**Master Thesis**

# Christianity & digital culture: analysis of the users' experiences of the Christian social networking site in Taiwan--Walei

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**JYVÄ SKYLÄ N YLIOPISTO**

Tiivistelmä – Abstract

**Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have been a popular phenomenon worldwide, while religion in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) studies has gained more academic attention. Walei as a pioneering social networking site is founded by a group of Protestant Christians targeting at the youth in Taiwan, and it exemplifies religious application on the Internet. This thesis investigates what role such a website plays both for its users and against its competition, particularly in the non-Christian cultural context. Using online interviews with nine users of Walei, how the interactivity affects Christian users' religious identity and the impression of non-Christian users toward Christianity is explored. This thesis seeks to shed the light on the interrelation of technology and religion, and the possible influence on identity formation online.**

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# 1. Introduction

My first encounter with Facebook[1] was in 2007, when I was an exchange student from Taiwan to Finland. Several international students and I were introduced to Finnish shyness and even social obstacles. Even within the Finnish church, I experienced difficulties in building interpersonal relationship with church members whom I thought should have been warmer and friendlier according to my church experiences in Taiwan. However, it was my Finnish friends who first asked if I had an user account on Facebook. Not knowing exactly how it functioned nor expecting myself to be a frequent user, I registered in Facebook though it was not well-known in Taiwan back then. Nevertheless, I was surprised to discover that almost all of my Finnish friends were Facebook users, except they engaged with different degrees. I learned later that "Social Networking sites" (SNSs), such as Facbook, seem to provide people another way of socializing, despite how they behave in physical life. Another and even bigger surprise came within the next two years. Facebook, after its Chinese-characterization, had become greatly popular in Taiwan. This strongly aroused my interests in how the Internet could assist people to breakthrough their personalities and mentalities, and in how SNSs were used.

In general, the computer mediated communication (CMC) has brought omnipresent impacts to life and culture. Things people do not, can not, or dare not talk about, whether it is because of shy personality or fear of the public, become easier to discuss or to show online. SNSs particularly have an influence on self-identity presentation and relationship building and maintenance. Users can easily display personal

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[1] Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) is a global social networking website from a private Inc. People can add friends, visit profiles of friends, and join communities.

information like religion or marital status, and they easily make new friends online. Encountering such SNSs as Facebook and gaining my experiences from it as a user in Finland, I cannot help but think retrospectively of another similar Taiwanese website—Walei.

Walei (http://www.walei.tw) is a social network website which has been designed and catered for the Taiwanese youth. Targeting the internet users from the age of 13 to 18



Fig. 1: The front page of Walei (Retrieved from 22.9.2009)

years old, it is constructed as an interstellar space with several planets, like Resident Planet, Government Planet, Entertainment Planet, and several others. The website had its first trial on the July 20th 2000 before its official launch on the September 1st the same year. Then on the December 22nd 2002, the second or the first updated version was released, followed by the third on December 28th 2006. Although founded only just pioneering among other social network sites in Taiwan, its functions were pretty similar to Facebook. In its 10-year period of existence, Walei had been updated and improved according to the development of technology and needs of society. In 2003, a book about Walei was also published, including a disc containing Flashes and music files. Today, it is presented as a multimedia website with texts, colorful images, and flash animation with special aesthetics.

I have chosen Walei instead of Facebook as my interest of research for the following two reasons: First of all, Facebook had not gained its popularity in Taiwan back in 2007. As a user of Walei since my high school days, I assume the comparatively long existed website reflects more of how Taiwanese interact with SNSs. Secondly, the design features of Walei are worth exploring, and it is even more interesting since it is a Christian-founded website. There are many designed ideas closely directed by the religious connections. As Taiwan is not a Christian country, the cultural context may broaden the perspective of SNSs studies, including the design and usage. Before going further, to know the cultural context of Christianity in Taiwan will be the key to understand the uniqueness of Walei.

## 1.1. Christianity as a Minority Religion in Taiwan

The freedom and diversity of Religions are rather obvious in Taiwan, due to the

multicultural history and the religious freedom guaranteed by the constitution of Republic of China. Basically, the dominant religion in Taiwan is the mixture of traditional Chinese religions like Taoism, Buddhism, and other folk beliefs; by 'mixture,' I mean the ambiguous boundary of the division of each different religion. People normally worship ancestors, ghosts, and visit temples. For students, especially during the periods of exams, it is common to visit the temples and try to get talisman of wisdom, in order to have better results. All sorts of Taoist magic figures are also available to be asked and bought. In addition, during the 1$^{st}$ and the 15$^{th}$ of each month in the Lunar Calendar, people burn joss sticks or light the incense, asking for good luck from Buddha or the God of Earth. The month of July in the Lunar Calendar is perceived as a fearful month of Ghost, which is full of taboos and requires more worshiping to ghosts. Other than that, fortunetelling and folk superstitions are fairly popular. Therefore, under the mainstream religious atmosphere, to keep the command of not worshiping idols is harder for Taiwanese Christians. The misunderstanding toward Christianity of not respecting ancestors by not worshiping them can lead to serious family conflicts, particularly when a member of a non-Christian family becomes a Christian.

By and large, Christianity in Asia used to be ranked as a cultural product or a colonial tool of Western world (Goh, 2005). Christianity was the first world religion in Taiwan and it was the Spanish catholic missionaries who brought it to Taiwan in the early 17th centuries. Later the Dutch missionaries of Presbyterian established churches and brought Christianity especially to the tribes of Taiwanese Natives. Since then, Presbyterian churches became the dominant denomination, while these days the

second biggest are those independent denominational churches[2], including the well-known Bread of Life churches.

According to International Religious Freedom Report 2006[3], Christian population in Taiwan was about 3.9% of the 23 million, of which 2.6% were Protestants and 1.3% were Catholics. Orthodox Christians numbers were too small to be reflected in the report. Because of its significant numbers although still a minority religion, the Protestant Christians were relatively more recognized. In fact, the term "Christian" in Chinese language was referred as Protestant Christians, whereas Catholic Christians were called differently[4]. Therefore, the term "Christians" used in this research would be referred to Protestants.

Robbie B.H. Goh (2005) stated in his book, "*The Internet and Christianity in Asia: cultural trends, structures and transformations*," that Taiwan's openness to cultural and religious differences had contributed to her economical success:

> "*Historically, Taiwan (as the refuge of the Nationalist government after the communist takeover of China in 1949, and also of the many churches and their members which followed in their wake fearing persecution by the communists) have been committed to the kind of free-market society which has made it one of the richer nations in Asia, as well as a society fairly tolerant of cultural and religious differences. Although it does not have a large Christian population, it has a particular significance as one of the leading members of the Chinese Christian diasporic community*" (p. 841).

