

## Media, Mobility & International Student Well-Being

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### Abstract

*How do international students pursue their own well-being in an age of ubiquitous media technologies and global mobility? In an age where mobility is rapidly becoming a key feature of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, aided by widespread usage of mobile technologies and global media (Sheller & Urry 2006), international students are becoming key stakeholders in constructing factors that influence their own well-being. At the same time, there is growing academic interest in studying international student mobility not just as economic flows of labour or capital (e.g. 'brain drains'), but also as a socio-cultural process in which social or cultural factors play a role in influencing student mobility (King & Ruiz-Gelices 2003). Mobility then, can be linked to the socio-cultural processes that surround student aspirations for "a better life", and their current or future well-being. This thesis attempts to unpack, through ethnographic studies and interviews, how students with global exposure to different cultures conceive of and pursue "well-being" in culturally-nuanced ways, and how the usage of new media technologies has impacted or transformed these cultural practices. By shedding light on the complexities of what "well-being" actually means to students from multiple cultures and how media technologies are transforming the way these students are practising "well-being", this thesis may be of use to well-being service providers in helping them facilitate student efforts to pursue their current or future well-being on their own terms.*

### Keywords

Mobility, media, well-being, international students, cross-cultural understandings

### Introduction

Mobility has become one of the key features of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, aided by the rise of globalization and technologies that facilitate the movement of people, resources and ideas across different national, cultural and socio-economic boundaries. (Urry 2012) International students are one example of mobile migrant populations that are experiencing radical changes in life and aspirations due to rise of mobile technologies and global media such as the smartphone and internet services. The rise of these media technologies has created a very different socio-cultural and technological environment that separates the international students of today from the international students of the previous two decades.

Firstly, the rise of global media results in a breed of international students that are exposed to a much wider range of cultural flows and ideas than ever before. Even though students may originate from one country, they are not bounded by the media of that country, and instead can consume media from many other cultures via the internet. This is especially true of students from South-East Asia, who consume media as diverse as Indian movies, Chinese dramas, Korean pop music, Japanese animation, and TV shows from the U.S., U.K. and Australia in addition to their local or regional media. What this implies is that the old essentialist view of international students being representatives of the static and undiluted culture of their home country, who then travel to another country with a different static culture, is outdated. Instead, the modern experience of international students is of a much more fluid amalgam of different cultural flows that continue to be present in their lives via the internet even after they physically travel to a different location. In a sense, then, many international students are *already* multicultural – even before they leave their home country – due to the ubiquity of global media flows.

Secondly, being exposed to different cultural flows means that students have to construct uniquely individual narratives about what constitutes "a good life" for themselves. While the influence of their familial environment and home culture probably would play the biggest part in this determination of what goals to aim for in order to better their lives, the access to information and different cultural worldviews through media technologies may also be a factor in their definitions of well-being. A greater awareness of what people in other countries consider

important for success in life, or what things to value, or how to deal with problems, will lead to a reconsideration of their own aspirations and resources for well-being. The increase in global student mobility also comes into play here, as students are no longer limited to their own country, but can start aspiring to a better life in another country or using the resources gained through travel to improve their future situation at home. Thus, as a result of the flow of ideas and people across the world, international students are starting to plan for and construct factors in their lives that will improve their well-being both presently and in the future in ways that may be very different from the approaches supported by official well-being organizations.

It is these two insights that are the driving force for my thesis, which will focus on exploring how international students define, and then pursue, their own “well-being” in this new age of mobility and multiculturalism brought about by the rise of global media technologies.

## Research Questions

The focus of this study is to explore the interactions between media, mobility and well-being among international students, with a particular focus on the socio-cultural factors that underlie their decision-making processes and life practices. Thus, the study seeks to answer two research questions:

1. How does a highly-mobile population of international students, with experiences of more than one culture and way of living, conceive of “well-being”?
2. How do international students in Melbourne use media technologies to pursue practices that will enhance their current and future “well-being” in an age of global mobility and cultural diversity?

## Literature Review

This project lies at the intersection of multiple fields of research, including international student well-being, mobility and migration studies, and research into how media affects daily life practices.

### International Student Well-Being

There has been a lot of literature on international student well-being – both globally (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day 2009; Iwamoto & Liu 2010; King & Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Kobayashi, Kerbo & Sharp 2010; Miller et al. 2011; Rienties & Nolan 2014; Yeh & Inose 2003) and with regards to Australian education (Burns 1991; Hjorth 2007; Kell & Vogl 2012b; Khawaja & Dempsey 2008; Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock 1995; Quintrell & Westwood 1994; Ramburuth & McCormick 2001; Tran 2009, 2011). In a survey of adaptation patterns among international students at a university in Melbourne, Russell, Rosenthal and Thomson (2010) uncovered three clusters of students which had distinct and different patterns of adaptation to their host country: positive and connected (58.8% of international students), unconnected and stressed (34.4%), and distressed and risk-taking (6.7%). A general overview of the literature reveals that international students struggle with language, financial, social and cultural adjustment difficulties during their time overseas (Khawaja & Dempsey 2008; Mori 2000).

