle migrants also report a conflict between expectations and reality in the everyday life they experience compared to the one they had imagined. Much of the focus on lifestyles migration research, therefore, is on the daily practices that migrants use to find meaning in the life that they chose and the ways in which they navigate their new environment.

With international students from Southeast Asia, as they move to Australia for studies, the same issues crop up as in the case of other lifestyle migrants. A large part of the international student lifestyle choices involves their relationships with their home country, their host country, and the various communities therein. These countries and communities shape international students' ideas about where they belong and influence their aspirations to search for a better life. This in turn also influences the media practices that they engage in to remind themselves to pursue this better life among the communities they feel a part of.

Mediated Practices of Aspiration and Belonging

How do students create or maintain ties to the communities that they aspire to belong to? As communities become de-territorialised, they are increasingly reliant on symbolic exchange and hybridised online/offline relationship management to maintain cohesion. For transnational communities in particular, therefore, as they are not bounded to a territory, participation and belonging is highly mediated. Thus, the *ways of being* and *ways of belonging* to a transnational

social field involve media practices. By examining how students deploy media to signal their intent to belong to a particular community, we can gain understanding of the relationship between aspiration and belonging. In this section, I discuss the stories of two international students—Kristy from Malaysia and Sally from Singapore—and show how they employ media as part of their expressions of belonging to a particular community.

We have met Kristy before in Chapter 4. She had come to Australia to study accounting, as it was a multifunctional degree that could be used either to help her father's business back home in Malaysia or enable her to pursue her true dream of a career in a multinational company. Kristy had always been interested in learning languages and meeting people from different nationalities, and she deploys a very high usage of social media phone apps to enable her to maintain connections to disparate networks of friends (Figure 5.1):

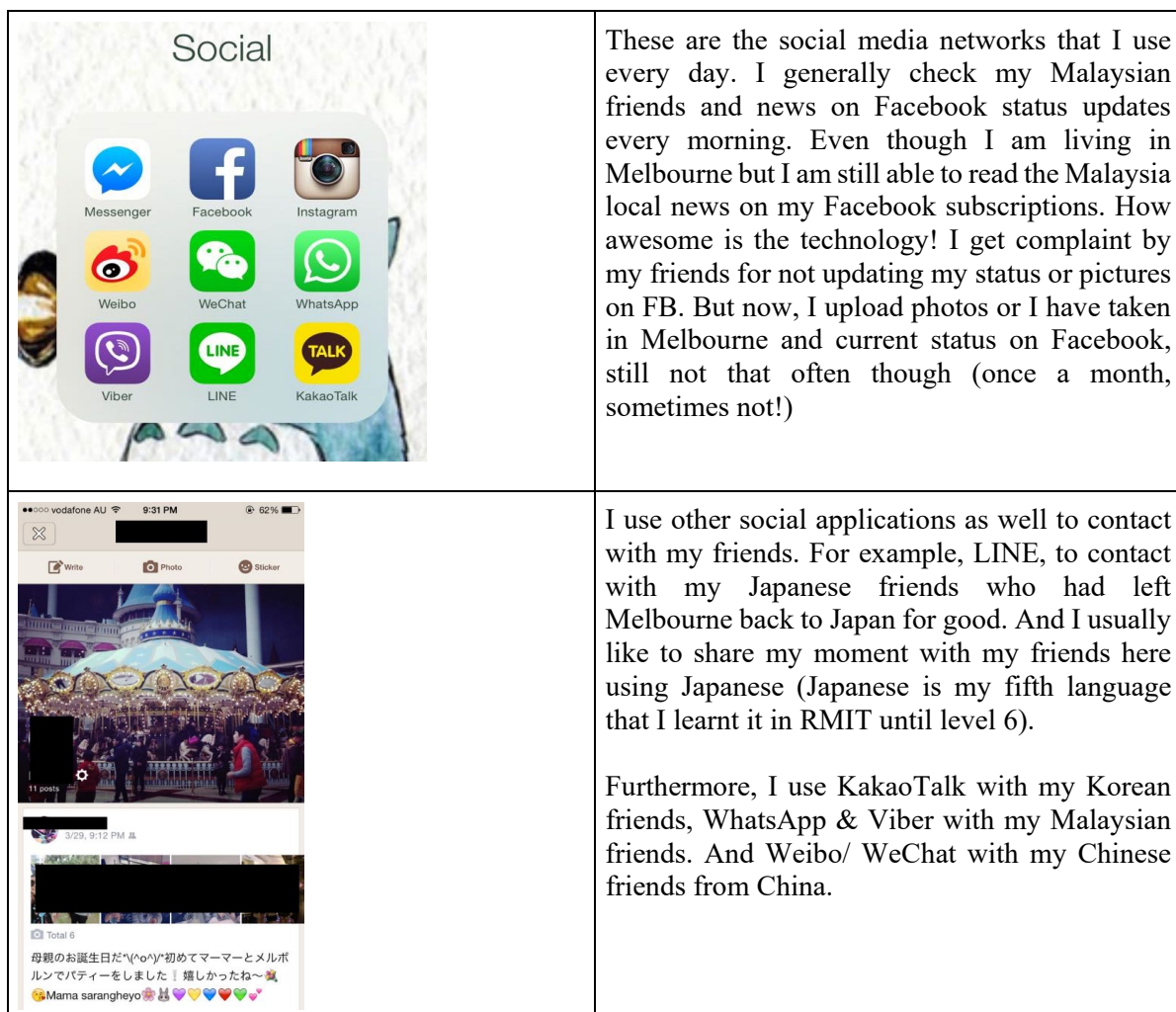|	
	These are the social media networks that I use every day. I generally check my Malaysian friends and news on Facebook status updates every morning. Even though I am living in Melbourne but I am still able to read the Malaysia local news on my Facebook subscriptions. How awesome is the technology! I get complaint by my friends for not updating my status or pictures on FB. But now, I upload photos or I have taken in Melbourne and current status on Facebook, still not that often though (once a month, sometimes not!)
	I use other social applications as well to contact with my friends. For example, LINE, to contact with my Japanese friends who had left Melbourne back to Japan for good. And I usually like to share my moment with my friends here using Japanese (Japanese is my fifth language that I learnt it in RMIT until level 6). Furthermore, I use KakaoTalk with my Korean friends, WhatsApp & Viber with my Malaysian friends. And Weibo/ WeChat with my Chinese friends from China.

Figure 5.1. Kristy, maintaining connections across multiple social media

Through her communicative acts on social media, Kristy subtly reinforced her aspirations to become part of the global community. Kristy's usage patterns of the various social media apps gave us insights into her management of social relationships with different communities and thus her aspirational priorities. According to Madianou and Miller's (2012) theory of polymedia, media should be seen as an integrated structure where each platform is defined relationally to all other media forms. Within that structure of multiple media platforms, such as the social media apps on Kristy's smartphone, her usage patterns of specific apps gives an indication of her social intent and relationship management strategies.

Although Kristy used Facebook to catch up on news from her home country (Malaysia), she received complaints for not updating her Malaysian friends and family about her life in Melbourne very often, indicating a (perhaps subconscious) intent to slowly disengage with them. Alternatively, she frequently contacted her Japanese, Korean, and Chinese friends through LINE, KakaoTalk, and WeChat/Weibo respectively—even if they had returned to their home countries. This showed how her international community of friends takes precedence over her hometown community.

Kristy was perhaps unusual as there was a strong coherence between her usage of media and her life/career goals. Even her studies in Melbourne afforded her the ability to make connections with international students from other countries and thus build the network of contacts and cross-cultural exposure that would help her in her eventual multinational career path. Not only was she actively learning different languages, she was also engaging friendships across multiple media platforms that were more comfortable to them, structured in the language that they were familiar with. In doing so, she was testing markers of identity, signifying that she was engaging in *ways of belonging* and not merely *being*.

At the same time, Kristy's participation and belonging to the local communities within the geographic territory of Melbourne was also highly mediated. In the next excerpt from her picture diary, she described how she found local gatherings of overseas students through a website and how she received her news about her locality through WeChat (Figure 5.2). What is interesting about this, however, is what was missing. Nowhere in her picture diary nor in her interview did Kristy mention her social engagement with English-speaking white Australians. Instead, her primary social connections formed are with the East Asian international student community or with the Chinese-speaking population of Melbourne.

I often use WeChat in Australia not only to contact with my friend, but also a platform for me to get information. Although this is a chinese social application but now it is commonly used in Australia and by the local community. I have subscribed a lot of public accounts on WeChat to read information and broadcasted news by the account I subscribed. I found this very useful and versatile in our daily life, for example, the first account on my screen is about 'life in Melbourne' (literally translated from mandarin), and the author usually updates what issue is going on in Australia twice a week.

Other than reading public accounts, sometimes I like to listen to music that share by my friends on the WeChat's moment! WeChat is a very versatile and practical social application for me, I even use it to do video calls and voice mails to my parents in Malaysia.
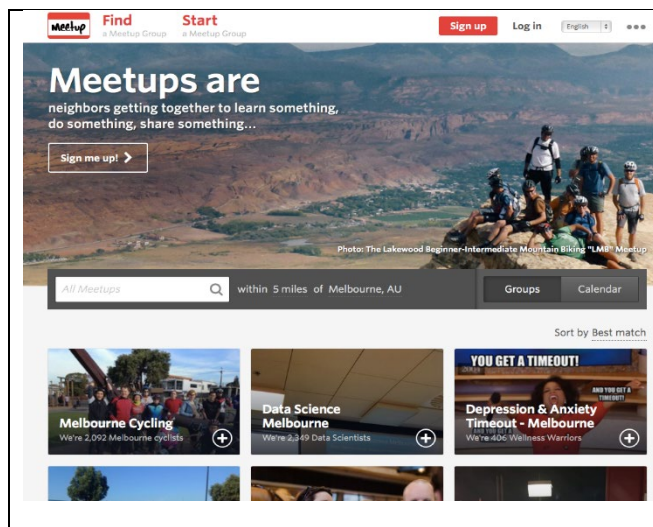
This is a social network website that allows the local community to attend social events organized by the different organizer on this webpage to meet new friends and who are currently living in Melbourne but originally from overseas. I meet most of my Japanese and Korean friends through attending the events posted on this webpage for e.g: Progressibu, or any other meeting groups!

Figure 5.2. Kristy, community meetups and news

Just as the internet is being fragmented into multiple parallel information networks separated by language, so too was Kristy's experience of Melbourne's local communities. Her local information sources were in Chinese. Her search for part-time jobs on another website was also in Chinese. Thus, the linguistic choices inherent in her choice of media platforms serves to both increase and limit her aspirations—she was aware of the resources and

opportunities available to the Chinese-speaking community in Melbourne, which could serve to aid her in pursuing her aspirations. At the same time, the relative lack of attention spent on non-Chinese media platforms had a limiting effect on the resources available to her to pursue her aspirations of a global career. However, as her concept of an international or global career seemed to primarily revolve around East Asia, her aspirations may be fulfilled after all.

On the other hand, there are students who wish to maintain connections with their home countries and communities and therefore structure the media in their environment to help them do so. In the picture diary excerpt below we see Sally, a female Chinese-Singaporean undergraduate, talk about how her laptop's wallpaper constantly reminded her of her aspiration to join the police force in her home country (Figure 5.3):
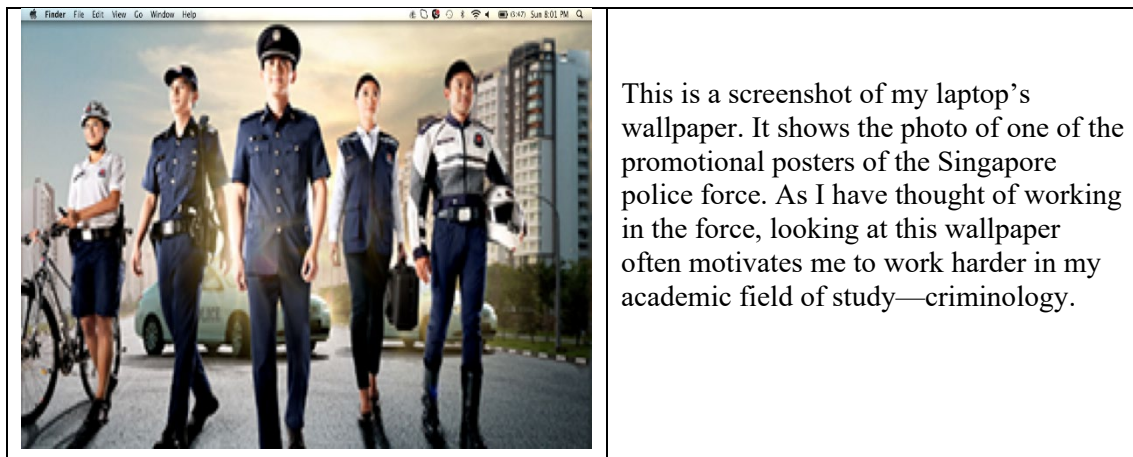

This is a screenshot of my laptop's wallpaper. It shows the photo of one of the promotional posters of the Singapore police force. As I have thought of working in the force, looking at this wallpaper often motivates me to work harder in my academic field of study—criminology.

Figure 5.3. Sally, Singapore police force

In this picture on her laptop, we see Sally enacting a reinforcement of her identity as a Singaporean. Sally was a rather tiny girl—standing barely over 5 feet—so instead of attempting to join the police force as an active duty policewoman, she decided to pursue criminology instead. As there were no criminology degrees offered in Singapore at that time, she came to Australia to study. However, despite studying in Australia, Sally was reluctant to get involved in Australian community life—it took parental intervention and what she described as an act of God to even attend church regularly in Australia, as described in Chapter 4. In addition, Sally also visited a news site from Singapore regularly as part of maintaining her ties to her homeland community (Figure 5.4):

Figure 5.4. Sally, citizen journalism site from home

News portals like these not only communicate factual news about events, they are also a transmission of cultural values about what is deserving of interest. By consuming news from these home-based portals, international students like Sally are reaffirming the cultural tastes and values of their home country and strengthening their identity as part of that society. Gomes and Alzougool (2013) noted that in most cases, international students in Australia consumed media content that they were used to in their home country, or media from the United States, rather than the media content produced in their new host country.

Of particular interest is the specific site that Sally had chosen for her daily news feed. The website on display is STOMP, a branch of the more reputable and established *Straits Times* newspaper, published by Singapore Press Holdings. However, STOMP's main attraction comes from its focus on articles and content submitted by members of the Singaporean public, rather than professional journalists (George & Raman 2008)—hence Sally's reference to it as a 'citizen journalism site'. By providing an online forum where matters of civic interest are published and discussed by the Singaporean community, STOMP has become a place where Singaporeans gather together to collectively build and enforce a communal identity and values. Thus, rather than getting her news from professional news sites such as the main *Straits Times* website or Channel News Asia, Sally instead chose the more community-centric and light-hearted STOMP site as a way to feel included in the collaborative meaning-making process of civic discussion that is creating the Singaporean identity and societal values.