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[2] Operation World, The Christianity in Taiwan, 2001 version:
http://www.operationworld.org/country/chnt/owtext.html
[3] International Religious Freedom Report 2006 in Taiwan:
http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71337.htm
[4] 基督徒 is used to refer Protestant Christians, and 天主教徒 for Catholic Christians.

Being open on choices, Christianity in Taiwan was less influenced by the original denominations from Europe, but more affected by churches in Hong Kong, South Korea, and lately Singapore.

### 1.1.1. Internet use amongst the Christian community in Taiwan

Internet technology is apparently utilized to serve religion. The emphasis of Christianity in relation to personal identity, fellowship, mission and evangelism, seems to make its digital application more reasonable than other religions. With the fact that it is not a dominating religion in some non-Christian countries, many informative contents of Christianity are needed. Proselytizing may be more imminent than in those Christian countries. Churches have tried to be more amiable and easy to access, in order to get along with the society. Therefore, the Internet has become a good tool for Christianity to be known, and has helped the communication between Christian and non-Christian users.

According to Goh (2005), Internet use and Christianity in Asia differs from country to country, with economical status and the history in significant degree. The internet-rich countries tend to have well-organized denominational and congregational websites. Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea will be the three dominant hubs, in comparison with internet-poor countries like Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. He also gives sharp comment and prediction toward the convergence of Christianity and the Internet in Asia:

> "*Christianity in Asia, largely the product of Anglophone mission movements, is also much more closely aligned to the Anglophone (and more broadly,*

*Romanized) communicative technologies of the internet and mass printing. With the accelerating force of these technologies, it is likely that Christianity's use of the internet is likely to further consolidate its position in many countries in Asia, as well as reaffirming its position as the religious culture most closely aligned to this communicative technology"* (p.847).

In Taiwan, among Christian community, the awareness of making Internet for religious use can be traced back to 1994, when a group of Christian students of graduate schools, mainly from National Tsing-Hua University and Nation Chiao-Tung University, started a Christian board in Bulletin Board System (BBS)[5]—FHL[6]. There they used this platform to exchange information and discussion, for 'sharing the gospel,' 'discipleship training,' and 'apologetics.' Together with the development of technology, the website 'FHL information center[7]' was created later. The main



Fig. 2: Webpage of FHL information center (retrieved in Sep, 2010)

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[5] Bulletin Board System (BBS) is a computer system software, which allows user to connect and log in, reading message and bulletins and exchanging information. BBS in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulletin_board_system

[6] FHL stands for Faith, Hope and Love.

[7] FHL information center http://ccn.fhl.net/editorial/christianityonline.htm

function was to serve as an information portal, where people could search for Biblical resources[8], Christianity-related images[9], testimonies and articles, and information of Christian organizations.

Then in the following year, the Protestant Christian organization called the "Campus Evangelical Fellowship" (CEF), which focus on student work since 1957, held the 6th Youth Mission Conference, where 'Evangelism online' was raised as a discussion issue. That was perhaps the first time the Taiwanese Christians got involved in the combination of Computer technology and Christianity[10]. Later more congregational and denominational websites sprung up like mushrooms. But together with FHL websites, the users are mostly Christians. Internet is serving as an informative tool, as Christian users often use it for internal communication.

If we just focus on the website application of Christianity, there are expectable Christian websites, such as congregational or denominational websites; websites of
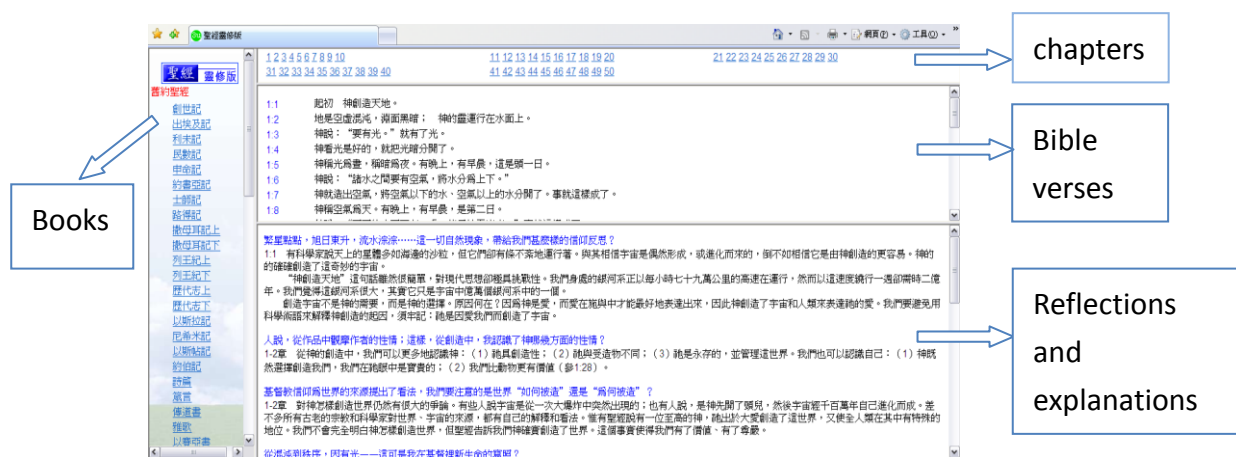


Fig.3. Devotional Bible from Chinese Bible International Ltd.

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8  FHL faith and Bible resources center: http://bible.fhl.net
9  FHL photos resources center: http://photo.fhl.net
10  According to the article, "Christian websites and the Internet" (in Chinese): http://ccn.fhl.net/editorial/christianityonline.htm.

Christian organizations; and websites for personal devotion, like online Bible[11] or online Christian radio[12]. However, the Christians use of Internet can also been seen in some neutral portal websites. For example, Wretch[13] is one of the biggest social networking websites in Taiwan, which integrates blogs, albums guestbooks, videos and other services. Some smaller churches that do not possess their own websites usually try to apply a free account on Wretch, and use it to post information, update common photos, and communicate with members of the church. Individual Christian users can as well share their faith by blogging or posting Christian-related videos. In addition to Wretch, there are similar commercial social networking websites like Pixnet and Yahoo Taiwan. Besides, the seemingly old-fashioned computer system "BBS" is still popular in Taiwan among university students, and it has been utilized by Christian students. Compared to Christian websites, individual users and smaller community can gain access online more freely through those portal websites without having advanced technological abilities like website construction. In this way, they can fulfill their natural needs to express their religious identity, to obtain religious information, to share their faith, and to communicate with Christians or with the whole society.

The social networking site--Walei (www.walei.tw), which is the main case of this thesis, was created with the religious trend of applying Internet, and in the cultural context. According to the history of Walei, it was the staff workers of CEF first presented to the internet world. The founders saw the need of using the Internet as a

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[11] Devotional Online Bible in Chinese http://www3u.homeip.net/bible/
[12] Good News Classical Music Online Radio: http://www.goodnews.org.tw/classic.php
[13] Wretch (http://www.wretch.cc/) is the biggest Taiwanese community web site. The name in Chinese means Anonymous. According to a Compete.com survey, the domain wretch.cc attracted at least 4 million visitors annually by 2008. More descriptions from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wretch_(website).

good tool to reach students. As the website was developed, they became a strategic alliance with another organization called the "Youth for Christ Taiwan." Today, CEF is assisting the programming, and "Youth for Christ Taiwan" is in charge of the financial founding and main workers.