Linguistically, although many students have passed the entrance-level English examinations for their universities, these tests are more indicative of reading ability than writing or speech skills. (Mori 2000) Furthermore, the English learned by students in their home country was often standard, formal English learned from textbooks, and many overseas students struggled with the speed, slang and accents of their Australian teachers and peers. (Burns 1991; Kell & Vogl 2012a) This translates not only to difficulties in dealing with academic assignments, but also affects their ability to form social relationships.

Financially, many international students face greater stress than their local peers when dealing with money matters. Because of the rate of currency exchange, even students who may have scholarships from their home countries may have to find ways to fund themselves by engaging in part-time jobs. (Burns 1991; Kell & Vogl 2012a; Mori 2000) This can often be a drain on their time and energy that has a negative impact on their academic performance, yet is necessary to even continue their enrolment. The financial stress is also compounded by the fact that many international students represent the best and brightest of their countries, and hence are expected by their families and friends at home to succeed. The concept of failure is unthinkable. Worries about academic failure form a significant proportion of stress that international students experience. (Burns, 1991)

Socially, it is often difficult for international students to make friends with local Australians for a number of reasons, described by Kell & Vogl (2012a). In some cases, there are hostile (or at best) ambivalent attitudes held towards international students by locals, that may occasionally result in harassment. There is also a lack of common ground in terms of practices and interests (e.g. Australian sports), and differing cultural environments for building conversations (e.g. going out for drinks at a noisy bar, going for coffee instead of tea). Many students are

also confused by cultural conventions in conversation, such as the ubiquitous “How are you?” which is treated by many international students as a genuine request to know the status of a person, rather than a generic greeting of amiability. (Mori 2000; Yeh & Inose 2003)

The majority of studies so far on international student well-being have thus been focused more on the problems they encounter and, to a lesser extent, the coping strategies they use. However, much of this research is conducted on a large scale, and lumps together all international students under one collective grouping. It also tends to construe international students as passive rather than active agents in their own well-being, relying on organizational initiatives to improve their situation. As such, there is still much research remaining to be done on how international students take care of their own well-being, as well as how cultural differences among international students may result in differing definitions of well-being and solutions pursued.

## **Mobility**

The study of transnational migrants (which includes international students) often falls under the new “mobilities” paradigm – studies that focus on the movements of people, ideas and resources and the wider social impacts of such movements (Urry 2007). With regards to international student mobility and how it relates to well-being in particular, there have been a growing number of studies that focus on social and cultural motivations for getting an international education. 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 (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day 2009; King & Ruiz-Gelices 2003). At the same time, there are also problematic assumptions about international student mobility as being great equalizers of socio-economic class distinctions, but Findlay et al. (2012) show that more often than not class distinctions are reproduced through the globalization 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.

Complicating the issue is Bryan Turner’s concept of “immobilities” and the “enclave society” (Turner 2007). International migration fills a valuable niche in advanced economies, where the population is ageing and many locals may not wish to perform low class or low-status jobs. Societies and states have to deal with the twin demands of encouraging migration to sustain the labour pool, while at the same time maintaining national and cultural unity by controlling the influx of new viewpoints. This has resulted in the creation of “enclaves”, where states seek to sequester the socially-undesirable from mainstream through military-political, socio-cultural or even biological means. Thus, in Australia, there are continuing debates about the ease or restrictions surrounding permanent residency, which are directly related to the interests of international students. And this debate is also intertwined with policies on asylum-seekers, which can sometimes be conflated with international student migrants, leading to narratives of social desirability and racism. Hannam, Sheller and Urry (2006) point out that the ongoing development of theory in the mobilities paradigm problematizes both the ‘sedentarist’ view of place and dwelling as natural steady-states, as well as the ‘deterritorialized’ approaches that see fluid mobility as a ubiquitous condition throughout the world as a result of globalization.

## **Media**

While the field of mobility and migration studies is still developing, there is still much to be discovered about the role that media technologies play in the lives of transnational migrants like international students. The mobile phone and mobile technologies have impacted well-being in various ways. For many transnational communities, including students, it is a way to maintain intimate relationships with home and negotiate being simultaneously ‘home and away’ (Hjorth 2007). For the Filipino diaspora of care workers in Hong Kong, it facilitates both a sense of independence and a constant co-presence with family, ranging from raising children at a distance to establishing and extending networks of community support (McKay 2006, 2007). For others, such as rural-to-urban migrant workers in China, it affords them not only connection with their hometowns, but also ways to connect with their fellow migrant worker communities, and even develop romantic attachments. (Wallis 2011)

Mobile and new media technologies have not only been a source of connection and intimacy, but also a platform that allows the disenfranchised to challenge existing hegemonies of power. (Qiu 2014; Qiu & Yeran 2010; Schwittay 2011) Voices which have been traditionally silenced now have a say in their local communities, ranging from lower-class migrant workers protesting exploitation (Qiu 2014), to youth in Korea and China organizing protests around political and social issues (Qiu & Yeran 2010), to Indian women expressing their thoughts about the gender divide (Schwittay 2011). In other cases, media technologies have allowed new structures of power in terms of media-access to emerge. For the Chinese generation Y (*ba ling hou*), growing up in a media-rich

environment allows them to teach their elders – parents and grandparents – new media literacy skills in order pursue co-presence with them. (Hjorth & Arnold 2012)

So far, there are very few studies that examine the relationship between international student mobility and media technologies in any great detail, and none that have specifically focused on how the confluence of mobility and media affect international student well-being. Thus, my PhD thesis will focus on gathering in-depth accounts of how the pursuit and practice of well-being among international students is transformed by these two influences.