Another aspect of Sally's frequenting of the STOMP site related to cultural factors such as language and humour. Cultural factors, as Antonsich (2010) has mentioned, create a sense of familiarity and community, which in turn reinforces the feeling of 'place-belongingness', or 'feeling at home'. Despite STOMP being an English-language site, the comments section and discussions among the online community of the website are often conducted in Singlish.

Singlish is a colloquial form of English spoken in Singapore that mixes together British English, the Hokkien-Chinese dialect, and occasional Malay words as well. Much of Singaporean humour is derived from Singlish—partially coming from puns and wordplay that arise when transitioning from one language to another in the same sentence, and partially from poking fun at those people who use Singlish in everyday speech, often considered to be less educated and not as urbanely sophisticated as the academic elite. These Singlish-speaking 'heartlanders' are somewhat similar in concept to the 'hillbillies' in the United States, or 'bogans' in Australia, and much self-deprecating humour is centred on playfully using Singlish to simulate certain attitudes or ways of speaking and understanding the world through 'less-sophisticated' eyes.

This playfulness with mixing languages is also one of the hallmarks of witty uses for Singlish, and for many Singaporeans, it is this mixed-up slang that reminds them most of home. The polyglot nature of the social media platforms that are used by these students allow for easy code switching between English in Australia and the languages of their home country. Some have argued that bilingual speakers who employ code switching from one language to another actually *produce* the context in which that language becomes meaningful and relevant (Blom & Gumperz 1972; Hall & Nilep 2015). Thus, by deliberately seeking out and consuming media that uses language from her home country, Sally produced the sensation of being surrounded by her home community in the world she was creating for herself through the media.

In this section, therefore, we have seen how different students navigate a polymedia environment to manage their relationships and aspirations. In Kristy's case, her aspirations to pursue a global career influenced the frequency of her communicative patterns with home versus friends from other countries, as well as the variety of social media platforms she used. In Sally's case, she surrounded herself with media that reminded her of her home country and her aspirations to pursue a career there. She also subscribed to news sites that allowed her to engage online with a collaborative communal process of nation-building while enjoying culturally specific forms of linguistic humour and dialogue.

The Cost of Global Aspirations and the Destruction of Locality

Increasingly, the rise of globalisation and transnational mobility has resulted in rapid changes in society that can radically reconfigure international students' relationship with their home countries and communities. This is particularly apparent in the more developed countries in Southeast Asia, which serve both as a midpoint destination for migrant workers coming from

poorer countries, as well as a source of international students heading towards even more developed countries in the 'Western' world. Even as international students pursue their own aspirations for a global education in other countries, their own home countries are undergoing the process of transformation as a result of the global flow of migrants. Two students—Joseph from Malaysia and Nicholas from Singapore—illustrate this problem:

Excerpt 5.1   Interview with Joseph, male Malaysian undergraduate

> **Joseph***: I was from a high school where sixty students in my class, one-quarter went to UK, another quarter went to US, another quarter went to Hong Kong and Taiwan, another quarter went to Singapore. So when you go back to Malaysia, you have no community to go back to. And then suddenly you realise—hmm, the only people you can ever talk with or ask out, or even just eat a meal with, is your relatives or your parents or whatnot. Where are all my friends? Huh. They're all overseas somewhere.*
>
> **Interviewer***: Okay, alright. So, it was a lack of community back home that was a big factor as well?*
>
> **Joseph***: Yeah. And I think it occurs for particularly Malaysian communities where everyone really tries to go overseas. Like Australians, I think, if they study one of the Australians tried to go, like say UCL [University College London] or something, when they come back their community is still back home, like everybody's still here. Very few [Australian students] go overseas. Malaysia, every single person will go overseas. So I had to build a new community here. And that was a very challenging thing.*

Excerpt 5.2   Interview with Nicholas, male Singaporean undergraduate

> **Nicholas***: When I first came to Australia, I intended to go back to Singapore. But, circumstances have sort of changed, Singapore is not the same as it was ten years ago, or even three years ago, Singapore is so different now. As in, the amount of foreigners you have, the amount of foreigners are fine, but foreigners who don't speak English, who have no sense of courtesy, who have no sense of personal cleanliness, are really ruining Singapore… So yeah. It'll be much better if I can stay here. I guess, if my parents insists I go back, I would go back. But I don't think they'll insist for me to go back. I hope they don't.*

Joseph highlighted a unique aspect of the Malaysian higher education system, which features a host of partnerships with foreign universities, resulting in many students who can afford to travel overseas for their further education. Not only does affordability increase, but Joseph also mentioned that everyone 'really tries to go overseas'. In Malaysia, there are a number of push factors that drive students overseas in hopes of perhaps securing a permanent residency in another country—the first step of which is gaining a university degree from that country. These push factors include racial and religious discrimination, perceptions of high levels of governmental corruption and incompetence, perceived low educational standards of local institutions, and rising costs of living in comparison to starting pay.

Many students, especially from middle-class families, see moving to another country as the best option. As a consequence, the sense of community among Malaysian international students returning home becomes fragmented. Usual patterns of friendship activities—face-to-face chats and eating out together (Gomes et al. 2014)—become disrupted due to the increased global mobility of their high school friends. Their 'home community' is no longer a group of friends bounded by a physical locality, but rather a diaspora of fellow travellers scattered across various countries, united only by past memories of shared experiences together. Thus, even when Joseph goes back to Malaysia for the holidays, one of the most tangible aspects of 'home'—his group of friends—is no longer found in his home country for Joseph, and his ties to Malaysia have become weaker.

Nicholas, on the other hand, described how he felt about the migrants that have come to his country and are 'ruining Singapore', making it not the same as it was three years ago when he had moved to Australia. Singapore has always been seen as a destination for many of the surrounding nations in Asia, as a good place to work and live, made even more so by the government's active courting of foreign investment and migration of talented people (the 'brain drain'). However, in the last few years, there has a been a perceived rapid increase in foreigners migrating permanently to Singapore—particularly from the People's Republic of China—and anti-foreigner sentiments have been rising among the locals, fuelled by media reports of clashes in culture and scandals due to foreigners 'misbehaving' in socially unacceptable ways in Singapore (which include drunk driving in expensive cars and causing deaths of local hardworking taxi drivers, and being bad neighbours due to different housekeeping practices and noise levels). For Nicholas, his home community had not separated, but it had been transformed by the influx of foreign migrants into a place that he was no longer feeling as home.

What Joseph's and Nicholas' stories showed was the cost of pursuing one's aspirations, as well as the ongoing dialectic between individual and national aspirations. The Singapore government has been actively maintaining ties with citizens who are overseas through events such as Love Singapore festivals held in various cities around the world, including Melbourne. At the same time, they are also pursuing a policy of increasing their workforce through skilled immigration, which has led to the situation where Nicholas was feeling conflicted about returning. On the other hand, the Malaysian government has made very little effort to encourage emigrants to return to Malaysia after tertiary education elsewhere, particularly amongst the Chinese-Malaysian ethnic group to which Joseph belongs, in order to continue the primacy of the Malay ethnic majority. As these governments pursue policies to lead their nation-states towards aspirational goals, they in turn shape the aspirational climates and influence the choices of their constituents overseas through forcing a reappraisal of the benefits and costs of pursuing individual aspirations and whether to stay or return.

Religious Communities as Transnational Social Fields

As previous structures that once provided stability and familiarity get uprooted in the tide of globalisation, new transnational structures of community emerge as central to international student life and well-being. One of the most powerful community forces among international students from Southeast Asia in Australia has been transnational religious organisations that have successfully tapped into the circulation of global migrants. The global network of churches and other religious organisations provides a community of support that helps students bear up under the difficulties of the transition process and separation from their home communities. Nicholas continued his story by talking about how he found a community through his church:

Excerpt 5.3 Interview with Nicholas, male Singaporean undergraduate, Protestant Christian

I knew four people before I came to Melbourne. Uh, I knew Sandra, I knew my auntie, uncle, and one guy from army, but that guy actually passed away last year, so… he's not here anymore. Let's see, so uh… how do you build relationships? You just get to know people, just talk. It helped because Sandra was from my cell group in Singapore, so she brought me into [her church cell group here in Melbourne], so I pretty much- from then on, I had fifteen friends already. Pretty easy from then.

Note that for Nicholas, being part of the same cell group was a sufficient basis for forming friendships. Among Protestant Christians, especially Evangelical Christians, there is a strong encouragement to attend cell groups, which are weekly or fortnightly meetings of small groups of people who attend the same church, usually ranging in size from 5 to 25 people. In cell group meetings, members study the Bible together, worship God together with songs or hymns, share their problems, and pray for one another. In essence, cell groups become a microcosm of the larger church population as a whole, and many international students have shared that the cell group becomes like a 'second family' to them while living away from home.

Another interesting thing that emerges from Nicholas' interview, as well as of many others, is how the relationship networks built within the church interwove with the transnational network of global migrants and extended family members. Nicholas mentioned another study participant, Sandra, who had been the one to introduce him to the church cell group in Melbourne because they had also been part of the same cell group back in Singapore. Sandra was also an international student from Singapore, and the church that they both attended in Melbourne—CrossCulture Church—has a large population of international students as part of its congregation.

CrossCulture Church (formerly known as Swanston St. Church of Christ) has had a ministry catering to international students since the 1970s due to it being located in the heart of Melbourne's central business district (CBD), and in response to the growing numbers of international students staying or studying in its vicinity. As such, it has played host to generations of international students—some who have returned to their home countries, and some who have stayed and raised families in Australia. This long-term generational strategy by the church has paid off dividends in terms of having a constant inflow of new international students who have been recommended to attend the church because of past attendees, and who are now members of their churches back in their home countries:

Excerpt 5.4 Interview with Camille, female Malaysian postgraduate, also attending CrossCulture

We didn't have any [pre-migration] briefing of any sort back then but there were a lot of people in my church who are- at least the older ones who had either studied before in Australia or are actually studying there, I mean living there, right now. So like... in a sense that also kind of made it easier. Like, one of the seniors in my church, her daughter and son both live here, work here, and so they helped a bit, they kind of took us around a bit, to say shopping centres or something, like where we didn't know and they told us how to get there and stuff.

Camille was another attendee of CrossCulture, who had been recommended this church by her senior church members back in Malaysia who had previously studied in Australia. She also made contacts with the relatives of her church seniors, who were able to welcome her and provide practical help in orienting her to Melbourne. The church therefore became a vital node in the circulation of community support and practical care among generations of international students.

While Nicholas' and Camille's stories speak of the positive outcomes of religious communities in helping international students integrate and find a sense of support in their new environment, it should be noted that they both came from the dominant religion in Australia—Christianity. For international students with other faiths, it is often more difficult to find that sense of community and transnational networks in Australia, and hence a number of them turned to the media as a source of religious instruction and community. For example, Tamar, a Muslim student from Brunei, described how she looked up correct ways of practicing Islam through the internet:

Excerpt 5.5 Email correspondence with Tamar, female Bruneian undergraduate, Muslim

> *I went to religious school for eight 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.*

However, that same media environment can create fears and negativity. Regular reports in the news and social media about the actions of radical Islamists and Islamic State (ISIS) can cause great fear and hurt among those who are exposed to negative news about their religion:

Excerpt 5.6 Email correspondence with Tamar, female Bruneian undergraduate, Muslim

> *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 did not always wear the hijab, Tamar was not often identified externally as a Muslim, but she still identified herself as one, as a matter of private and personal practice. Her words also indicated that she thought of herself as part of the larger brotherhood of Muslims around the world. Tamar received most of her news about her fellow co-religionists through the internet, particularly Facebook and Twitter. While this helped her connect to the larger worldwide community of Muslims, the news about Islam and ISIS has led her to experience a 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 mentioned was a response by the Australian community towards the local Muslim population in the wake of the Lindt café siege in Sydney in 2014, whereby people offered to accompany them on public transport networks so that they would not 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 interpreted that hashtag as helping to defend those that are actively being harassed worldwide.

When thinking about Tamar's case, the issue of belonging once again becomes pertinent. Distanced from her regular religious support structures in her homeland and from a local religious community of support, Tamar instead started to identify with the global body of Muslims found online. Her practice of religion became mediated by online media. At the same

time, because the online community became more salient to her, news and comments about her religion on Twitter bore more weight in her perceptions of social acceptance or exclusion in Australian society.

Communities and Personal Identities

Lastly, there arises the issue of the relationship between one's personal identity and the community or country one lives in. As Benson and O'Reilly (2009) mentioned, many lifestyle migrants see themselves as pioneers and migration as a chance to forge a new identity. In this section, I present the stories of two young men—Yohann from Malaysia and Simon from Indonesia—who had created identities that were resistant to the home countries they had originated from and in their reactions to the local community in Australia. We begin with Yohann, the architecture student from Malaysia, who we met earlier in Chapter 2, and who had come to Australia in search of sustainable architecture techniques:

Excerpt 5.7   Interview with Yohann, male Malaysian undergraduate

Yohann*: Well, for me back in Malaysia, especially where I'm from, in the Borneo islands of Malaysia, there's not much architectural schools to begin with. In Malaysia there's only one, which is poorly or newly-formed, and I can't really get much from there if I were to study in university. So from there I started to get into international universities.*

[…]

Yohann*: The thing that [the Malaysian universities] may be focusing on is not what I'm willing to or what I'm interested in. Which I think we can push it more, based on what we have in Malaysia.*

Interviewer*: So what are you interested in then?*

Yohann*: I'm more interested basically in how—architecture-wise—how to generate sustainable buildings around the environment. Because for me, the major problems for buildings right now, is basically through profit. They are mostly controlled by the developers. There's not much interesting buildings around I guess. To be exact, to answer my problems, there's not much sustainable buildings around. So, yup, that's what I'm trying to go through, what I'm trying to pick up.*

[…]

Yohann*: [Speaking on cultural differences] One of the things probably is the open-mindedness of the views over here. They do encourage their kids to do whatever they want, or the government to encourage the people to do whatever they're*

willing to pursue for. Whereas back in Malaysia probably they might want to focus on things that they need to, so they would really ask people to move into the industry, because there's a lot of that industry.

In Yohann's case, the architectural education in Malaysia was lacking in quality, and the building industry as a whole was focused on profit from building developments rather than sustainable practice, which was what he was interested in. As such, he chose to pursue studies in Australia to gain more experience in sustainable development methods. What he appreciated was the freedom to pursue his interests, rather than being pigeonholed into what the local industry required of architects. When commenting on the state of Malaysia's architectural scene, however, Yohann indicated some of his attitudes towards the industry where 'the major problem for buildings right now, is… profit. They are mostly controlled by the developers'. Underlying this comment, however, is an entanglement of socio-political conflicts and perceptions of that conflict among the people of Yohann's home state.

Yohann was from one of the two easternmost states in Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) that is on Borneo, a resource-rich island, where there are major resource extraction industries of timber, petroleum, and mining. However, at the same time, relatively little money goes into developing the quality of life of the people from the East Malaysian states, and one of the common gripes of the people on Borneo is that the money earned by the country from selling resources of their state and plundering their natural environment is being spent on developing the other states in the western Malaysian peninsula (especially the capital of Kuala Lumpur) instead of feeding back into to their state. So, there is relatively low access to good educational facilities in Borneo, and even if there were, most of the developers are focused on profit rather than sustainability and taking care of the environment.