The non-profit website claims to be "a clean space free of commercial pollution." Therefore, no commercial advertisements can be seen in Walei. Instead of profit-orientation, the effort of building such a site lies heavily on the Christian mission to "give teenagers a place of love and to share the gospel.[14]" The intension is to "attract more youth users, fulfilling the mission of building a virtual Eden for teenagers." As such, the funds come from sponsors who identify with the same vision. Walei regularly operate promotions in congregations and camps, requesting for attention, prayers and financial support.

Walei was the first and only evangelical website targeting at teenagers in Taiwan. With its interesting contents and features, it succeeded in attracting many users of which 70 % were non-Christians, according to its survey. For instance, users would be encouraged to leave caring messages on the Guestbook of neighbors, friends, and even strangers. They might also be recruited as volunteers of Walei to make further interactions with other users. If needed, a teenage user can apply for a personal 'Guardian Angel' or write to the Christian volunteers or professional counselors who acted as 'Secret Counselors.' There are official offline face-to-face meetings annually held for users to establish friendship in physical sense. In addition, seasonal activities which address different topics related to Taiwanese teenagers' lives can be found in Walei and be discussed within the online community. Opinions based on Biblical

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[14]  Walei Museum (in Chinese) http://www.walei.tw/entertain/museum/action.html

principles and Christian values are provided for user to take as references. In this respect, Church Planet is especially present for curious users to explore Christianity, which is still unknown to many Taiwanese.

There is no doubt that this minority religion in Taiwan can leverage on Internet as a tool to reach and serve more people. But how does Walei take advantage of Internet to interact with its youth users through social networking and online community? How effectively does it achieve the religious function, especially in competing with secular social network sites and other religions in Taiwan? How much will the users accept the ideology conveyed from the site? What kind of internet culture, religious culture, youth culture, is involving within the presence of this site? To investigate further, I explored deeper into the functions of Walei, and conducted intensive interviews with its users, with the primary focus on the role this religious social network site plays, and the possible religious identity construction and maintenance online.

## 1.2. Theoretical Background and Framework

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) used to be defined as "a form of electronic written communication," but Susan B. Barnes (2003) re-defines it as "a wider range of technologies that facilitate both human communication and the interactive sharing of information through computer networks, including e-mail, discussion groups, newsgroups, chat, instant messages and Web pages" (p.4). She categorizes CMC into two major categories: *Informatics*, when the computer is used as "an information manager and a system for the electronic storage and retrieval of digital data," and *Conferencing*, when the computer is used to connect people. Besides, CMC allows the synchronous and asynchronous communication without physical

presence, and thus requires fantasy and play to compensate the lack of face-to-face information.

Social networking sites (SNSs), though not being widely recognized back in 2004 (Clarke, 2009), are not in the infancy anymore. They are broadly used and to draw academic attentions. Boyd and Ellison (2008) organize the history of SNSs, identifying SixDegree.com, launched in 1997, the first recognizable social networking site. It combined profiles and friend lists. Through later development, various social networking sites for different purposes and goals, containing profiles, friends lists, guestbooks, and diary pages, were launched throughout the world, including Cyworld from South Korea in 2001; Skyblog from France in 2002; MySpace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004 from the United States. Friendster in 2002 even "popularized the feature that define contemporary social network sites—profiles, public testimonials or comments, and publicly articulated traversable lists of friends (Boyd, 2008, p.121)."

As SNSs are increasingly becoming more popular worldwide, not only many corporations start to invest on such business, but also many scholars are having research interests largely in CMC studies. It is observed that topics on 'Impression Management', 'Friendship Performance', 'Networks', 'Network Structure', 'Online/Offline Connections', and 'Privacy Issues' are studied (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Popular research SNSs cases included MySpace (Boyd, 2008; Thelwall, 2008) and Facebook. However, research work outside the United States' context is required to broaden the understandings of who are the users and why do they use (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Meanwhile, increasing research on religion and New Media has been done in the

Western world since 1990, mainly from the perspective of CMC. After the mid-90s, issues about identity construction, social community, changing authority, as well as the discussion of Online Religion and Religion Online (Helland, 2000, as cited in Wu, 2007) have been addressed. Heidi Campbell is a major voice in this field contributing many academic articles on this topic (Krüger, 2005). As a new media scholar, she indicates how religion fits into the larger domain of Internet studies and why studies of religion within CMC need to be given more attention. She points out the importance of religion in people's life, and the growth of Religion Online (2005a).

In "Spiritualising the Internet-uncovering discourses and narratives of Religious Internet" (2005b), Campbell investigates how Internet users conceive and speak of the Internet, in order to shape it as suitable for religious use. She discovers that religious users have spiritualized the Internet as a sacramental space by linguistic legitimization and pro-active culturing. Four common discourses and strategies used to frame Internet technology are identified: spiritual medium facilitating spiritual experiences, sacramental space suitable for religious use, tool to promote religion and religious practice, and technology for affirming religious life. The narratives of the Internet that follow the four discourses function as 'spiritual network,' 'worship space,' 'missionary tool,' and 'religious identity.' Through the shaping process, the religious internet user will be able to emerge in digital culture and express more.

Furthermore, Campbell (2005b) explores how the internet is being studied and conceived as "a sacramental space", where religious users see the internet as a viable place for presenting their beliefs and practices. She first presents four more dominant concepts and models of the Internet: "An Information Space," "A Common Mental Geography," "An Identity Workshop" and "A Social Space," and adds internet as "A

Sacramental Space" by considering several additional typologies of online spiritual communities emerging from a recent online community study. The Internet as a sacramental space, therefore, functions as a spiritual tool, religious identity, a space for personal spiritual pursuits and a social spiritual support sphere, by encompassing the traits of the four models.

Within 20 years, scholars have put up efforts on nine categories of themes in the research field of religion and CMC: theology, religion, morality, practical/ministry application, traditions, community, identity, authority/power, and ritual (Campbell, 2006; Cheung, 2009). However, although Christianity is frequently chosen as the main religion to discuss, studies remain limited in the context of the Western world. Concerns about the Asian cultural context are frequently lacking. Thus it is worth examining closely the religious use of Internet in a specific country, such as Taiwan.