## **Methodology**

For this study, I chose an ethnographic approach that combines semi-structured group interviews, photo diaries taken by the participants, and participant observation (as an international student myself).

While ethnographic approaches have rapidly become one of the more common methods used in media studies, the rapid changes brought about by Internet, social media and mobile technologies have often left researchers grasping for effective forms of ethnography for studying the communities that grow up around these technologies. (Farnsworth & Austrin 2010; Hine 2000, 2008). In traditional anthropological ethnographic research, the culture studied has usually been bounded by a physical locality. But the idea of “place” becomes problematic in this new globalized digital age. My research participants can no longer be bound and defined by physical locality (i.e. “international students in Melbourne”), as a very real part of their existences are elsewhere – connected via mobile and internet technologies to a wide range of locations and social spaces, and seamlessly transitioning from offline to online lives and processes. Pink (2009) argues that ‘ethnographic places’ in new media research can be defined not 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 offline and online processes – something very important for social media environments. Therefore, even though I am interviewing international students that physically reside in Melbourne, the actual people group whose ‘culture’ I am examining are students who have experiences of multiple cultures, through physical travel and exposure to global media, and who are incorporating mobile and social media technologies as part of their everyday lives.

## **Participants**

Approximately 20 participants will be recruited for the study through snowball sampling and recruitment advertisements on job websites. These will all be international students who are studying in a tertiary institution in Melbourne, and who have been here for at least 6 months. The 6-month limit is so that they would have had sufficient time to settle down and gain enough first-hand experience of the cultural environment here in Australia, to be able to make useful comparisons to their home countries and cultures of media that they consume.

## **Procedure and Data Gathering**

Data will be collected through two methods: photo diaries and group interviews. First, I will ask each study participant to document their media usage for a day through photos, with accompanying descriptions. In her book *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’), 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), capturing women’s experiences of chemotherapy (Frith & Harcourt 2007), and documenting perceptions of quality of life among Italian-Australians (Goopy & Lloyd 2006). In all these cases, cameras were given to the research participants, and they were asked to take photos about things of significance to the focus of the study, after which they would be interviewed with the photos serving as a reference point and focus for the conversation.

Similarly, I would be asking my study participants to take photos of where, when and how they use media (and especially when it has an impact on their well-being), and then add a little written description to each photo explaining why it is significant to them. By doing so, I hope to understand more about the situated use of media in their lives, and to what extent this is shaped by their cultural background. By “media”, I include both digital media technologies and to a lesser extent any print and tangible media that they interact with. Examples of pictures I would ask them to take include their computer wallpaper backgrounds and screensavers, arrangements of their favourite apps on their mobile phones, the locations where they regularly place their laptops or phones, regular websites or apps that they access, as well as any decorative media that reflects 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.

After sending me their picture diaries, students will be interviewed in groups of 2-3 people, for roughly 1 ½ - 2 hours. Through these interviews, I try to understand how international students from different cultures think about “well-being” and how they describe their pursuit of it in their everyday lives. The questions in the interview would largely center around four categories:

- Descriptions of their life journey as international students (e.g. “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?”)
- Cultural influences on how they think about & practice well-being (e.g. “How do you think your life experiences, travels, or the media that you consume have influenced your ideas about “a good life?”)
- Challenges faced & connections to sources of well-being (e.g. “Can you describe some ways in which you are pursuing your own well-being or a better life for yourself?”)
- The role of media in their pursuit of well-being (e.g. “What role do media technologies (such as social media, entertainment media, mobile technologies, or the internet) play in your pursuit of well-being or a better life?”)

As much as possible, I would try to include students from different ethnic, national or cultural backgrounds in each group, so as to tease out differences in ideas about well-being across cultures. I will also ask them about how they pursue well-being through different activities, and how their usage of media technologies plays a role in that. In the interviews, I would also ask them to talk about some of the pictures that they took, and what these media-related practices of well-being mean to them. This data will then be collated, transcribed and analysed for common themes and patterns, and will furnish the material for discussion for the thesis.

## Conclusion

In the end, this thesis will produce in-depth, qualitative accounts of the ways in which mobility, media, and international student well-being interact with each other. While I do not claim that the results are likely to be representative of all international students, or even ones from the same country / region, the results of this study will hopefully shed light on the different thought processes and factors that international students take into account when thinking about their well-being, and how they employ media technologies as part of their well-being practices. Thus, the stories of these international students and the analysis provided by my research will hopefully be of use to well-being service providers that cater to international students, in helping them deal with the new socio-cultural and technological contexts that exist in this new decade of mobility and multicultural media flows.

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