A second problem is that a number of construction and development companies are often perceived by the populace to be vehicles for cronyism and corruption (Abu Hassim, Kajewski & Trigunarsyah 2010; Manthorpe 2015). The public perception is that many real estate and property development firms are owned by cronies of the people in power and win building contracts easily—not to actually build things necessary for the nation or state but to channel funds into the private accounts of the owners and complete the development contract with substandard building materials and procedures. Thus, when Yohann stated that the problem was profit and being controlled by the developers, he was not just referencing the standard business practices of a development company out to make a reasonable profit—he was referencing the popular perception that many development companies in Malaysia are shell

companies designed to funnel money into the hands of rich cronies while cutting down on building quality and other costs as much as possible, to grant even bigger profits to the developers.

For Yohann, because he had a strong difference in opinion in the direction that the construction industry should take in Malaysia, he had a low expectation of ever being able to make a change in his society. As such, there was very little incentive for him as an architect who cares about the environment and sustainable development over profiteering to work or study architecture in Malaysia. Australia allowed him the freedom not just to pursue his own interests but also to break free of the system of cronyism and corruption plaguing the Malaysian construction industry. However, at the time of writing this dissertation, Yohann has since completed his course and returned to Malaysia to work as an architect in his home state. This highlights the often conflicting and contradictory nature of an international student's relationship with their home country—it was corruption-riddled and regimented, but to Yohann it was still the place where he felt he belonged.

Some students experience a sort of existential crisis as religious identities they have built up in their home communities no longer matter in their new environs. Simon, a philosophy student who came from a strict religious and dogmatic school in Indonesia, described his experience coming to a more relaxed religious environment:

Excerpt 5.8   Interview with Simon, male Indonesian undergraduate

> **Simon:** *In Indonesia, they believe that, they're more foundational—they believe their absolute truths, like one plus one is two, and they really hold it as absolute truth. Whereas here in uni, the people are consider it as human construct. So yeah, maybe that's the difference… In school [in Indonesia], the way they talk, it's like they really respect mathematics, tautologies, you know, that sort of things. Sort of evidence statements. Yeah, they really. But here, in Swinburne at least, I don't know about other universities, they don't really believe that. So, it's like, I'm not used to this environment. But neither do I really love it back home, those foundationalist attitude. But I have to argue from that viewpoint back home. But now, it's like everybody already believe it, why- why am I arguing?*
>
> **Interviewer:** *So back then, everyone believes in That Truth, and you're arguing against that. But when you come here, everyone doesn't believe that it's a truth, so there's nothing to rebel against.*
>
> **Simon:** *Yeah. It's like, I don't have… all my labour seems… not very useful in eighteen years.*

Simon had spent years of his life trying to rebel against the strict religious authorities in his home country of Indonesia and had partially built his religious identity around resistance to dogma, arguing against fundamentalist attitudes. When he came to Melbourne and met people who already believed that religious truth is a human construct, he was at once both set free from a community of religious dogmatism but also lost without his familiar philosophical opponents to argue against. At the same time, he continued to find himself still mentally trapped in the religious strictures that he was raised with and had difficulty overcoming his youthful past. In his picture diary, he described how he turned to books obtained through the internet to provide a way to help him (Figure 5.5):
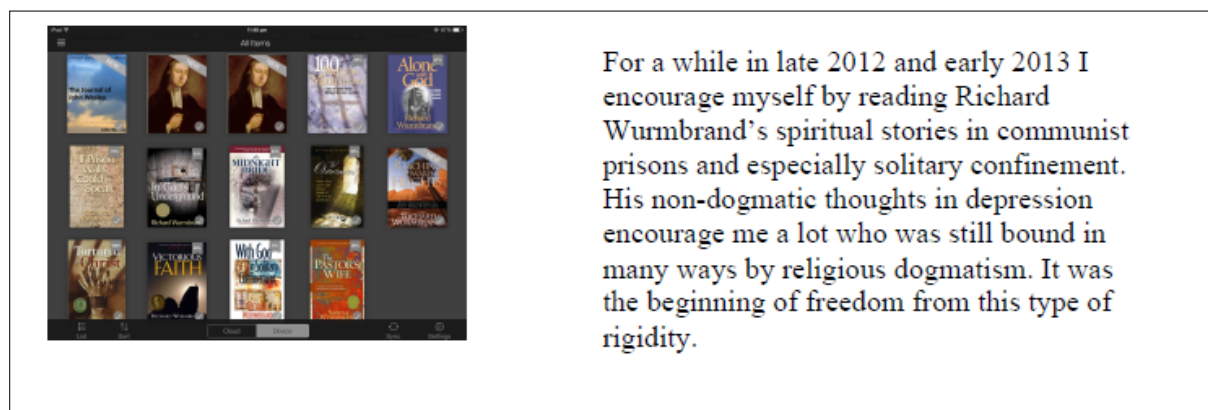

For a while in late 2012 and early 2013 I encourage myself by reading Richard Wurmbrand's spiritual stories in communist prisons and especially solitary confinement. His non-dogmatic thoughts in depression encourage me a lot who was still bound in many ways by religious dogmatism. It was the beginning of freedom from this type of rigidity.

Figure 5.5. Simon, spiritual ebooks of Richard Wurmbrand

In this case, you can see that media served as a way for Simon to reconstruct his own personal faith and identity in the absence of the role he had once played in his community. No longer a rebel fighting to be free of religious dogmatism in his environment, he now had to continue the battle within himself, and found encouragement through connecting with another spiritual seeker via eBooks.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen some of the many ways in which community and belonging become entwined with transnational migration and media practices in the lives of Southeast Asian international students. Three types of transnational social fields were described in this chapter—online social networks, nation-states and their attendant diaspora, and transnational

religious networks. In each of these, we see media practices that serve to ground the sense of belonging to a community in various ways.

While it may be tempting to think that all communities are imagined, and can be entirely constructed out of symbolic exchanges in an age of digital media, we see that there are also some very practical and material realities behind these transnational social fields. Kristy's engagement with her overseas friends on social media was based upon building friendships through face-to-face meetups while they were still fellow students in Melbourne. Joseph's and Nicholas' loss of community within their nation-states was based on the grounded realities of global migration. The religious communities of Nicholas and Camille were built around practical week-to-week meetings, and for Tamar it was based around online news of Muslims-related events in real life.

Digital media did not change the nature of communities, but it did provide more options for levels of engagement with them. Community practices and ways of enacting belonging can include active engagement through social media (as in Kristy's case); it can involve passive consumption of symbols that reinforce communal identity (as in Sally's case); and it can also include active disengagement (such as Simon's journey to rid himself of dogmatic attitudes) or passive disengagement (as seen in Tamar's fear of Australian attitudes towards Muslims).

When Benedict Anderson first conceptualised the notion of imagined communities, he suggested that communities could be distinguished from each other by the style in which they are imagined (Anderson 1983, p. 49). In this chapter, we have seen new forms of imagined community emerging bound together by different styles. For Kristy, her global network of friends are characterised by a common lifestyle of migration, tied together through specific, varied, and discrete social media networks. She is but one node (albeit a very well-connected one) in the larger network society that Manuel Castells (1996) foresaw.

For other students, they imagined themselves at the nexus of competing forces in conflict, each with their own rhetorics of ideology around which they build community. For Simon, who found himself caught between an ideological community of religious dogmatism and another one of secular indifference, he found refuge and identity through the writings of a group of spiritual seekers. For Sally, when experiencing the clash of nation-states, she chose to disengage as much as possible from the Australian community and instead focus on maintaining her connection to Singapore.

And for a third group, the markers around which they built their sense of community and belonging disappeared due to forces beyond their control. For Joseph and Nicholas, it was the changes in their homelands due to globalisation, and for Tamar it was the change in

religious attitudes towards her faith online after incidents of terrorist acts. In these cases, they sought to adapt to changing circumstances and build new communities through identity management—Tamar selectively chose to keep her faith private, Nicholas emphasised his religious identity to integrate with the church community more than the national one, and Joseph, as we will see in Chapter 6, gave up certain lifestyles and leisure activities in order to fit better into the local Australian society.

Chapter 6
Play, Leisure, and Learning Aspirations

'I guess for me [online role-playing games are] like an outlet. Like, I guess in a sense you don't have to worry about, um… I guess saying 'reality' is a bit weird, but it's like say if you're not happy that day, you just like take it out on whatever creature you find. And it's also stimulating. That you have to learn new things, and then you also have to coordinate your hands and what you're thinking.' (Camille, female undergraduate from Malaysia)

Play and leisure activities have long been associated with the emotional well-being of individuals and an important part of cultural practice and sociality. In his book *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith (1997, pp. 9–13) outlines seven perspectives on play that have historically comprised much of the scholarship surrounding play. We play to learn and develop skills (*play as progress*), to have fun (*play as self-focused*), to express ourselves creatively (*play as the imaginary*), and to get away from the seriousness of life (*play as frivolous*). We play to get along with people and forge a common identity (*play as identity)*, to establish dominance and power through contests (*play as power)*, and sometimes simply to see if our luck will hold out when we take chances (*play as fate)*. However, the advent of greater media convergence brought about by digital media has allowed for an increase in mediated forms of play and leisure. Jenkins et al. define play as 'the capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem-solving' (2006, chapter 6) and considers it one of the key skills required of people living in the new media environment of the 21st century.

As play scholar Miguel Sicart (2014) notes, the playful is a key feature of contemporary media practice. However, it is important to recognise that the playful is more than videogames—rather it points to an attitude and mode of engagement. 'Playfulness is a way of engaging with particular contexts and objects that is similar to play but respects the purposes and goals of that object or context' (Sicart 2014, p. 21). We can engage playfully with many different contexts—in building and maintaining relationships with others (e.g. joking, flirting), in the way we communicate and express ourselves (e.g. emojis, memes, Snapchat filters, profile/phone customisation), and in the way we navigate the physical and social contexts we exist in and the life goals that we have set (e.g. 'YOLO', lifehacks, the 'bucket list').

One of the central challenges surrounding play and playfulness is the idea of boundaries and ambiguity (Sutton-Smith 1997). Should 'play' and 'leisure' be considered as oppositional to 'work' and 'serious matters'? And if so, where does the demarcation lie? Lines are being blurred, especially in the hybridity of experiences, places, and socialities fostered by digital media technologies. The media frees us up for leisure at the same time as it further enslaves us through the 24/7 wireless leash (Arnold 2003; Qiu 2007). The rise of the professionalisation of the amateur and leisure in industries such as e-sports (Taylor 2012) and YouTube channels illustrate the complexity that lies beneath the work-play dichotomy, where something previously considered mostly frivolous (playing video games) can require long hours of hard work and be the basis for a lasting career. The rise of apps and algorithms in and around social media creates virtual public spaces separate from 'work' or 'home' where we can engage in playful behaviour, and unwind while engaging in sociable behaviours (Rao 2008).

As aforementioned Sutton-Smith (1997) argues for rhetoric of play as having the core trait of adaptive variability, derived from human evolutionary history and understandings about the way the brain works. This adaptive variability—marked by quirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility—is made manifest in the sheer variety of forms of play and ways of studying it. Play is a model of the Darwinian struggle to survive; in the arena of human culture and society it is a way for us to deal with our existential anxieties. As we play, we artificially induce problems and uncertainties, and then resolve them in the virtual arena. That process ultimately helps us in our search for the Maslowian needs—safety, approval, achievement, love, and significance (Maslow 1943). Therefore, when international students engage in play activities, they are at the same time pursuing their aspirations towards a good life by fulfilling these needs—to feel secure (away from stressors in their life), to gain the approval of other people in their environment (by building common interests), and in certain play worlds feeling a sense of mastery and control over their surroundings, or perhaps vicariously experiencing triumph through their support of a sports team.

However, play does more. Sicart (2014) suggests that the characteristics of play include creativity and appropriation. When people play, they recognise and accept the rules and structures that govern the play world and perform within those rules to satisfy their needs or desires. Play is a way to creatively engage with the contexts we live in and appropriate the physical, social, or technological settings to serve our purposes. As students aspire and pursue the good life, they creatively appropriate the resources around them—particularly media technologies—to enable that pursuit. It becomes part of our real world experiences, rather than being separate or detached from it (Huizinga 1949; Salen & Zimmerman 2004). Students

repurpose existing 'serious' technologies like cloud computing to serve their leisure activities of watching movies online. They repurpose entertainment media (such as English sitcoms) for the serious purposes of learning a new language.

Students can creatively engage in leisure activities for serious purposes. Robert Stebbins defined leisure as the 'un-coerced, contextually framed activity engaged during free time, which people want to do and, using their abilities and resources, actually do in a satisfying or a fulfilling way (or both)' (Stebbins 2012, p. 2). Stebbins developed a model to classify all leisure activities into one of three categories—a model he terms as the Serious Leisure Perspective (Stebbins 2015, pp. 15–42). The three categories of the Serious Leisure Perspective are: (a) casual leisure, (b) project-based leisure, and (c) serious pursuits which become further subdivided into serious leisure and devotee work.
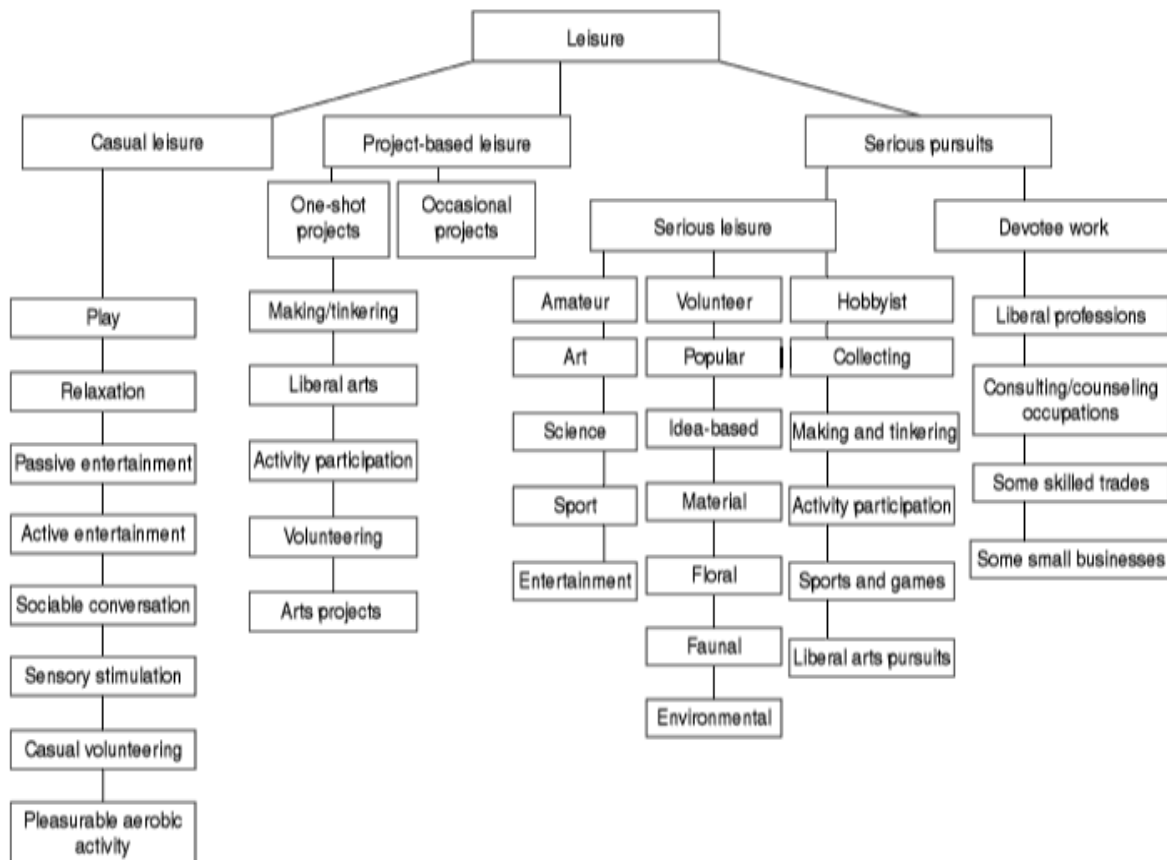

Figure 6.1. Serious Leisure Perspective (taken from Stebbins 2015, p.16)

Figure 6.1 charts the breakdown of these three categories into more distinct forms. Casual leisure includes those activities that are pursued primarily for hedonic pleasure and fun/enjoyment. These can include activities such as play, relaxation (e.g. strolling, lazing

around), passive entertainment (e.g. TV shows, books, movies), active entertainment (e.g. games), sociable conversation with others, sensory stimulation (e.g. eating, drinking, sightseeing), and casual volunteering (as opposed to serious or career-focused volunteering). Project-based leisure activities are the intermediate stage between casual and serious forms of leisure activities—there is both a sense of fun as well as the fulfilment of meaningful goals requiring sustained effort (which is more reminiscent of serious leisure) but lacking the long-term commitment to a particular pursuit, due to time constraints or busyness of the participant in the leisure activity, and thus the participant does not really have the opportunity to make a career out of it.