In Taiwan, there are some studies done on Buddhism and the Internet, such as discussion of digitalizing Buddhism Scriptures (Du, 1999; Sie, 1999), and the virtual sanctity of online Buddhism (Lian, 2002). While the Internet use for Protestant Christianity in Taiwan is just second to Buddhism (Wu, 2007), there are limited number of researches and its dimension on Christianity and Internet use. For instance, Lin's (2004) research on effectiveness index of Christian religious web-based communication only concentrated Christian church websites in the United States., There is also study of the integration of Internet and Christian media, but more from the marketing perspective (Lu, 1998). The latest "A preliminary study on the Taiwan Christianity online religion" has examined how Christian users in Taiwan use Christian websites by taking three websites from churches and a Christian information center. Wu (2007) points out the Internet use among Christian community in Taiwan

still lies in the Youth, and mainly for information searching.

In general, by comparing with the global development of Christianity and the Internet, most of the applications in Taiwan may still be categorized as a one-way informative Religion Online. However, a Christian website like Walei, in the form of social networking site and designed for teenagers, has not been examined. Therefore, through this research I hope to shed light on the relation between Christianity and the Internet in an Asian context, specifically in Taiwan, and their function in the society. How Internet empowers religion and how Internet has been spiritualized in different cultural contexts may bring new insights for research field.

## 1.3. Research questions and materials

With this thesis, I intend to discover what role Walei plays for its users. Therefore, my research questions are: a) "How do the Christian and non-Christian users of Walei perceive its functions?" b) "How does it differ from other commercial social networking sites in Taiwan like Wretch or Facebook for the users?" More sub-questions with two directions follow up depending on their personal religious identity. Supposedly they identify themselves as Christians: Which functions proposed by Heidi Campbell--a spiritual tool, religious identity, a space for personal spiritual pursuits and a social spiritual support sphere--are more significantly seen in Walei from their experiences? Do these Christian users' religious identities affect their behavior? How then for those who consider themselves non-Christians will they perceive Walei, so that they are willing to engage? If they do change their attitude toward Christianity or become a Christian through the experience of using Walei, what then would make them do so?

Methods like Observation and Archives and Collections were used in this qualitative research. Being a registered user of Walei, the web contents were generally accessible. The E-newsletters I received regularly were collected and analyzed. In addition to these materials, my personal contact with the main founder of the website enabled me to obtain extra information, including their public promotional materials. Moreover, I chose interview as the main method to answer the research questions stated above. The list of interviewees was provided by Walei, based on my requests for three groups of users: Christian users, Users who became Christians because of Walei, and non-Christian users. This religious division was self-identified by users themselves.

Due to the geographical limitation and the interests to experiment this Internet Research, semi-structured interviews were held online through typing with instant chatting software MSN, combining with a set of preliminary questionnaire. Because of the time differences between Europe and Taiwan, as well as the varied amount of time to use the Internet among Taiwanese youth, the interview had become more difficult to be carried out. As a result, it was not possible for some interviewees to continue to completion but eventually only 9 completed interviewees are presented in this thesis.

## 1.4. Thesis Overview

As in the earlier section, the reason of choosing Walei as the main research focus of this thesis is presented, so as the diversity of religions in Taiwan and Christianity in Taiwan as the cultural background. Theoretical framework, research methodology and research questions of this thesis were briefly introduced. Since it is important to

understand what Social Networking Sites mean, and to acknowledge what a social networking site Walei is, therefore, in the next chapter I will discuss the special designed functions of Walei. Following that, in Chapter 3, the religious use of Walei shall be addressed, where studies in relation to Religion Online/ Online Religion will be presented; how Internet has been spiritualized among Christians, together with Heidi Campbell's models, will be more elaborated. In addition, the religious design and language use in Walei will be further explored.

The methodology will be explained more in-depth in Chapter 4, including reviewing of interview process. The interview cases and analysis can be looked at in Chapter 5. In the first half of this chapter, individual story of interviewees from the three respective groups, divided by their religious identity, will be outlined. The interview findings and analysis are followed in the second section. Chapter 6 will be the conclusion and the reflection, where research restrictions and a proposal of possible future study directions will be highlighted. Interview questionnaire and one sample of the interview script can be found in the attachment in the appendix.

## 2.  Walei as a Social Networking Site

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are one of technological inventions that cannot be ignored, whether in everyday reality or in academic interests. Boyd and Ellison's (2008) definition of SNSs helps us see the significance of these web-based services to individuals:

> *"web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p.211).*

Three prevalent features—profiles, friends, and comments, differentiate SNSs from other types of CMC. Boyd (2008b) argues that these three features are worth paying attention since they take place in public: "Friends are publicly articulated, profiles are publicly viewed, and comments are publicly visible (p.124)." Then the term 'networked publics' is used to describe the special nature of mediated publics, containing four properties: persistence, searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences. Persistence demonstrates the possibility of asynchronous communication, that any speech act can be extended by being recorded for posterity. Searchability shows the ability to discover and find someone since the digital body exists through text regardless of the geographical condition. Replicability is exemplified when public expressions are copied and passed around verbatim, so that the original and copy becomes hard to distinguish. Invisible audiences display the uncontrollable receivers of a public message. It is closely linked with persistence, serachability, and replicaility, for an expression can be heard at a different time and space from when and where it was originally made.

## 2.1. "Walei interstellar space"— game-like setting and narrative

Although SNSs are popular among different age groups nowadays, youth users will still occupy the biggest group. Having the traits defined by Boyd (2008a), Walei undoubtedly belongs to the category of Social Networking Site, falling under the garment of an interstellar space with different planets. The founder stated their first designing idea on their 5th anniversary webpage.[15] It was a fantasy story that after earth exploded due to over pollution, the five founders, now known as five station agents, then flew to this Walei interstellar space and restarted their lives there. In their



Fig. 4: Walei Front page during Chinese New Year 2009 (Retrieved in Feb, 2009)

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[15] Walei museum, stating their beginning and history(In Chinese):
http://www.walei.tw/entertain/museum/words.htm

first version of the website, there was even an opening Flash animation[16], quickly displaying this story. Now the front-page of the website is with the starry background picture and icons of planets. It also applies Web Feed to present some updated contents of users' dairy, and Flash as advertisements for attracting people to visit and view their certain topics.



Fig. 5: The head section

Several planets were built in this space. In the head section, ten icons were given with names of different planets. In Figue 4, from the left to the right, they were 居住星球 (Resident Planet), 政府星球(Government Planet), 秘密星球(Secret Planet), 娛樂星球(Entertainment Planet), 教會星球(Church Planet), 飛颺[17]星球(Fly and Soar Planet), 飛躍[18]星球(Fly and Leap Planet), 希望部落(Hope Tribe), 大學星球 (University Planet), and 哇咧新聞臺 (Walei News Station). Each planet provided different functions, in order to meet needs from different users. A brif introduction of each of these fuctions can be found in the following sections:

● **Resident Planet**: There are 16 stars for registered users to choose from and to have their 'Homes,' which are their personal profiles. Once they have their own places, users will get access to edit their profiles, to post their diaries as writing blogs, and to have a guestbook and inbox. Users get notification mails from the

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[16] Opening Flash: http://www.walei.tw/entertain/museum/cross.htm

[17] 飛颺 literally means 'fly and soar.' But this title is the name of camps by CEF for Junior High school students or even younger ones.