'Serious pursuits' is Stebbins' third category and is subdivided into two smaller categories: serious leisure and devotee work. Devotee work is when people are engaged in occupational careers, which generate immense amounts of fulfilment and enjoyment in them, such that the boundary between work and leisure is erased, and their job becomes their passion during leisure time as well. These may include examples from consulting or counselling jobs, small businesses, and some liberal professions or skilled trades (like chefs, for example). Serious leisure are those leisure activities which a person pursues in a hobbyist, volunteer, or amateur capacity, which are sufficiently substantial and fulfilling enough that they are able to make a career out of it if they so choose. These include things like fine arts or sports, acquisition of specialised knowledge, or collectables they are passionate about. The six qualities that distinguish serious pursuits (both serious leisure and devotee work) from the other two categories of leisure include

(1) some element of *perseverance* required when overcoming setbacks and obstacles in the course of pursuing this activity (e.g. rugby players overcoming injuries to play again);

(2) the opportunity to follow a *career* based upon the leisure (or devotee work) activity (e.g. opportunities to become a professional rugby player);

(3) the requirement to make substantial personal *efforts* in that career using one's specialised skill set/ knowledge/ resources (or all three), (e.g. rugby players must adhere to a daily training exercise regimen);

(4) the development of several tangible *durable benefits* as side effects of pursuing one's passion, such as self-enrichment, self-expression, or enhancement of self-esteem and feelings of accomplishment, (e.g. winning a trophy as a rugby player);

(5) the development of an *ethos* (spirit) by the community of participants involved in each particular serious pursuit (e.g. the spirit of good sportsmanship and fair play in rugby); and

(6) the person identifies strongly with their chosen pursuit—it forms a core part of their *identity*.

Stebbins is largely working from within a psychological perspective and thus overlaps with Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of the self as being the primary focus of play. We indulge in play and leisure because it pleases ourselves to do so.

One of the core issues around leisure and aspiration has to do with the professionalisation of leisure. In research on the electronic sports industry, T.L. Taylor noted that many players undergo a socialisation process as they go from conceptualising their game playing as hobby and leisure to serious undertaking and sport (Taylor 2012). She rightly points out that there are many instances of hard work and tedious practice inherent in professional sports such as football, and many people do not blink an eye at that description. And yet, when it comes to cyberathletes and the notion that hard work must be put into the skilling up of the professional players of computer games, laymen often experience difficulties in accepting it.

What Taylor's work suggests is that the social environment plays a crucial role in the formation of aspirations around serious leisure activities. One has to learn from others that it is acceptable to turn a non-work hobby into a career pursuit. For international students, this can happen through two methods. Firstly, they may encounter new vocations in their host country that did not exist in their home countries and discover that what was previously thought of purely as a leisure activity is considered by some as a job in Australia. Secondly, access to international media can facilitate the development of interests that are not encouraged in one's home country but may be an avenue for career progression elsewhere.

How then does this mix of trends surrounding play and leisure in the new media environments of today intersect with international students' aspirations and pursuit of well-being? In this chapter, I describe two aspects of how international students incorporate media technologies in their pursuit of play and leisure activities, as part of their aspirations towards a better life. Firstly, leisure activities can serve as a bridge for adaptation to a new social and cultural context. Secondly, international students can engage in serious and creative leisure activities in order to learn life skills as part of their aspirations to become a better person. These two areas contribute to the central theme in defining aspirational well-being in and around practices of leisure for international students.

Leisure as a Bridge for Adaptation

One of the core components of international student well-being is the ability to successfully adapt to and exist in the new environment of the country they are studying in. This ability to adapt has implications not just for their present living circumstances but also can be seen as a part of a larger continuum of the student's progress towards a more cosmopolitan identity as a global citizen. Leisure activities can often serve as a useful bridge for students to adjust to their environments in Australia. However, there are also cultural aspects to the play and leisure practices of international students, and thus at a deeper level, the ways in which they are engaging with play and leisure also speaks to struggles of power, class, ethnicity, and the clash of cultures. An example of this can be seen in Joseph's story, where he shares his attempts to establish friendships here through community activities:

Excerpt 6.1 **Interview with Joseph, Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate**

Interviewer: *How do you go about building a community of friends over here then?*

Joseph: […] *Basically, you try to participate in as many community activities as possible—volunteering, joining student societies, anything you can find. And hopefully there will be one spot somewhere that you can fit in.*

[…]

Interviewer: *What sort of club activities did you take part in?*

Joseph: *Mm… like a lot. Uh, but I never really committed to a particular one, I was exploring many. Um… commerce students club, financial management association, Australasian association, Malaysians of Melbourne University, chess club, OCF, heck of a lot. […] I would join each of them, but I never committed to either one of them because I committed to an organisation called Embrace Education, where you spend your time teaching asylum seekers who came from overseas and they don't have education. I found similar-minded people there, it was fun teaching people. But the main community was built in Cross Culture Church, which I committed most of my time. But, before that, for around 8 months, when I came here, there wasn't any church connection, it was all volunteering, somewhere, somehow. And the Australian culture was so foreign when I joined conservation volunteers. Uh… I absolutely didn't know how to interact with Australians, but now it's fine.*

Interviewer: *Can you tell me more about that? You also mentioned some issues about culture shock, right? What were some of the issues you faced in terms of culture shock, or cultural differences, between Australia and Malaysia or Singapore?*

[…]

Joseph: *I notice students here place a lot of emphasis—I mean, relatively to students from Malaysia and Singapore—that studies is not everything. That extra-curricular activities, part-time jobs, all these things play a very significant role in whether or not they'll have a successful career in the future, or whether or not they develop as a person in the first place. Whereas in the Malaysian and Singaporean culture, everything is just studies. You get better results than me, that's your way forward. But nobody works part-time, rarely. And if you do, people will suspect you, but here if you work part-time people respect you for that, then if you are heavy on co-curricular activities but you sacrifice a bit of your results people will respect you for that as well, in the competitive academic environment. Asian communities—I think it applies to people from China as well—if you sacrifice results because of co-curriculum people will say that was bad time management.*

Joseph described how he tried to get involved in community and how through these activities he built up friends. And yet, this was not uncontested. Embedded in this excerpt we can see the clash of different rhetorics of play: the idea of play as frivolous, play as part of community identity, and play as a site for the contestation of power between different cultures. Joseph actually described a very common perception among Asian communities—and hence in the minds of many Asian international students when they arrive in Australia—that the only purpose for students is to study.

Anything else—especially leisure or extra-curricular activities, or even part-time work—is to take second place and should not interfere with one's studies. This, he contrasts sharply with his perceptions of the Australian attitude towards work-play-study balance. There are obvious links to aspirational mobility as well. The ultimate question that both cultures are trying to answer is what would give the best advantage in one's future career, and while Asian communities focus on academic proficiency, Australian culture takes a more holistic view. Thus, in order to progress in Australian society, Joseph has ascertained it was important to get involved in different aspects of community life, even at a minor cost to his academic results if necessary.

Beyond the balancing of personal priorities between studies and play is the larger issue of the way hegemonies of power are embedded in the leisure practices of a nation or culture, and the difficulties that international students have to face when trying to navigate that cultural environment. Sutton-Smith argued that

The more powerful group in power induces the subordinate group by persuasion or example to play the hegemonial group's games, under the presumption of their moral superiority […]. The value for the hegemonial group is that playing the games can become a kind of persuasion to believe in the general ideology surrounding t hem (1997, p. 96).

Joseph experienced his greatest moment of cultural foreignness when he joined the conservation volunteers. Conservation and environmentalism is a relatively small consideration in a developing country like Malaysia, which is known for its rich natural resources in timber and oil.

It was a huge shock to go from a country where the environment is not particularly highly valued to joining a conservation group in Australia, where the protection and preservation of Australia's unique natural island habitat is valued highly. While Joseph's motive might have been simply to make friends in a new community, by taking part in the unique range of volunteering options available in Australia, he also absorbed the values and ideology of the section of Australia's population he interacted with—a rise in the importance of preserving the environment; the charity to help with asylum-seekers (which is also an ongoing current issue in Australia); and a lowering of the need to attain academic excellence in order to succeed in having a good life in the future. This pattern is further illustrated by Joseph's comments on social support:

Excerpt 6.2   Interview with Joseph, Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate

Interviewer: *How connected do you feel to sources of social support? That means people you go to for encouragement, for advice, when times are difficult. In your early days at Melbourne.*

Joseph: *Social support? Unfortunately, regrettably as well, turned back to my gaming communities. So basically, friends who have separated, but went to UK or Singapore while I was in Australia. True, there are some delays, because internet connection and the distance… when we played games together it's like, we're back in high school again. So those were the initial support. But I've since discovered that such things cannot be permanent. So, it must be stopped. I encouraged friends to stop also. But those were the initial ones. Like, you're trying to get back what you lost. And, because of internet connectivity globally, everybody's in sync. Like,*

just at the same time. So you're doing an activity together, instead of talking together at the same time for instance in Skype. And you're doing an activity at the same time while asking each other, 'Eh how's your study? What are you studying? How's Australia?' We chat a lot of stuff.

Interviewer: *But you found that was useful?*

Joseph: *That was the initial support. Uh… beneficial up to a certain extent. But if you- if you rely on it solely to be your social support, then destructive. If that is your only source of social support. Beneficial to a certain extent, yeah.*

Interviewer: *Why do you say that it can be destructive if it's your only source of social support?*

Joseph: *Then, you won't learn at all. Because… I think social life has a lot of learning involved. And, if you've already learnt a way to interact, which is through gaming, then that's it, like the next time you go into the gaming community you know how to interact again. And you never learn outside world, how they interact. Professionals interact differently, Master's students interact differently, undergraduate students interact differently, high school students in Australia also interact differently. But when you're part of different social circles, with different personalities grouped together, then there's a whole new learning process involved. So that's what I meant by if you rely on it too much, it'll be destructive because you don't build up your social skills. Absolute zero.*

Here, we saw Joseph starting to cut ties with his previous communities of support and patterns of play. In Malaysia, it is very common to have young teenage males play networked online games together, as a form of social bonding. Internet and gaming cafes dot the urban landscape, and with the advent of broadband internet, networked play now occurs more frequently at home with groups of friends. Thus Joseph still carried over this familiar cultural pattern of play when he came to Australia and indulged in it as a form of psychological and social comfort, which he later regrets. But notice that the reason why he regretted it was not because he wanted to cut off all ties with his former life, but rather because he realised that staying in his comfortable pattern of play would lead to maladjustment with his new context.

Therefore, for the sake of his future social interactions and learning, he deliberately stopped gaming with his friends from home and sought out interactions with people in his new land. Joseph later talked about how he had to buy an original copy of a game for the first time, instead of a pirated one, and joined Steam—an online games distribution platform and community of players. This led him to playing games such as *Shogun: Total War* and *Mass*

Effect with local Australian teenagers. He then described one of the major differences between the play styles of Australia and Malaysia—the players here were far more likely to use microphones and voiceover chat, compared to the typed-out text chat messages that is prevalent in Malaysian gaming circles. Joseph then started to adopt some of the local patterns of gaming as well.

From this, we can see how patterns of play and leisure vary significantly between cultures and how one international student tried to negotiate the differences between the cultural values by absorbing and adapting to the local patterns of leisure and play, along with the values that are embedded in these cultural forms. However, this is not the only way that students can react to the cultural distress they experience as part of the migration process.

While the earlier two examples were about how students use leisure activities to help with the stresses of adapting to a new culture, there is a third approach. This is shown through the story of Samuel, a student from Singapore—this time, about aspiration and appropriation:

Excerpt 6.3   Interview with Samuel, male Malay-Singaporean undergraduate

Interviewer: *Was it always your dream to actually travel overseas and to study overseas?*

Samuel: *Actually yes. Yes, um especially Australia because I play rugby back in Singapore and it's just like their national sport so actually, best to be here as well, to uh, improve my rugby as well.*

Interviewer*: Okay, tell me more about how you got interested in rugby. How did you first ...*

Samuel: *Uh, I started when I was 12, um, primary school. I played with a bunch of friends and all that and after that I went on to my secondary school. I went to a very good, uh- a very um, rugby-based school, ACS Independent, back in Singapore, and then um- then I trained 3 times a week and it became a passion after all.*

Notice that Samuel made his choice to come to Australia because of his passion for rugby, a pursuit he took seriously, reflecting years of dedication and hard work since primary school. Samuel's love of the game has profoundly shaped both his identity and his life choices—he decided to major in physiotherapy partially because of his interest in sports. And he chose to come to Australia to 'improve his rugby'. In fact, when questioned later about what he hoped to get out of his time in Melbourne as an international student, his first answer was 'to improve [his] rugby', and he only mentioned other factors after further prompting. So rather

than sports being used instrumentally to help improve his social relationships, or help with internal mental stressors, rugby was pursued autotelically, as an end in and of itself.