[18] 飛躍 literally means 'fly and leap.' The tile is the name of camps by CEF for Senior High school students.

Fig.6: Users can choose where to live or whom to visit from stars, zones, and places

Government Planet, when there is a new neighbor moving in or when a neighbor is having his/her birthday. If there are friends in real life using Walei together, they can also be online neighbors simply by choosing the same star to live. Users can visit each other's place, that is to view other's profile, and by that they can earn themselves 'Walei Money,' which is a monetary system operated within Walei. With Walei Money, users are able buy decorations to personalize the outfit of their Home, as well as to open a personal discussion board, to send E-card and "Red Envelope[19]" to others. They can also use the money to move to other stars, and even to be qualified to apply for some volunteering positions. If they are volunteers, such as forum moderators or group administrators, the title of these 'public roles' will be shown in the 'Honor' section of their personal profile.

● **Government Planet**: It is a place that users get all the background information about Walei, including the history and the instruction for new users. Latest

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[19] "Red Envelope" refers to the monetary gift. It has the allusion from Chinese culture. During the traditional Chinese New Year, elders or relatives in the family give children pocket money in a red envelope. See Red Envelope in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_envelope.

activities and announcements are presented there. Some videos uploaded to YouTube are also available for new users to watch and learn to use.

- **Secret Planet**: The most popular sections are in this planet, including "Life Variety Shop", "Love Consulting Room" and "Sexual Education Zone." In Life Variety Shop, problems like self-understanding, interpersonal relationship, and school studies are discussed and dealt with. Love Consulting Room and Sexual Education Zone provides users educational contents, allowing people to discuss and exchange some ideas about love relationships.

  There are so-called "Secret Counselor" or "Guardian Angel," played by professional staffs or trained volunteers. Youth users can write to Secret Counselor about their own problems, or apply a personal Guardian Angel to talk with and be friend.

- **Entertainment Planet**: Users can find various discussion boards based on their interest, such as movies, music, or sport. Decorations or E-cards are purchasable with Walei Money there. Users can also play small flash games. There is also a Walei interstellar museum, documenting some past activities and files.

- **Church Planet**: Users can get information of Christianity, Student Fellowship from CEF, and some churches here. Articles with encouraging contents, many evangelical Flash animations which explain meaning of life and growth in Faith, Q&A about Christianity, Christian and gospel music, and Bible verses with explanation for different situations, are all available.

- **Fly and Soar Planet**: This is a planet for junior high school students and elementary school students. Discussion boards are there for people from the same class, school, and small group in the camps held by CEF. There is also link to a forum in Secret Planet, addressing how to study, and how to decide what to

study after junior high. A series Flash called "the story of Angel Little Po" is watchable there.

- **Fly and Leap Planet**: This is a planet for senior high school students, and also vocational school and polytechnic students outside Taipei area. They can have and open discussion boards, as a platform for people from the same class, same school, same Campus Fellowship, and same group in the camps held by CEF to communicate. "Study Map," addressing many possible inquires about how to choose university and what to study, is also provided here.

- **Hope Tribe**: This is a planet for vocational school and polytechnic students in Taipei area. There are forums and announcements about camps. "Study Map" and some other information regarding their studies are also given.

- **University Planet**: This planet is created later for university students. They can have an open discussion board, as a platform for people from the same university, same Campus Fellowship, and same group in the camps held by CEF. Some links related to Christian resources are provided, including another website "Ark Amusement park," also created later by CEF, specifically for university Christian students to have online extension of their Campus Fellowships.

- **Walei News Station**: It is a new place started in 2009, trying to arouse wider attention to different social issues. Since 2009, there had been "Months of Breaking through," asking care about the World; "Months of Single family," encouraging cares about people from single families; "Months of Education," concerning about education in different countries; and "Months of Services," addressing how to serve people, particularly after the severe Morakot Typhoon disaster in 2009 summer.

According to Boyd (2008b), the longing to perform the self-identity, to maintain the friendship in real life by participating in what their friends are doing, and to solve the boredom, is the main reason for youth to get the good fulfillment with the Internet and SNSs. Typical features of Social Networking Sites may obviously be seen from Residence Planet and Entertainment Planet, where users produce their individual contents on their profile, make friends of common interests or residency, and comment on their friends' dairies or posts. As for Fly and Soar Planet, Fly and Leap Planet, University Planet, and Hope Tribe, they serve with more similar functions as online forums for different educational groups.



Fig. 7: Flash commercial, advertising different activities in various planets

Besides, Mike Thelwall (2008) finds the peer pressure and influence in using SNSs. By identifying personal factors that associate with different age ranges, friendship circle sizes, and genders in MySpace, he tried to investigate user behavior and attributes to SNSs. According to demographic data, he discovered that the typical MySpace user is apparently female, 21-year-old, single, with a public profile, interested in online friendship, and logging on weekly to engage with a mixed list of mainly female "friends" who are predominantly acquaintances. He discoverd as well that users without real friends may perhaps sign up to MySpace out of curiosity in the first place, and then do not become active users. Therefore, though the demographic and design ideas of each SNS may differ, I perceive that friendship maintaining and

establishing as essential for a SNS. Walei is no exception, and its system to combine online and offline relationship is worth exploring in the following discussion.

## 2.2. "You are not alone!" — Friendship establishing system

In Walei, users can maintain the existing offline relationship online, and develop new online interpersonal relationship by: (a) visiting "neighbors" and making self-introduction on their guestbook; (b) sending instant messages, in Walei called 'Water balls,' to online users; (c) joining the group from school or fellowship, or the group of same interests from Entertainment Planet; (d) adding friends to friend list and visiting their places; (e) searching people by ID, true name, and school. Users may also have relationship with some volunteered users as "Caring volunteers," "Guardian Angels," or the staffs as "Secret Counselors."