Rugby as a transnational and aspirational narrative is also prevalent throughout Samuel's story. Samuel learned about the sport by attending ACS Independent, a rugby-focused school in Singapore. ACS is the acronym for 'Anglo-Chinese School', founded by the British when they colonised the ethnic-Chinese dominant island of Singapore. Rugby was a reflection of British culture at that time, and it was introduced into Singapore through British schools like ACS. Samuel, who belongs to the ethnic minority of Malays in Singapore, joined the Anglo-Chinese school, representing the two dominant powers in Singapore's history. The school itself has a very good reputation and is considered one of the top-tier schools in the country today. Even though Samuel did not come from a very prosperous family background, his entry into the school afforded him the opportunity to assimilate into the dominant elite (many children of the upper classes also attend ACS), and rugby was also a way to appropriate the cultural forms of the British. This then became a gateway into aspiring towards overseas study, in a country where rugby was dominant. At the same time, Samuel's exposure to internet media facilitated both his dreams to come to Australia, as well as his access to learning materials for improvement:

Excerpt 6.4   Interview with Samuel

> **Interviewer:** *Okay, alright. Did the media help in any way in like, influencing you towards rugby?*
>
> **Samuel:** *Um, yeah of course! Yeah, we watched TV, we watched the super stars and on top of that, I remember when I was younger, I was not good at – not as good now in rugby so I actually find on the internet on how to improve, look for techniques, especially videos and because of YouTube, there's a lot of people actually analyse games that I can actually learn from them which is – I think improve my rugby as well. Makes me more interested as well, especially when you see all the superstars making all the big moves [...] And um, I also watch NRL a lot – National Rugby League – which is a Australia-based competition so most of the superstars gather which I follow every week.*
>
> **Interviewer:** *Oh, do you get that back in Singapore as well, the NRL?*
>
> **Samuel**: *Um, yeah, well on TV. But here, well it's mostly based on Sydney and Queensland, but for Melbourne there's Melbourne Storm, so um they're heavyweights, they play at home. That's probably one of the reasons I want to be in Melbourne as well.*

The rhetoric of Samuel's narrative was very much that of constant improvement, striving to become better, aspiring to greater opportunities and better skills. Rugby therefore became both cause and vehicle for Samuel to aspire to greater mobility in his life—in terms of socio-economic class, geographical migration, as well as social capital. Now Samuel's social circle in Australia combined classmates as well as the touch rugby team that he joined in his university in Melbourne. Samuel's story shows us that leisure activities such as sports can actually be intertwined in fairly complex ways with aspirations, mobility, and the search for a better life, beyond just simple pleasures of having fun. This theme is built upon in the next section, where students engage in playful, creative or leisure activities to better themselves.

Serious Leisure and Learning through Media

Besides facilitating the adaptation to different cultures and the transitional journeys of international students, leisure activities and practices can also be appropriated for learning. In these next few cases, we see how international students can make use of digital media technologies (particularly those suited for entertainment and play) in various ways to aid them in pursuing individual aspirational goals. Three ways emerged from the evidence: media as an aid to learning skills in preparation for a career, media as a tool to learn language, and media as a tool to help build an aspirational self-identity.

Many students use media to educate themselves. YouTube is an educational resource for many international students. Keith, a recently graduated computer science student from Vietnam, talked about how he watched training videos via YouTube in order to prepare for job interviews and improve himself at the same time:

Excerpt 6.5 Interview with Keith, male Vietnamese undergraduate

> **Interviewer:** *So is there anything that you are doing currently to try better your situation, or to make your situation better?*
>
> **Keith:** *Yeah, yeah, I do. I watch training video, I run some web development, I start learning some programming language—just try to review some basics, just in case in interview they ask me a few stuff, technical stuff that I don't know.*
>
> […]

Interviewer: *Okay. Interesting. You also mentioned at one point that you were watching training videos. Can you tell me a bit more about that?*

Keith: *Yeah, there are many YouTube channels. So many channels that you can follow, you can subscribe. So whenever they have a new video upload on YouTube, they send you the email or something. Or every time you just open the YouTube website, the new video just appear on that channel, you can see right away. You just keep up to date with the new technology stuff.*

**Interviewer:** *What sort of videos do you watch?*

Keith: *I watch Microsoft technology, like Microsoft Windows server. Virtualisation, like VMware, Citrix. So basically, networked machines, you go around to other stuff.*

Interviewer: *Virtualisation, networking, alright. And this is sort of what you want to do in the future as well?*

Keith: *Yup. I applied for junior network engineer, system network admin… well, at the end, they always say 'training provided'. And then, I just go, 'Of course. Hah. How can it be? How can I get the training? How good I am to get the training?' I don't know.*

Here Keith expressed some cynicism about companies that advertise training will be provided for all their new hires and doubted that he would qualify for their training programs even if he did get in. Thus, in lieu of being trained by the company, and in order to prepare in case of interview questions, he actually watched training videos by himself on YouTube. This helped him stay abreast of current technology trends, as well as learning skills for future employment.

Many students also use digital media as part of the process of learning a new language. We come back to Kristy, the girl who wished for a multinational career and employed a wide array of social networks to pursue that goal. Kristy, a Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate who normally spoke Chinese at home, shared how she relied heavily on online dictionary resources to help her with her English (Figure 6.2):
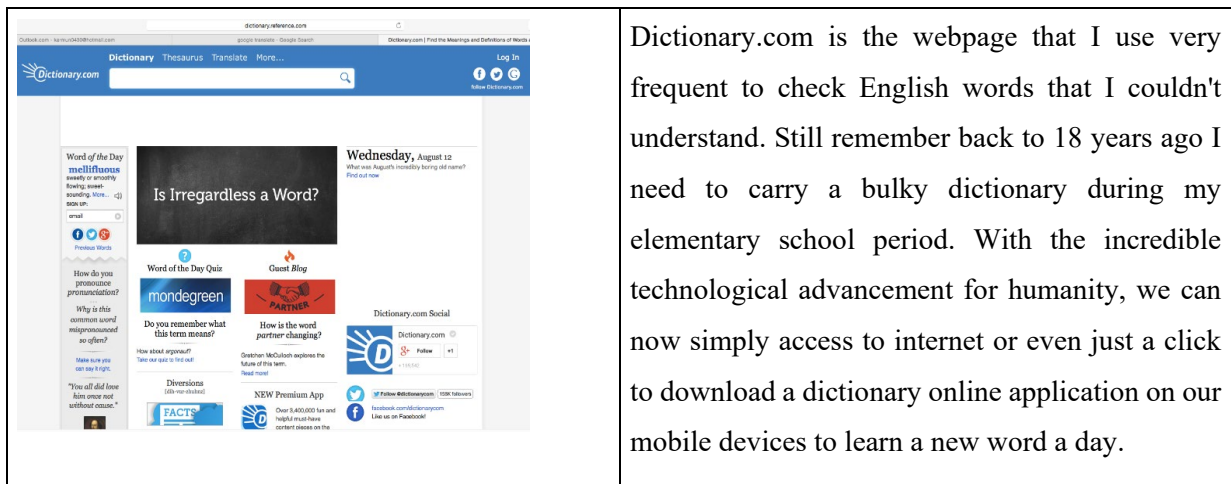
Dictionary.com is the webpage that I use very frequent to check English words that I couldn't understand. Still remember back to 18 years ago I need to carry a bulky dictionary during my elementary school period. With the incredible technological advancement for humanity, we can now simply access to internet or even just a click to download a dictionary online application on our mobile devices to learn a new word a day.

Figure 6.2. Kristy, online dictionaries

In her picture diary, Kristy compared the situation now—with dictionaries available online and as an application on her mobile phone—to the situation 18 years ago, when she had to carry a bulky (book) dictionary during school. She noted that accessibility and convenience is what has significantly improved, plus additional features on the mobile app (the 'new word a day' function) had advantages that a printed book dictionary could not have had. Later on, in her interview, she mentioned how she actually used the online dictionary as a night routine before she slept:

Excerpt 6.6 Interview with Kristy, female Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate

> *Maybe sometime it's just like maybe my friends telling me of this sentence and then there are some words I don't know and then I just search online at night. I will remember it or screenshot it on my phone. Emm… and then every night I will just find out.*

Another example of the way media is involved in the transitional journeys of students can be seen in the story of Paula, an undergraduate from Singapore. Paula had come from a difficult situation in Singapore—as an ethnic Indian in Chinese-dominated Singapore and as a daughter who was not valued as highly by her family as a son was. Much of her interview involved descriptions of how she endured bullying by her classmates and neglect by her family back in Singapore and how she was incredibly and pleasantly shocked by the experience of life here in Melbourne. For Paula, social media had been a source of hope and inspiration—the

video blogs ('vlogs') of famous YouTube personalities such as Hannah Hart ('My Drunk Kitchen') and Lilly Singh ('IISuperwomanII') helped her understand what a normal life and friendship could be like:

Excerpt 6.7 Interview with Paula, female Singaporean undergraduate

> **Interviewer:** *Yes, um, can you tell me a bit more about what you watch and why?*
>
> **Paula:** *I LOVE My Drunk Kitchen and I love this—this um, person called Lilly Singh. I love her because she's so down-to-earth and she's so real and because I've never been able to—I've never actually experienced a normal life before coming to Melbourne, like normal as in without all the fear and the hate so when I came here, and I was kind of lost as to what normal people do, like watching her vlogs like made me think, 'Oh, you know, I could do that', or 'I could go here. I could, you know, do this with people.' Like stuff like that. And watching Hannah Hart – I just LOVE her because she's so – she's so cute. […] And because she's also been through like, um, a traumatic childhood, it's like a bit-it's inspirational that she's like- she went through all of the stuff that she went through and then she's in this place in her life where she has amazing things, she has amazing opportunities and she's so happy with her life. And it's just nice to see that. Like to be like reaffirmed that, you know, life does work out. […] And she has friends like Grace Helbig and Mamrie Hart and um, I love all of them when they're together, the Holy Trinity <laughs> they're just so perfect together and it's so nice to see that at some point in your life you can find the right people who just fit in your life and just- you guys are just meant to be together as friends and like, it's just like the most perfect combination of humans, you know? Like it's so wonderful to watch them and laugh with them, and sometimes at them, but because it's like I've never had a full circle of friends and even here, I kind of tend to think of my peers as acquaintances rather than like full-blown friends. But when I watch them, it kind of makes me think, 'Hmm, human interaction maybe isn't THAT bad.*

Having grown up socially isolated throughout most of her teenage years by her family and classmates, Paula had difficulties with human interaction—not really knowing how to enjoy time with friends 'without all the fear and the hate'. She introduced herself in her interview as someone who 'hates people' and a 'total weirdo'. Thus, being self-aware of her unusual state after being in Melbourne for six months—Paula was halfway through her

foundation year when I interviewed her—she referred to her favourite YouTube vloggers for information on how to interact with others in a friendly way, as well as inspiration that it *was* possible to have a group of friends who she could enjoy being with. Beyond this, in some ways the vloggers also became substitute friends. Even though YouTube is still largely an asynchronous, one-to-many communications platform, Paula has had an experience of personal intimacy and friendly laughter through the screen ('it's so wonderful to watch them and laugh *with* them, and sometimes at them').

Paula was someone who had experienced a lonely childhood and school life and was therefore captivated by the warmth and emotional sharing Hannah Hart and her friends exuded over YouTube. She mentioned that she enjoyed watching them laugh and laughing together *with them*, indicating that she did indeed feel a sense of co-presence even though vlogging is somewhat more of a broadcast form than truly interactive. At the same time, she also really appreciated Hannah's puns and wordplay, as it resonated with her own personality. Puns and wordplay are a form of playfulness with language. It is also expressed through the creativity of the media content that is produced. Playfulness can be an infectious attitude—one of the reasons why Paula loves watching Hannah Hart is that the uplifting attitude of playfulness that Hannah exudes also helps Paula learn to do the same in her own social circles—to enjoy her life and be comfortable with herself, 'weird' as she might be. Thus, Hannah Hart became the representation of the idealised self that Paula aspired to have and become.

Digital media also served as a way for Paula to measure her progress towards her aspirational journey of self-discovery and gain perspective on the difference in her life since leaving Singapore. This was particularly the case with Instagram and Twitter:

Excerpt 6.8 Interview with Paula, female Singaporean undergraduate

> **Paula:** *Mostly I use Instagram to stalk people. Mostly I use Twitter actually.*
>
> **Interviewer:** *Yeah, I noticed something interesting that you use Instagram and Twitter to stalk people. What sort of people do you stalk?*
>
> **Paula:** *The people who used to bully me in secondary school.*
>
> **Interviewer**: *Okay.*
>
> **Paula:** *And it makes me feel a lot better about my life knowing that, you know, I'm in Australia surrounded by wonderful people, I can do like wonderful things in my*

life and they're stuck with those people, with themselves, in Singapore. And like, yeah it just makes me feel better about myself and my life.

Interviewer: *Interesting, okay. Um, okay. How does it make you feel better? The fact that they're-?*

Paula: *Just when they—they're the kind of people who go clubbing and drinking and they only just turned legal this year which means that they've been doing it illegally for the past 2 years. So when I watched them and I realised that they need to do all of these things in order to feel happy for just a few hours, and they need to go seek out like alcohol or like shisha like whatever the hell else they do that's illegal. Um, it makes me feel sad for them that they don't have something in their lives the way I do that just makes me happy without being intoxicated, you know? It's like they need beer to get—to have fun at a party. I don't even need to be at a party, like I could just go to school. I'm like the happiest person there. So it's like, it just makes me feel happy that, you know, they bullied me so much and they're just stuck in this system with education in Singapore that's not making them happy and that makes them have to get drunk to get to be happy. And I'm here like, with wonderful people and doing crazy things that I never imagined doing.*

In addition to giving her perspective, Instagram also became important as a tool through which aspirational practices were carried out. As Paula began to build a new life for herself in Australia, she became engaged in creative arts and crafts. As noted by Sicart (2014) play and creativity are intimately intertwined; to play is to create something—usually a positive outcome—out of sometimes mundane situations and materials. Because of her gratitude to her teachers here in Melbourne in creating a pleasant school life, Paula was extremely interested in finding ways to repay the favour they had shown her and so used arts and crafts as a form of self-expression as well as a way to create gifts for them. This is shown in her picture diary in Figure 6.3:
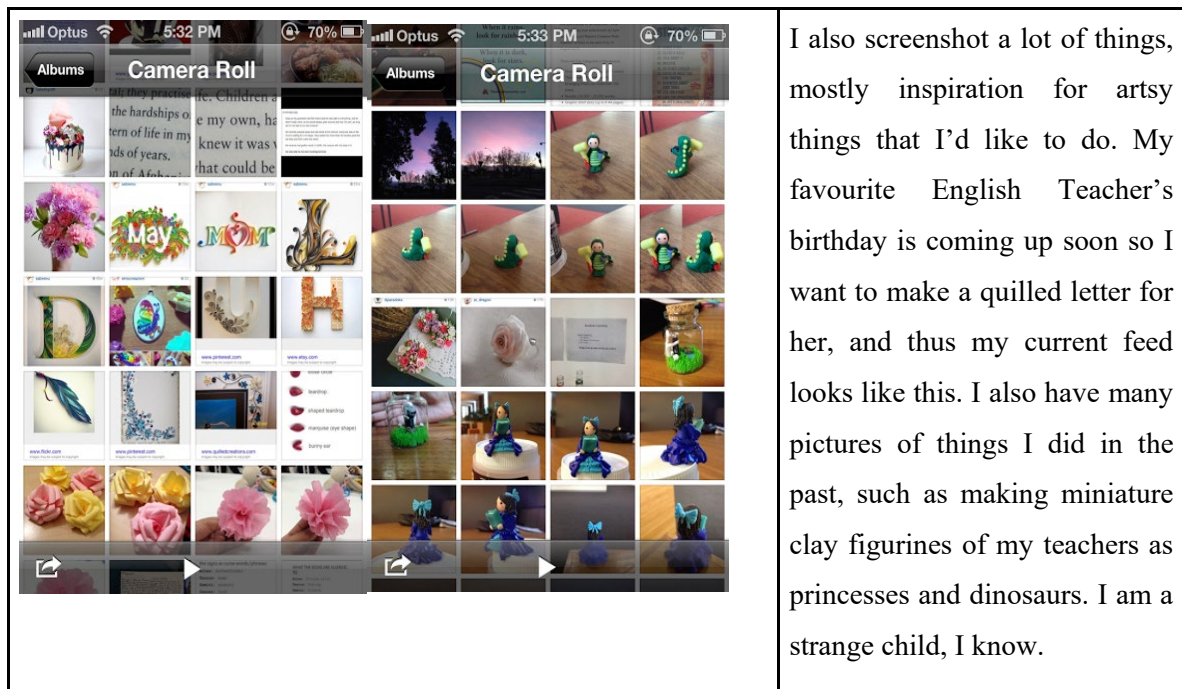
I also screenshot a lot of things, mostly inspiration for artsy things that I'd like to do. My favourite English Teacher's birthday is coming up soon so I want to make a quilled letter for her, and thus my current feed looks like this. I also have many pictures of things I did in the past, such as making miniature clay figurines of my teachers as princesses and dinosaurs. I am a strange child, I know.

Figure 6.3. Paula, inspirational photos for arts and crafts

Paula actively used Instagram and photos to aid her in her creative approaches in two ways—to record moments and materials of inspiration and to document the process and outcomes of her creative energies in this serious pursuit. This creative remixing of media content from photos all over the internet and real life is part and parcel of Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of play as the imaginary, in which play facilitates a transformation through the arts—in this case, from the world of inspiration into the reality of crafted products.

Beyond that, the act of making things, as Gauntlett argues, is one of great value to the human condition and well-being. It builds resilience, by emphasizing the creative capacity to deal with challenges (2011, p. 20). The process of making things is also a process of connection—there is a social dimension to craft work, in which one builds connections to others as Paula demonstrated: she consumed craft ideas from other makers online and produced presents to gift to significant people in her life. Making things also increases our engagement with the world, physically and socially. For a person like Paula, who came from a background in which she was isolated and lacking in connections to the world around her, this act of making both strengthened her connection to the world as well as served as an expression of that newfound joyous connection. It transformed her from a passive individual who had to 'sit and be told' (Gauntlett 2011, p. 8) to a socially conscious individual actively taking control over her life.

Beyond that, it also mediated Paula's participation in larger do-it-yourself (DIY) craft communities and gave her a sense of identity. Although she did not mention social interactions with other crafters, and positioned herself primarily as a consumer of online materials centered on craftwork, Paula nevertheless can be considered to be a participant-consumer in an online DIY community. DIY communities online have been shown to provide participants with a sense of involvement and identity, even if the communities themselves and membership in them are transitory (Orton-Johnson 2014). And by participating, even as a consumer, she absorbed the ethos and values of such DIY groups, which involve openness and sharing (Kuznetsov & Paulos 2010). This in turn added to and shaped her own personal values and identity and helped her become the kind, warm, and giving person that she aspired to be.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we saw how leisure and play activities are not simply about having fun. Rather, students creatively appropriate, deploy, and engage in leisure activities in order to help them with their aspirations towards a better life. For some, this involved careful management of past and present play practices, in order to signify the shift in community engagement and allegiance, helping them adapt to a new life. For others, sports became a serious leisure practice through which they expressed their aspirations.

As students become more involved with the digital world, they also creatively appropriated digital media entertainment technologies to aid them in learning career skills, serve as a reflection of the type of person they were becoming, and aid them in creatively building a new identity and connections to the world through playful crafts.

Chapter 7

Discussion: Aspirational Well-Being and Digital Media

The last three chapters have explored how aspirations, media, and well-being are intertwined for Southeast Asian international students in the areas of home and family, community and country, and play and leisure. In this final chapter, I return to the research question: '**What role does digital media technology play in the aspirations and practice of well-being among Southeast Asian international students in Melbourne, Australia?**' and discuss my findings. I will also go into detail about the holistic experiences of these Southeast Asian international students and the role that digital media plays in their aspirations.

When this dissertation first began in 2013, the discourse surrounding international student mobility was nascent as researchers grappled with the ways global mobility changed international student life (Gargano 2009; King & Raghuram 2013). King and Raghuram (2013) outline how research proceeded along a number of different vectors, including categorisations of mobility, diverse definitions of 'international students', the level and subject of study among international students, and the experiences of mobility. They also pointed to two key insights—firstly, that there was a need to decouple the student from being the object of study to examine the contexts and multiple players involved in international education and mobility; and secondly that it was important to realise that students are much more complex subjects than merely students whose only function was life in higher education, as they inhabit multiple roles and hybrid identities.

How then can we understand and explain the relationship between digital media technologies and aspirations to 'a good life' in the lives of Southeast Asian international students? This initial question became increasingly complicated as the research progressed, since the participants themselves were embedded within various contexts and were undergoing multiple simultaneous processes. As tertiary education students and young adults growing up in the late modern era, they were on the path towards maturation and individualisation in their identities, careers, and relationships. As international students in Australia, they were both products of and participants in the circulation of transnational global flows, subject to the structural realities of globalisation and transnationalism that influenced their material conditions, perceived opportunities, and capacity to aspire.

As students coming from Southeast Asia but located in Australia and with access to transnational media, they were also exposed to multiple modes and visions of modernity,

cosmopolitanism and 'the good life', contesting with each other for influence over their self-development, identity formation, and aspirations. And as 'digital natives' much of their social interactions, everyday lives, and lifestyle practices were mediated, meaning that the social processes that involved formation and pursuit of collective aspirations were shaped, empowered, or limited by the media used. All of these forces and contexts had bearing on these students' formation of aspirations and their usage of media in pursuit of well-being goals.

Aspirations, Media, and the Modern Reflexive Self

One way to conceptualise the aspirational process is as a project of the reflexive self, in which the individual seeks to achieve goals and acquire resources in order to gain capabilities in life (Sen 1993) and build their self-identity. At first glance, this seems to tie in with the individualisation thesis espoused by Beck (1992, 1994), Giddens (1991), and Bauman (2001) in which choice becomes paramount amidst global risks, the individual is freed from previous collective categorisations of identity such as class and gender, and is responsible for constructing a self-identity from a wide variety of sources. In this case, then, the media could be said to aid aspirations to the good life in the following ways:

(1) Media content provides resources to imagine possible futures (Sellar and Gale 2011), thus strengthening the *capacity to aspire* (Appadurai 2004), as seen in Janet's exposure to green technologies (Excerpt 3.4), Samuel's pursuit of rugby (Excerpts 6.3 and 6.3), and Paula's aspirations towards a normal life (Excerpt 6.7).

(2) Information and communications media may provide access to resources and networks that were previously denied to individuals because of structural inequalities, thus enabling or facilitating the pursuit of aspirations. This can be seen in Yohann's architectural ambitions (Excerpt 3.3 and Figure 3.1), Kristy's pursuit of multicultural networks as steps towards a global career (Figures 3.2 and 5.1), or Janet learning how to cook as part of being independent (Excerpt 4.6).

(3) Media can serve as motivational reinforcements for aspirations by providing a concrete visualisation of the aspirational goal, or by tracking progress achieved so far. We can see this in Sally's placement of the Singapore police force as her wallpaper (Figure 5.2), Samuel's recording of his life and relationship journey (Figure 4.16), and Paula's comparison of her life with her former bullies back home (Figure 6.8).

(4) Communications media can serve as a platform through which individuals participate in collaborative meaning-making processes that can involve larger familial or nation-state aspirations. This can be seen in Sally's participation in STOMP (Figure 5.3) and Janet's conversations with her mother (Figure 4.4).

Simultaneously, media technologies have also hindered the well-being of students:

(1) Established methods of media usage may maintain ties and connections to communities that no longer aid growth and divert focus from productive interactions, as seen in Joseph's reliance on his old gaming communities (Figure 6.2) and to a lesser extent Kristy's choice to communicate less with friends from home in favour of friends from other countries (Figure 5.1).

(2) Negative media content could contribute to the perception of a hostile or nihilistic environment, thus making students fearful to interact with others. This can be seen in Tamar's reactions to the online news about ISIS (Figure 5.6).

While the above lists are general conclusions reached based on my empirical findings, there are important nuances with theoretical implications. Specifically, with regard to individualisation theory, my findings somewhat support one of the main tenets of the theory—the privatisation of individual responsibility—while contradicting another, the disappearance of collective social categories from influencing the self-determination of identity and personhood (see Dawson 2012 for a more in-depth discussion of these two processes). Although they were still circumscribed by social categories such as class and gender, students were taking more individual responsibility for decisions to determine their life circumstances that would previously have been made collectively. I would qualify that last statement, however, by saying that although collective decision-making was not apparent at the macro level, there was still an element of collective decision-making happening at the level of the family unit and the friendship network. Therefore, although individuals *did* show a reflexive awareness of their increased responsibility for life choices and the resulting consequences, they still consulted others in the process of making those decisions, aided by communications technologies and media.

There are weaknesses to the applicability of the individualisation theory to characterise the experiences of my participants. The individualisation theory has come under criticism for being too decontextualised, Euro-centric and ahistorical, focusing primarily on a Western middle-class conceptualisation of modernity within neoliberal societies (Brannen & Nilsen

2005; Dawson 2012). It also has had a weak record with regard to empirical support, as many researchers have shown that structural considerations and categories such as class and gender still play a significant role in the individual's process of constructing their self-identity (Dickens 1999; Branaman 2007; Nollman & Strasser 2007; Mills 2007; Mendez 2008; Holmes 2010; Dawson 2012). Furthermore, the degree to which the individualisation theory is applicable to students from Southeast Asia rather than the West is questionable (Lewis, Martin & Sun 2012), even if they are currently studying in what is purported to be a neoliberal democracy like Australia.

Nevertheless, I would argue that exposure to the global and transnational flows of culture has to some extent transmitted values that are similar to Western ideas of late modernity. However, because of their past experiences in their home countries, Southeast Asian students have to negotiate Western neoliberal societal values in contestation with their own home countries' visions of 'Asian' modernity, resulting in individualised biographical accounts of hybridised values that combine both 'Western' and 'Asian' visions of modernity and 'the good life'. Sometimes, this process can be extremely unsettling, as seen in Simon's existential crisis of faith when he transfers from religiously fundamentalist Indonesia to secular liberal Australia (Excerpt 5.8). In other accounts, such as Kristy's, there are more successful hybridisation of values. To illustrate this phenomenon in more detail, I will now analyse in-depth the holistic experiences, aspirations and life story of this young woman, to show how she formed and pursued aspirations that were hybridised in nature.

A Study of Contested and Hybridised Aspirations: Kristy

Kristy has figured prominently in several chapters throughout this dissertation. Kristy was a 24-year-old female ethnic Chinese student from Malaysia, currently pursuing a master's in accounting after completing a bachelor's degree in international studies. Her primary spoken and written language at home was Chinese (Cantonese), although she aspired to be fluent in multiple languages including English. Kristy came from an urban suburb in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. In Malaysia, articulations of modernity are strongly influenced by internal racial politics, industrialisation advancements that emphasised foreign investments and partnerships rather than the building of local capacities, and a broadly projected pan-Asian resistance to perceived Western corruption of values—the so-called 'Asian Values' project.

The road to Malaysian modernity began in the aftermath of British colonial rule. As a legacy of colonialism, the English language and an English education was seen as a carrier of

modernity and a route to prestige and employment (Lee 1992). However, access and appropriation of English-language education differed amongst ethnic groups in Malaysia. For the dominant Malay ethnic group, the Malay elites who received an English education were co-opted into first colonial and then later governmental administrative services. Pathways into governmental service were circumscribed for other ethnic minority groups, however, and so the Chinese and the Indians instead seized upon English education as a way to enter the private professional services—becoming doctors, lawyers, engineers, and accountants in order to increase their socio-economic status.

This race-based stratification of Malaysian society is not just apparent in the educational sphere, but rather permeates through all areas of Malaysian life, aided by overt governmental privileging of the Malay ethnic group through positive discriminatory policies (Goh 2002). Non-Malays faced significant structural barriers such as access to higher education and ownership of corporate interests. Thus, a common aspirational goal among the middle-class non-Malay families was to send their children overseas for educational opportunities and to start a new life free from the racial discrimination in their home countries. (Other students from Malaysia also alluded to this, such as Joseph's story in Excerpt 5.1.)

Secondly, industrialisation efforts have taken a very different turn in Malaysia compared to Western societies. In order to preserve and protect the hegemony of the Malay ethnic groups, the government launched various initiatives to attract foreign investments and technological development, in partnership with local Malay-owned businesses (Goh 2002; Lee 1992). This led to foreign domination of the manufacturing sector and increasing dependence on Western technological investment and trade (and later on rising Asian economies such as Japan and Korea). Visions of modernity and entering First World status was, therefore, inextricably linked in Malaysian minds with working for or with foreign global transnational companies.

Lastly, in the mid-1980s, leading intellectuals around Southeast Asia, including then Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir Mohamad and the former Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew, began a postcolonial project to counteract Western societal influences through an emphasis on what they termed 'Asian Values' (Thompson 2001; Stivens 2006). The 'Asian Values' included privileging societal interests over self-interest, order and harmony over personal freedom, respect for authority figures, strong attachments and loyalty to family members, traditional gender roles, filial piety, discipline, hard work, and thrift. In Malaysia, the emphasis was on building strong families, in response to a moral panic against Western influences of liberal lifestyles, alternative gender and sexual identities, and breakdown of

traditional marriages (Stivens 2006). Thus, media publications and public information campaigns throughout the late 1980s and 1990s were laced with many messages emphasising the need for traditional gender roles in family, filial piety, and the duty to prioritise family interest over self-interest. The modern Asian family was one that had strong family bonds, whose members subscribed to traditional roles, and who prioritised family over individual.