The volunteering task is also a way used to encourage people to take more part of sharing and helping each other. Walei has its structured volunteering system. First of all, they have volunteers of planning group, taking responsibilities of designing the contents of the website. The second main volunteering group is to show concern and to care for the members. Under the second group, there are four types of volunteers: (1) Cheerleader for new friends/users, (2) Head/Representative of interstellar senate, (3) Guardian Angel, (4) Secret Counselor.
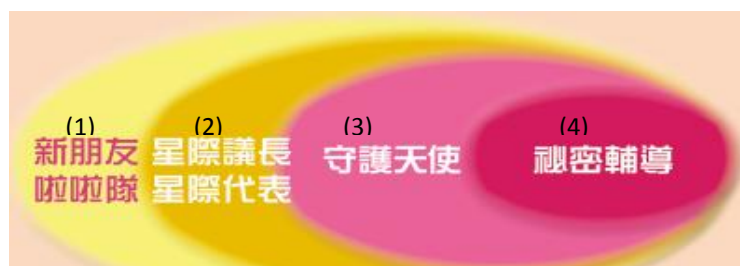


Fig. 8: Four types of Caring Group

|     | Task and current situation | Qualification |
| --- | --- | --- |
| (1) | Taking care of new members, helping them get familiar with the functions of Walei. 7 sub-groups are divided based on the 7 weekdays. | Members who are over 12 years old but under 25, and have passion to help people. Passing an online test is required. Recruiting happens every summer and winter vacation |
| (2) | Regularly taking care of members in Resident Planets, keeping public security, promoting Internet ethics, and encouraging users to take part in activities by Walei. Each of the 16 stars has one head and several representatives. | Members who are over 15 years old but under 35. Having registered over 3 months and over 5000 Walei money, plus passing an online test no later than 3 months after taking office is required. It can be applied from Immigrant Office in Government Planet. |
| (3) | Actively finding people who are in need and giving caring, and becoming specific angel of a certain member who applied for it. Developing friendship, being an older life example, and at some point sharing the gospel with the user. During the meeting up, also being the volunteered small group leader. 10 small teams are divided according the online activity area. | Christian members who are over 19 years old, and have hearts for youth mission. Physical training and test are required. Online test should be passed within a year after taking office. No public recruiting, but the Government Planet may send invitation letters to certain qualified members. |
| (4) | Answering inquires and mails in Secret Inbox from users daily. So far there are 8 consolers (Figure 5)., all with pseudonym like Pearl Granny or Very Teacher. | Christians who are more than 30 years old, and have professional consoling experiences and spiritual maturity. |



Fig. 9: Eight consolers of Walei, Staff workers from Youth for Christ Taiwan

Meanwhile, besides online friendship building, meeting up physically with online friends takes places every summer and winter vacation. Each meeting will have a specific theme, for example, intimate relationship or friendship. In the meeting, ice-breaking games, a short sharing, some other designed programs, and some refreshments are provided. In the 2009 survey, this was one of the most popular activities. There are also regular pre-arranged physical meetings for volunteering training.

Walei does not only enable the interactions between users, but also make information interactive. If Government Planet is like the informative manual for the users, then Secret Planet, Church Planet, and Walei News Station will be rather unique design of Walei among Social Networking Sites. They are planets which have 'activities' held by Walei, and many stories, selected articles, Flash animation and quizzes are provided for users to browse, to comment, and to participate. Advertisements of these activities, in the sense of self-promotion, can be seen in Walei, instead of any other e-business advertisements. In the survey done by Walei in 2009, the most popular sections were "Life Variety Shop", "Love Consulting Room," "Sexual Education Zone," and "Study Map."

These innovated designs undoubtedly have a strong relationship with the religious use of Internet. In the following chapter, I will present the studies and theories of Religion and CMC, that helps us see the link of the designs in a more detailed and practical way. How Walei, a social networking site, fits the domain of Religion Online/Online Religion will be examined.

# 3. Walei as a Christian Internet use

Christopher Helland (2000) first presents the distinctive concept of 'Online Religion' and 'Religion Online', by using the interactivity as a division index. Religion Online is like one-way presentation, with major religious websites as representatives. In contrast to the lack of interactions, online religion exemplifies the unrestricted possibilities and freedom of a high level of interactivity. Nevertheless, by making critiques of his earlier works, he now revises the concept, regarding to the line of division between Online Religion and Religion Online is vague (Helland, 2005). This revision is predictable, as the interactivity online is increasing in many new ways along with the development of technology.

After the first international conference on Religion and Internet in Copenhagen, Denmark in 2001, research interests have been in Religion Online/ Online Religion, in the way it exists, and in the influence it brings to offline religion and religious culture (Chueng, 2009). In "Making space for religion in Internet studies" (2005a), Campbell indicates how religion fits into the larger domain of Internet studies and why studies of religion within CMC need to be given more attention. Furthermore, in "Spiritualising the Internet-uncovering discourses and narratives of Religious Internet", Campbell (2005b) investigates how Internet users conceive and speak of the Internet, in order to shape it as suitable for religious use: "Internet is seen as a technology or space that is suitable for religious engagement, where by allowing users to include Internet-based activities into rhythm of their spiritual lives (p.2)." She calls for attention of "the religious shaping of technology," based on the study of social shaping of technology (SST), which "highlights that technology is embedded in a

social process of negotiation between individuals or groups who inevitably shape them towards their own desire and values (p.4)."

Discovering discursive framing strategies for religious communities to accept Internet as a non-secular item but a useful tool from God, Campbell (2005b) goes on to name this process 'spiritualizing the Internet.' She also defines four common used discourse strategies. Each strategy is connected to a narrative of use, displaying how religious users shape and employ the Internet:

1). **Spiritual Network**: Internet as a spiritual medium facilitating religious experience

2). **Worship Space**: Internet as a sacramental space suitable for religious use

3). **Missionary Tool**: Internet as a tool for promoting religion or religious practice

4). **Religious Identity**: Internet as a technology for affirming religious life

The narrative of Spiritual Network emphasizes the shared spiritual experience among the religious users. It empowers members in an online religious community "to understand their community as possessing power from God to influence the global Christian community (p.15)." The Worship Space narrative exemplifies on the recreating traditional religious worship experiences in a digital environment, such as the virtual churches on Second Life, where users gather together online on Sundays and have services. This narrative encourages more religious activities and rituals online. As for the narrative of Internet as Missionary Tool, Campbell (2005b) mentions even this term "e-vangelism," including online witnessing, or the extension of a short-term face-to-face evangelical event. This narrative gives rise to individual religious users new proselytising strategies, leading to breakthrough in the convention of a top-down manner.

The missionary tool strategy may well explain the motivation of establishing Walei.

Stated by one of the founders, Walei was intended to "construct a virtual world which,

witnesses the life with God.[20]" She mentioned, it is "to introduce Christian belief as a

new lifestyle and new global perspective to teenagers, saving teenagers from the

reality constructed by media segments and inconsistency by using the Internet,

cultivating their soul and mind to be a good earth for receiving the gospel, and sowing

the seeds of the gospel." With the religious need to do missions and the fact that

Christianity is unfamiliar to the society, this specific strategy of spiritualizing the

Internet among Taiwanese Christian users are particularly enhanced. In order to

"introduce Christian belief," many informative and even educative planets, as

mentioned above--Secret Planet, Church Planet, and Walei News Station, are designed

to match one of the main function of Internet—'an information space' (Campbell,

2005c).