These three factors formed the backdrop in which Kristy formulated her aspirations prior to arrival in Australia. As an ethnic Chinese, she knew she was locked out of higher positions of influence in Malaysia and so had to seek opportunities elsewhere. Because of how modernity was tied with global transnational companies, her career aspiration was to work in one of those companies. At the same time, because of the way that English is perceived and appropriated by non-Malays, her specific career path involved a transition from international studies to a professional degree in accounting. This also served a dual purpose in allowing her to fulfil her filial duty as a daughter, by helping out with the family's business if necessary, instead of privileging her own self-centred desire to go global.

Kristy was following a *habituated* logic (Zipin et al. 2015) of evaluating her current situation and pursuing what was lacking in her capabilities, based on her socio-economic resources. In this particular case, it was an English-language education, multinational contacts, and an educational qualification for a global career. This was reflected in her media usage as well (Figures 5.1, 5.2, and 6.2). However, as a result of her stay in Australia, she became aware of new possibilities and situational factors she had never considered previously, and that resulted in new *emergent* aspirations. For Kristy, although she desired a multicultural experience in education, she actually discovered a competing *doxic* ('commonsense') logic of work and race relations that she had not encountered before:

Excerpt 7.1   Interview with Kristy, female Chinese-Malaysian undergraduate

>**Interviewer:** *Before you came, during your Bachelor stint, did you have the intention to migrate already?*

>**Kristy:** *During that time I didn't have intention to migrate. But, ya, I found out like here everyone has the fair go at the opportunity to get…like for example, actually when I was doing that course—my Bachelor course—I actually did receive sort of like scholarship for study tour which I never receive from my Malaysian government before. So, I think here it's like, as long as you work hard, work hard and you strive for it and you get what you want eventually.*

Interviewer: *Is that different from Malaysia?*

Kristy: *Yes, it's little bit because of the… You know the races thing ya…*

Interviewer: *Ok. What is your understanding of the races thing?*

Kristy: *Ah…umm….quite hard to say but I can say like for example, like our government sector, most of the higher positions they just give to the Malay to do. So not a lot of Chinese can enter into the position … ya.*

Interviewer: *Alright. So you've thought that as a Chinese you will have no opportunity to hold higher ranking jobs?*

Kristy: *Ya.*

Interviewer: *Was that also one of the reasons you chose to come to Australia?*

Kristy: *Ya.*

In Malaysia, the standard *doxic* logic was Malay supremacy. Hard work by the Chinese was not always commensurate with rewards in Malaysia; thus Kristy had formed the impression that race mattered more than effort in life. However, due to her experience of the equality of opportunity and the value of a 'fair go' that was practiced in a neoliberal democracy like Australia, she became aware that a system where hard work *was* rewarded with achievement existed. As such, her aspiration to migrate and live within such a system emerged out of her experiences while studying in Australia, where initially she had merely wanted to find an opportunity to gain a positional advantage by moving away from her home country and pursue a version of modernity that involved working in a multinational firm.

	Definition of Well-Being	Definition of A Good Life
Kristy (24, Malaysia, Chinese, Accounting, five years as an international student)	If my family can stay in Melbourne with me. Find a stable job. Graduate so that I don't waste parents' money. Having friends and good food to eat.	No need to work every day, and can travel around the world. No financial strain. Have family stay with me, don't live apart. Relationships—maybe in future. Right now, independence.

Figure 7.1. Kristy's definitions of Well-Being and A Good Life

If we look back at Kristy's definitions of well-being and the good life, two common themes of family and finances resonate. Notice, however, that her aspiration was for her family to stay with *her* in Melbourne, rather than for her to go back to Malaysia to stay with *them*. While Kristy did not maintain as much contact with her family through social media as with her other friends, she still has a very strong familial orientation and awareness of her identity that is rooted in family. Even her definitions of the good life that revolve around financial strain are located with relation to her parents, as seen in her picture diary in Figure 7.2.

Kristy did not seek financial freedom for its own sake, or to acquire any particular capabilities to enhance herself. Rather, it was to repay the debt that she owed to her parents, and to fulfil her familial identity as a dutiful daughter. In Kristy's life story, we can see that although she inhabits multiple identities and juggles multiple aspirations, her identity as part of her family is paramount to her conceptualisation of the good life. Her other aspirations –to a global career, to financial freedom, to an English education, and to migration—have all become subordinate to her desire for her family to enjoy 'a good life' with her.

This website is a very informative platform for students or Asians who are living here looking for second-hand items, part time works and so forth.

As an international student, spending time in university is not only about the academics. To ease the financial strain of my family, I have decided to go for a part time work since my second year of study in Melbourne. I have volunteered for few organisations before and worked as a waitress, dish cleaner and flyer distributors. As a student, we are not allowed to work for full time and also with the assignment workloads and expensive tuition fees, I am not afforded to fail in any subjects. I felt very bad because my parents are the one who financially support me and pay for my full tuition fees. So I found some casual work before and these help by giving me the needed money for day-to-day living expenses.

Figure 7.2. Kristy, on finding part-time jobs.

So what are the implications for theory? As individualisation theory suggests, Kristy felt a stronger sense of individual responsibility in charting her life course and making decisions that

would once have been made more collectively. For example, she had actually fought with her father to study in Australia, rather than in Singapore as he had suggested, because she could see the value in existing in a cultural environment radically different from the one in Malaysia (Excerpt 3.5). However, she was not making them in isolation, as a free agent determining who she wants to be in a vacuum. Her mixed identities as ethnic Chinese, as daughter, as non-English-educated middle-class, and as a migrant student, all played a role in shaping her aspirations and cohesive sense of self. And even so, the primary identity she finally chose was not being an individualised one but a collective identity as the daughter of a family.

Larger forces have played a role in her perceptions of well-being and the good life as well. These include cultural values such as Malaysian racial discrimination and Australian ideas of 'a fair go', the transnational networks of friendships that were built and sustained through both online and offline social networks, and the media platforms which facilitated those networks. The dialectic between economic globalisation and national policies produced a vision of modernity in Malaysia where transnational companies became a pathway to success for her. At the same time, globalisation also led to a large body of international students in Australia for her to interact with and build communities around.

Therefore, in considering the relationship between aspirations to the good life and media, we can see that there are multiple facets to take into account. Digital media—while certainly important—is not the only factor. As multiple scholars have pointed out, even though media and communications studies are centred on media, they cannot be media-centric to the exclusivity of all other factors (Morley 2009; Krajina, Moores & Morley 2014; Pink et.al. 2015). Nor are the causal relationships between media and aspirations entirely one-way. Instead, we have ongoing interactions on multiple levels:

- On the macro level of nation-states and transnational media, digital media plays a role in students' perceptions of opportunities and evaluations of their environment, which thus leads to formulations of aspirations to either escape or incorporate elements of the life values portrayed by the media. (Chapters 1–3; 7)
- On the meso level of communities and familial ties, digital media can serve as sites of resistance and subversion to normative practices, as connections to collective processes of imagination and aspiration, as polymedia environments of affordances through which individuals enact life choices that shape their social identities. (Chapters 4–5)

- On the micro level of individuals and everyday life, digital media can serve as tools to empower people with new capabilities in life through learning information and skills or creative inspiration, to reinforce chosen identities and aspirations, or can become destructive and growth-inhibiting forces that hinder aspirational success. (Chapter 6)

This dissertation, *Aspirational Well-Being and Digital Media (AWDM)*, thus contributes to knowledge in two ways:

Firstly, by taking an interdisciplinary approach and investigating subjects such as international students who stand at the nexus of many overlapping fields of research, I hope to sensitise researchers in the fields of media studies, globalisation, transnationalism, migration, international education, well-being studies, regional studies (particularly Southeast Asian studies), and youth studies to the linkages that exist between their respective fields. By explicating the factors that go into influencing dynamic processes such as the pursuit of aspirations and practice of well-being, I highlight the multifaceted nature of such constructs and delimit previous studies on aspirations that have primarily been centred around economic, psychological, or educational perspectives. Most notably, I introduce sociological, cultural, transnational, and mediated aspects to the aforementioned perspectives.

Secondly, I explicate the processes by which digital media interacts with the formation and pursuit of aspirations, and do so in a non-media-centric way. In line with recent calls among media and communications scholars to investigate media practices in context, I provide empirically grounded evidence of ways in which media is used in everyday life to fulfil particular aspirational goals. As life in the 21st century becomes increasingly mediated, it is particularly important to understand how media interacts with other life processes. The pursuit of a good life is one of the most fundamental driving forces of human existence, but little is known about how the advent of digital media changes it. This dissertation, while by no means exhaustive, at least opens the door to such research.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a number of limitations to this dissertation—some stemming from the sample, some from the nature of the work.

Firstly, with regard to the sample, the majority of the students from Southeast Asia came from urban backgrounds and were already accustomed to widespread and frequent usage

of digital media technologies in their everyday lives. While this was useful as it allowed the usage of polymedia theory to the applied to this sample, it also prevented the dissertation from encompassing the full diversity of the international student experience—particularly, the students who came from rural backgrounds and those who may not have been exposed to digital or mobile technologies as much, prior to their educational migration.

Unused empirical material, particularly from the limited number of South Asian interviewees that were not featured in this dissertation, suggests that the transitional experiences of migrants from low-media-access environments to an environment of media ubiquity show markedly different reactions and employ different strategies when negotiating the usage of media for well-being practices. Some of these practices include having to establish self-directed censorship and regulation in order to preserve their well-being against the dangerous media content of the internet or to avoid video game addiction. Others involve selectively taking part in or avoiding social media connections that are an extension of the home village gossip networks. And thirdly, having to negotiate dual lifestyles of high-media-dependence and low-media-dependence while travelling back and forth between countries for visits was also mentioned. While these points were only mentioned by one or two individuals, there is potential for future research into how varying access to media prior to arriving in Australia can shape an international student's experience.

This, in turn, brings us to the larger debate about the effects of media on the well-being of young people. While this dissertation has primarily focused on the ways in which international students are pursuing positive well-being through the use of digital media, it must be acknowledged that the relationship between digital media and well-being is not always a positive one. Most notably, the issues of privacy and surveillance become salient. Here, two issues are under contestation: the effects of context collapse (Vitak et. al. 2012) or boundary crossing (Sánchez Abril, Levin & del Riego 2012) in social media, and the problem of self-disclosure (Marwick & boyd 2014; Marwick, Fontaine & boyd 2017).

In privacy and surveillance studies, the idea of privacy is usually maintained through people choosing to selectively disclose only certain information about themselves in particular contexts, such as the workplace, the campus, or the family. However, several studies (Sánchez Abril, Levin & del Riego 2012; Vitak et al 2012) have noted that social media networks increasingly facilitate the blurring of boundaries between different contexts, which allows people at work to see photos of home, or from campus to see travel-related photos, and so on. This phenomenon is known as context collapse and can lead to a degradation of individual privacy. Furthermore, Marwick and boyd (2014) have argued that engaging with social media

transforms young people's understandings and conceptualisation of privacy, from an individual concept of privacy to a networked version, in which they recognise that the onus on the individual to maintain control of their private information is impossible. Instead, young people rely on establishing interpersonal relationships centred around trust and mutual intimacy to control the sharing of their personal information on social networks.

However, there are some challenges to the context collapse perspective of privacy for international students. Firstly, usage of various social media networks is not uniform across countries, and the differences in national social media platform usage arguably creates contextually separate digital communities for international students.

Chang and Gomes (2017) have argued that there is a digital journey online that international students need to make from one set of digital information sources and online communities in their home countries to another set within their host countries that parallels the physical migration process. This can be further exacerbated by differences in language between the social media platforms used, as can be seen in Kristy's example (Figure 5.1), where she deployed a mixture of various social media platforms to interact with different networks of friends from various countries. The evidence from this dissertation thus suggests that boundaries are relatively less porous between different digital contexts for international students, and that feature can be exploited by the individual to maintain a greater sense of privacy and control over their individual information among their various social networks. Further research in this direction could investigate the nuances of what information gets disclosed by international students among their various digital communities and how this impacts their perception and negotiation of privacy and surveillance by communities both online and offline.

Another direction for future research is in the relationship between polymedia and aspiration—two fields that have yet to be interposed meaningfully. So far, there has been relatively little scholarship around the relationship between media and aspirations. What research does exist also frames this relationship dichotomously: on the level of nation-states and organisations, media becomes a channel or tool through which they express and exert power in pursuit of their aspirations (also known as 'soft power' through cultural channels). However, on the level of individuals, the scholarly framing of this relationship is inverted— media is not a tool wielded by an individual to express or pursue aspirations, but that an individual's aspirations are shaped by the (usually mass) media they are exposed to. This dissertation challenges that framing, by presenting evidence that individuals are purposefully

using media technologies as a tool to pursue their individual aspirations, in a similar fashion to how nation-states use media to pursue national aspirations.

This pursuit of individual aspirations using media is facilitated and revealed mainly because of the state of polymedia. Polymedia theory, as it stands now, conceptualises media (primarily social media) as a composite structure of converging communicative opportunities through which users navigate and select from in order to suit their communication needs (Madianou 2015). The exploitation of the differences in communicative affordances of various media platforms has been framed in terms of helping individuals manage their social relationships.

Significantly, this dissertation suggests that an even larger scope afforded by polymedia environments beyond the management of social relationships is that of managing aspirations. International students navigate the polymedia environments and select from the opportunities it offers not only to manage the relationships between themselves and the persons they are communicating with—but also between their present selves and the future selves they hope to become. The choices of which media platforms an individual uses are significant—not only because of what they indicate about their social intent but also about what goals or aspirations the students choose to pursue. Some may give up gaming with buddies from home in order to fit in more with their new country. Some may join social networks in a different language, as part of aspirations towards a global career.

This conceptualisation and juxtaposition of polymedia as affording not just an individual's social intent but also aspirational intent is one of the main contributions to theory that this thesis provides. However, major questions still remain that require further investigation: To what extent is a student's transition from one online community to another indicative of their aspirations? If the relationship between media and aspiration on the individual level is not merely unidirectionally causal but a cyclical process where aspirations are shaped by media but also influence choice of media platforms to engage with, are there virtuous and/or vicious cycles in this relationship? And if these virtuous/vicious cycles of media and aspiration exist, what factors may influence an individual's entry into or exit from these cycles?

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Appendix 1. Sample Interview Questions
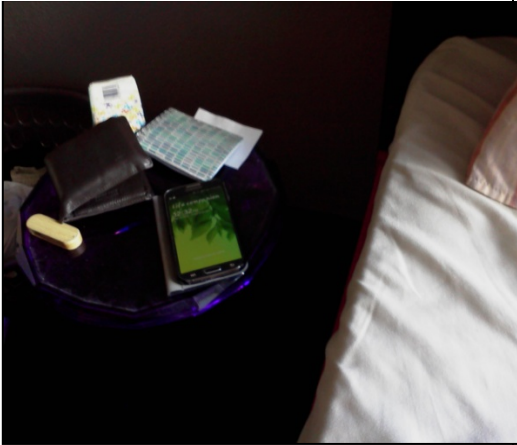
These are some of the questions that were asked of participants during their group interviews:

- Can you describe what your first few weeks in Melbourne were like as an international student?

- How did your life's journey lead you to becoming an international student in Melbourne?

- What were some of the challenges you faced throughout your time as an international student, and how did you deal with them?