## 3.1. Church Planet and Secret Planet

Church Planet welcomes anyone who is interested to know more about Christianity

and the faith. As described earlier in Chapter 2, Christian-related information

presented in interactive multimedia forms is available there. According to the survey

made in 2008 by Walei, 3400 people had used Church Planet. 40% users had received

Jesus and hoped to know more about God, and 60 % users got to know Christianity

more because of using Walei. Among these 60% users, namely 2040 religious

investigators, 82% had no religion, and the rest were Buddhists, Taoists, and believers

of I-Kuan Tao. And in the Christmas event Walei held, there were 231 people asking

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[20] The origin text in Chinese, stating the mission or the purpose of establishing Walei:
http://www.cef.org.tw/program/theme/read_article.php?article_id=3&page_no=2

for some devotional brochures, 51 people asking for the Bible, and 58 users writing to the Secret Inbox asking how to become a Christian. Therefore, the mission aspect of Walei has proven to be effective.
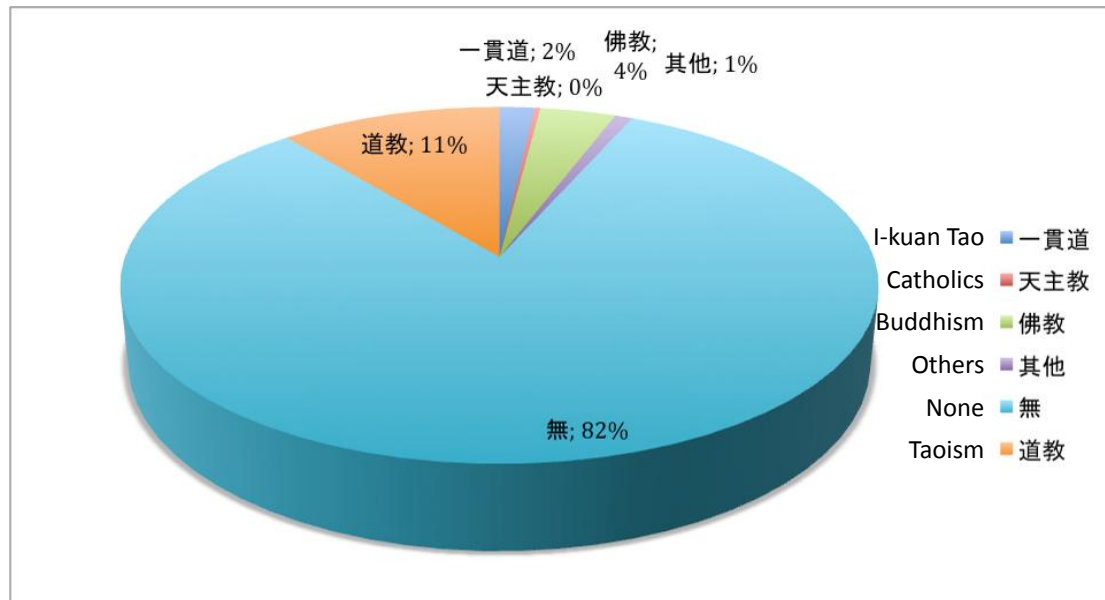


Fig. 10: The poll from the survey of Walei, 2008

Besides the Church Planet, which addresses information about Christianity comparatively directly, educative contents with Christian values are seen in Secret Planet with the contextualization of Taiwan. Because of the Credentialism[21], teenagers lead a life focusing largely on studies in Taiwan. "Life Variety Shop" is a place dealing with more trivial issues in life, which are often not taught in school, such as finding own interests; getting along with friends; communicating with parents; preventing Internet addiction; and choosing the study subject and ways. In Life Variety Shop, users can read articles written by Christians or advice offered by Christians. There are ample quizzes on personality test available to take. According to the feedbacks Walei has gathered from its users, they have commented that they get to know themselves better through these quizzes, and learn to explore the uniqueness of

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[21] Credentialism in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Credentialism

themselves. Walei founders utilize the idea of "everyone is precious for the Creator," and try to convey this to the young users so that they can see their own values, especially when overwhelming competitions in life reality may strike their confidence.

In addition, because of the heavy pressure that youths face on their studies, boyfriend and girlfriend relationship is discouraged before their university education. Most of high school students are asked only to strive for better and higher education. Teachers and parents are usually very much against anything that may distract them from the studies, not to mention to give advices and support on this issue. Love relationship and sex become mysterious and attractive for the Taiwanese youth, especially during their puberty period. Although nowadays sexual education is given more attention, together with the more liberal ideas towards sex that are brought by media, the society tends to be more conservative than the western ones since sexual issues even used to be a taboo to talk in Taiwan. Facing the decreasing traditional moral value of keeping their virginity and the popular fashion of having premarital sex, many teenagers are 'experimenting' it with confusion. Yet marriages in young age, as well as having records of abortions or being unmarried mothers during the studies, are not perceived to be honorable publicly. Social pressure may also lead to distorted mental development.

Douglas Kellner's (1995) statement: "when members of oppressed group gain access to media culture, their representations often articulate alternative visions of society and give voice to more radical perceptions (p.157)", supports the religious atmosphere in Taiwan. Christians in Taiwan as a minority group are restricted by the major Buddhist/Taoist culture, and secondly less understood by the public. Now owning a

place online and seeing the social problems, Christian founders of Walei take the step to address these taboo-like but practical issues via the Internet. In Love Consulting Room, analysis about different cases and love stories, quizzes accompanied with "diagnosis from Love Doctor," articles about attitude before and in a relationship, or even suggestions to deal with breaking-up, are provided as references for teenagers to learn about love relationships As for Sexual Education Zone, there are a lot of Questions & Answers, handling "*embarrassing questions, worries which are hard to solve*." Provocative question titles such as "What should I do if I am pregnant?" "Is masturbation good?" or even "How should I deal with the guilty feeling after having sex?" "Why pre-marital sex is against by Christianity?" are used to attract attentions. Answers written by professional counselors are provided.



Fig. 11: Feedbacks towards Love Consulting Room (In Chinese)

All in all, Sexual Education Zone and Love Consulting Room make sexual issues more explicit than it used to be in conservative Taiwanese society. Holding the belief that love comes from God and sex should be a beautiful gift from God after marriage, Walei founders apparently utilize Walei to convey this Christian value. According to the presentation sheet of Walei in 2009, positive feedbacks and comments towards different discussion topics in Sexual Education Zone and Love Consulting Room are given. The move against keeping silence with social issues but to have open discussion explicitly with educative voices has now also been approved by department of social welfare of Taipei Government.

## 3.2. Walei Newsletter and Reminder

Compared with other commercial Social Networking Sites in Taiwan, predictably Walei has limited popularity. The promotion of Walei has to remind its users of its special designs and to take more active steps to keep its users. Therefore, Walei sends out newsletter on a monthly basis, both to users' inbox in Walei and to external email. The latest activities in Walei will be reported in the newsletter, which contains pure text, graphic images, Flash animations, and hyperlinks to the website, keeping the same vivid and lively style as the website. This kind of promotions reveals not only the fact that the trend of having a newsletter with the use of multimedia, but also Walei strives to attract its users.