- What are some of the cultures that you have been exposed to, and how have they influenced the formation of your identity or the way you think about things?

- Were there any cultural differences that you've experienced being here in Melbourne?

- What does 'well-being' mean to you personally?

- What do you think people of your culture understand 'well-being' to mean?

- What does 'getting the most out of your time here in Melbourne' mean to you?

- What do you hope to gain from your experiences as an international student here?

- What are some things, activities or experiences bring you the most happiness and pleasure?

- What are some things that cause you to worry or experience stress, or have a negative impact on your well-being?

- When you are experiencing things that have a negative impact on your well-being, how do you deal with it?

- How connected were you to sources of well-being in your early days in Melbourne?

- How connected are you to sources of well-being *now*?

- What role did new media technologies (such as mobile phones, the internet, social media, or electronic games) play in your well-being?

- What role did new media technologies (such as mobile phones, the internet, social media or electronic games) play in your efforts to overcome difficult or stressful situations in life?

- What role has new media technologies played in you adjusting to Australian life and culture?

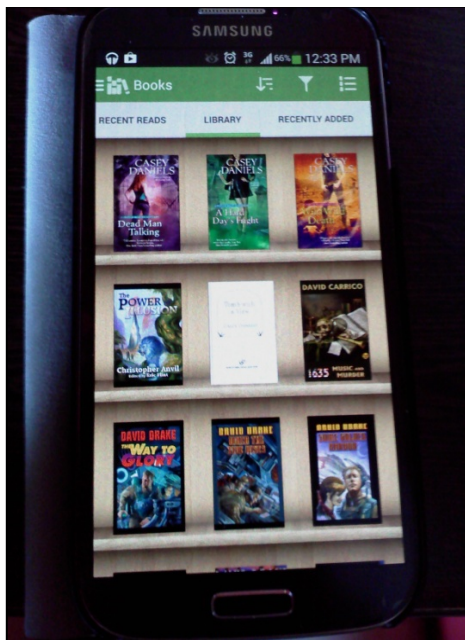# Appendix 2. Example Picture Diary

This is an example of what a photo diary or picture diary looks like. You are requested to take about 10 pictures (or more) showing how you interact with media in your daily life, and where relevant, describe how it impacts your well-being in some way. Each picture should be accompanied by some written text describing why this photo is relevant to either your media usage or your well-being. These pictures could include screenshots of favourite websites, or photos of physical spaces where you regularly use or keep media technologies, or how media is used to help you do other things connected to your well-being (like religion, health, finances, etc.), or even photos of non-digital media (like posters on a wall) that have an impact on your well-being. Some of the pictures may be of your mobile phone. If you normally use your phone for camera purposes, you can borrow a friend's phone to take a picture of your own phone screen. Examples are shown below:

I keep my mobile phone on a little end-table next to my bed when I go to sleep. This is because I usually end up reading books on my phone at night while lying in bed, sometimes for a couple of hours, which can make me lose sleep. My phone is also my alarm clock, and usually the first thing I check when I wake up. So the last thing I see at night and the first thing I see in the morning is my mobile phone.
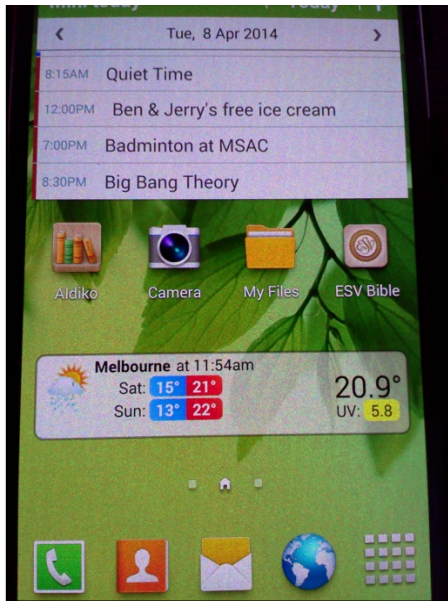
|	
	This is the main screen for my phone. At the very top is my organizer for the day. I used to use a little notebook, but I use my phone now to organize my daily life. This includes everything from scheduled events and activities, to even when my favourite TV shows are showing. Also, I usually check the weather first thing in the morning. I chose the background wallpaper to be green leaves because I thought it was soothing. I don't really like the edgy or futuristic wallpapers — I want something that reminds me of nature, even when I'm staring at a computer screen.
	This is part of my digital library. One of my hobbies is reading fiction books, and I stored a lot of my collection on my phone so that I can read anywhere, anytime. I usually read at night before sleep, and when I'm taking public transport between home and the city. Sometimes, I get so caught up in what I'm reading that I can't put it down, and continue reading even when I should be moving on to other things, like work or sleep. That can be bad for my well-being, because I'm wasting time on hobbies instead of doing something more productive with my life.
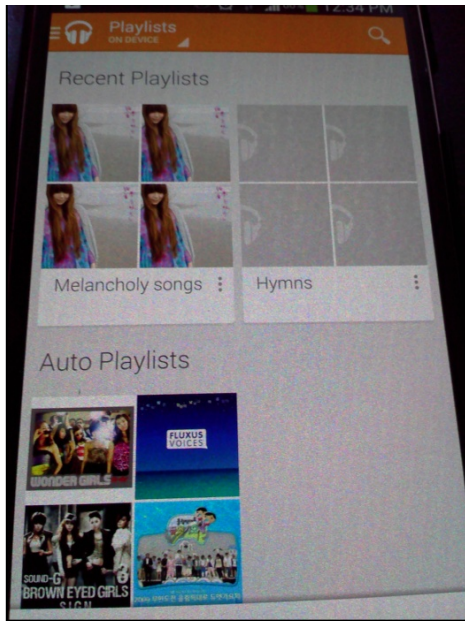
These are the playlists on my phone. I don't really listen to music much. I only have two playlists — one of emotional, melancholy songs, and the other of spiritual, uplifting hymns. Usually, I only listen to music when I'm feeling emo. Then, I either cheer myself up by listening to the hymns, or I play the melancholy song playlist. The songs on the melancholy playlist are mostly Japanese or Korean ballads which were title songs for shows that I was watching during difficult times in my life (like during a university exam period where I was sure I was going to fail). When I listen to those songs, I reminisce about the past and re-live the sadness of those times, but it's somehow cleansing. And after a while, it makes me feel that my current situation is better than it was back then.
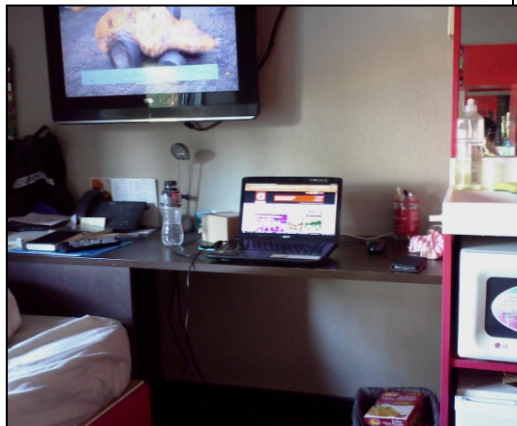
This is the desk in my room, with my laptop. I spend a lot of time sitting in front of my laptop at that desk. And because it's right next to the TV, I sometimes have both on, multi-tasking during advertisement breaks. It's also very close to my microwave and fridge, because it's such a small room. That means that I can usually cook and eat food sometimes without even getting up from my desk. I guess it's bad for my health to be sitting down for hours without getting up. And it's very close to the TV, so I sometimes get eyestrain.
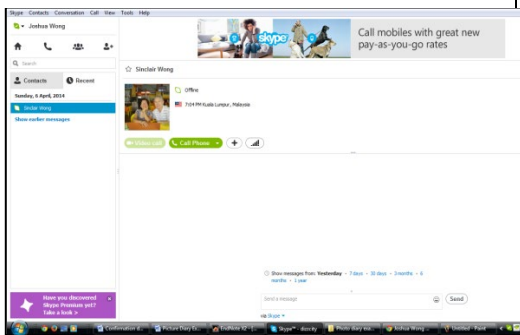
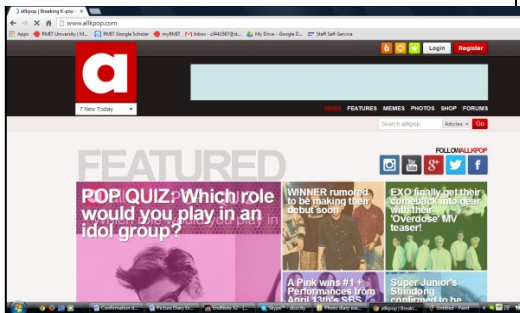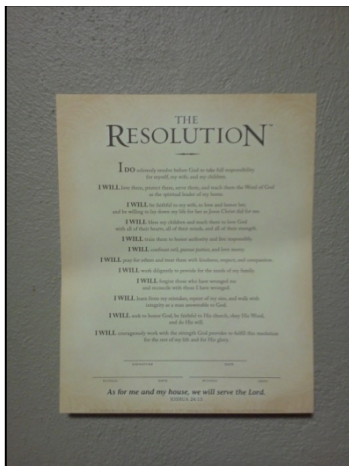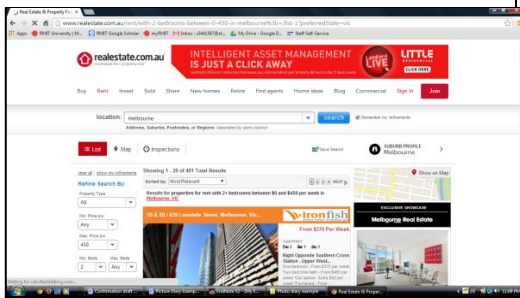|	
	This is a screenshot of my computer desktop. Again, I chose the background wallpaper to be something based on nature, because I find it soothing. Another one of my hobbies is computer gaming, and over half the icons on my desktop are games. Sometimes I think I'm too addicted to games. I can play for 6-7 hours without a break. I mostly play single-player games, by myself.
	I visit Facebook nearly every day. But for me, I don't normally upload that many photos, or share articles from other websites, or keep up with my friends' updates much. Rather, I treat Facebook like a blog, where I write down my thoughts on things and share it with my friends. It's therapeutic for me to write out my ideas and feelings, and helps me center myself once again. And it's nice to see my friends 'liking' the ideas I write. Makes me feel valued.
	I have a Skype conversation with my parents every week on Sunday nights, usually for about 1-2 hours. That helps me to keep up with news from home, and makes me feel energized and motivated again after talking with them.
	One of my favourite websites that I visit regularly is allKpop, a site devoted to news about Korean pop culture and celebrities. I'm a K-pop fan, so I like to gossip about it when I'm with friends who share similar interests.
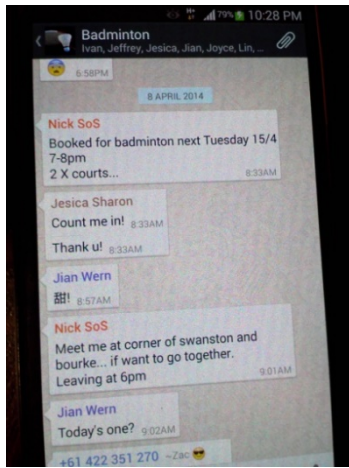
	I mainly communicate with my friends here in Australia using WhatsApp. We have several WhatsApp groups, and we use it for everything from chatting about random stuff to planning for events. Sometimes, in our random chats, a person would post a picture of something interesting (like a protest, or skywriting) that happened during their day. Also, we use Whatsapp to organize events such as a weekly badminton game. I play badminton both because it's fun with friends and I can keep fit and healthy. And it's the national sport of my country.
	This is a poster I have on my bedroom wall. It contains a list of resolutions for Christian adult men. I keep it to remind myself about what my goals in life are. It serves as a measurement check for my spiritual well-being, and helps to inspire me when I'm feeling de-motivated, but it can also be a source of stress when I feel that I've failed in keeping one of these resolutions.
	My friend and I are thinking of becoming housemates and sharing a flat together to save on financial expenses and get a better home environment, so we've been checking out places for rent. The main website that we use to find places is realestate.com.au.

Appendix 3. Ethics Approval Documentation

Pilot Study (Part One)

RMIT UNIVERSITY   Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN)
Sub-committee of the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)

Notice of Approval

Date:	**23 September 2013**
Project number:	**CHEAN A 0000015677-08/13**
Project title:	**How Playful Technologies Impact International Students' Emotional Well-Being**
Risk classification:	**Low Risk**
Investigator:	**A/Professor Larissa Hjorth**
Approved:	**From: 23 September 2013** **To: 31 July 2014**

I am pleased to advise that your application has been granted ethics approval by the Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network as a sub-committee of the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Terms of approval:

1. **Responsibilities of investigator**
   It is the responsibility of the above investigator/s to ensure that all other investigators and staff on a project are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure that the project is conducted as approved by the CHEAN. Approval is only valid whilst the investigator/s holds a position at RMIT University.

2. **Amendments**
   Approval must be sought from the CHEAN to amend any aspect of a project including approved documents. To apply for an amendment please use the 'Request for Amendment Form' that is available on the RMIT website. Amendments must not be implemented without first gaining approval from CHEAN.

3. **Adverse events**
   You should notify HREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.

4. **Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF)**
   The PICF and any other material used to recruit and inform participants of the project must include the RMIT university logo. The PICF must contain a complaints clause including the project number.

5. **Annual reports**
   Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an annual report. This form can be located online on the human research ethics web page on the RMIT website.

6. **Final report**

A final report must be provided at the conclusion of the project. CHEAN must be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.

7. **Monitoring**
   Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by HREC at any time.

8. **Retention and storage of data**
   The investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.

In any future correspondence please quote the project number and project title.

On behalf of the DSC College Human Ethics Advisory Network I wish you well in your research.

Suzana Kovacevic
Research and Ethics Officer
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University
Ph: 03 9925 2974
Email: suzana.kovacevic@rmit.edu.au
Website: www.rmit.edu.au/dsc

Subsequent Study (Part Two)

RMIT UNIVERSITY Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN)
Sub-committee of the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)
Notice of Approval

Date:	**28 October 2014**
Project number:	**CHEAN A 0000018950-09/14**
Project title:	**Media, Mobility and Well-Being: A Case Study of International Students' Media Use for Well-Being**
Risk classification:	**Low Risk**
Investigator:	**A/Professor Larissa Hjorth and Joshua Wong Wei-Ern**
Approved:	**From: 28 October 2014 To: 31 July 2016**

I am pleased to advise that your application has been granted ethics approval by the Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network as a sub-committee of the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Terms of approval:
1. **Responsibilities of investigator**

It is the responsibility of the above investigator/s to ensure that all other investigators and staff on a project are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure that the project is conducted as approved by the CHEAN. Approval is only valid whilst the investigator/s holds a position at RMIT University.

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6. **Final report**
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7. **Monitoring**
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8. **Retention and storage of data**
   The investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.

In any future correspondence please quote the project number and project title.

On behalf of the DSC College Human Ethics Advisory Network I wish you well in your research.

Suzana Kovacevic
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