If there are special events, such as soliciting articles or recruiting volunteers, notification emails will be sent. In addition, another special kind of emails will be sent to all Christian users, according to what users have filled in the column of religion when they register Walei. Those emails are asking for particularly for Christian help; for instance in the recruitment of Guardian Angel. Moreover, if the user has not logged in Walei for over three months, an external email will be sent as a reminder or a notification to the cancellation of the membership, with the Subject—"Your Walei account is in danger.[22]" The narrative used in the email is in a humble and friendly tone, asking for advice to improve, giving a short description of itself, and inviting users to re-visit. In this notification, users can easily revisit by click on the hyperlink provided. (A translated version is provided in the following.)



Fig. 12: Newsletter of March 2009

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[22] The email with the subject "您哇咧帳號危急了！" can be seen in the appendix.

*Dear [username], hello!*

*It has been three month since you logged in Walei last time.*

*We wonder if you were busy, or there was something that you were not satisfied with Walei, so that you reduced your visit?*

*We hope you can kindly indulge and excuse us, and we sincerely hope that you are willing to tell us, and let us improve.* 【*Walei improving classroom*】 *http://www.walei.net/at/reason/action.html This is a special place to collect everyone's opinions. We staffs will often do the self-examination. ^^||*

*Walei is not a commercial website. So with the limited resources, we will work harder and try our best! But our most significant feature is that—we hope the website is full of love, so everyone can safely have his/her home in Walei, and be truth to hiself/herself. We hope you can feel our sincere attitude! Nowadays we are preparing for the 4$^{th}$ updated version of Walei, so we need more of your critiques and opinions.*

*Wholeheartedly we invite you to visit Walei lately, and keep supporting Walei!*

*Walei thank you for your love and support!*



Fig. 13: Webpage of Walei Improving classroom

## 3.3. Religious identity issue in Walei

In order to attract more youth users and to achieve the religious motivation, Walei has to be an interesting and fresh designed website. "Walei," is actually a word in Taiwanese language, meaning the expression of being surprised or something neat. This informal term later became rather popular among especially youth in Taiwan around 1999-2001. The choice of the website name documents the trendy online expressions back then, and suggests the tendency to see up-to-date or 'cool' wordings in Walei, as the target users are young people. Meanwhile, since there are many special terminologies of Christianity in Chinese language, which are identifiable markers of the religion, the language use and the wording are significant for reflecting not only popular youth and internet culture, but also the Christian culture in Taiwan.

In the normal "Log in" section (Figure 14, the phrase on the top, "Hi!你今天哇咧了沒?!" (Hi! Have you Waleied today?), is a stylish way among youth to verbalize a noun, in this case "Walei." The intention to reach youth is implying. Also there is "心情"(Mood) section for people to choose from. The design motivation reveals the fact that youth want to express their mood and status, and the options orient them. Among the options[23], there are more examples of usage of the language, which show the youth sub-culture, with expressiveness, incorrect grammar, but fashionable ways of saying. At the same time, there are options related to Christianity, mentioning "耶穌"(Jesus). Some expressions like 'Thank you Jesus!' or 'I want Jesus!' indicate the possible existence of Christian users, who may choose to express their religious identity with these expressions. Here the explicitness mixing with other expressions is also reflecting the reality of Christianity in Taiwan as a minority religion--Christians

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[23] I translated the first 25 options of all, trying to catch the spirit of the expression in Chinese.

may want or dare to tell about God boldly as to follow what is taught in the Bible.

Fig. 14: Login part

| Chinese | English |
|---------|---------|
| 陽光普照 | Shining sun |
| 哇咧我愛你 | Walei I love you |
| 考前症候群 | Symptom before exams |
| 放空中 | Space out |
| 好想去旅行 | I wanna travel |
| 感慨萬千 | Sigh... |
| 失戀快樂 | Happy breaking up |
| 閒的發慌 | Too free, too boring |
| 要自閉中 | Having autism |
| 飢餓難耐 | Starving |
| 面無表情 | Poker face |
| 喔~謝謝耶穌 | **Oh~thank you Jesus** |
| 寂靜的夜 | Silent night |
| 無人地帶 | No men's land |
| 無事不登三寶殿 | One never goes to a Buddhist temple for nothing. |
| 就是粉快樂咩！ | Just sooooo happy! |
| 超級High | Super High! |
| 太爽了 | GREAT! |
| 我要耶穌 | **I want Jesus** |
| 熱情洋溢 | Enthusiastic |
| 耶穌愛你呦！ | **Jesus loves you!** |
| 滿足的打呼嚕 | Snoring with satisfaction |
| 輕鬆一下 | Take it easy! |
| 很「幸福」 | Very "HAPPY" |
| 微笑的標誌；） | Sign of smile :) |
| 充滿興奮期待 | |
| 想念的心情 | |
| 沒啥特別的 | |
| 一切歸於平淡 | |
| 需要人陪 | |

People identify their body online and interact with others with their virtual identity through the process of "embodiment" (Campbell, 2005c). Barnes (2003) mentions the use of screen names, nicknames, or pseudonyms as ways to represent oneself in CMC. Bechar-Israeli (1996, as cited from Barnes, 2003) has categorized 7 groups of CMC nicknames, and out of 260 nicknames from four different IRC channels: real names; self-related names; technology-oriented names; names of objects, flora, and fauna; play on words; figures in literature, films, and fairy tales; and sexually oriented names. Thus, I would like to add one for Christian users--names with Christian terminology or Biblical references. Besides, personal profiles can be used to demonstrate identity (Barnes, 2003). Containing more information than the name, people can put age, sex, interests, as well as contact information In Walei, users have to make up a user ID, to name their Home/personal profiles, and to create a nickname. They can express their

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identity more through writing dairies, in the similar sense of posting blogs.

While addressing the construction of youth online identity, Angeka Thomas (2007) points out that "identity as experienced, performed and constructed by youth online, through textual and social practices, where textual is inclusive of multimodal texts." Static and dynamic, visual and audio, multimodal texts are used as props to perform the self. Together with the social activities online and interaction with others, the self-identity is reinforced. Although the plain textual practice will be dominantly seen than other textual practice in this multimedia website, Walei still enables youth to experiment their identities through personalizing their personal profiles: "buying decorations for decorating their Homes" and "pasting pictures to others' Guestbook." Moreover, through the volunteering system of the Christian values, the role-playing may enhance the social practices of the identity constructions even though there are different senses from most of the multi-users dimension online games.

Self-disclosure is an important element of presenting self and relationship-building. When it comes to self-identity and CMC, studies have shown the comfortableness and convenience of self-disclosure for people when interacting online (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991; Benahum 1994, as cited by Burnes, 2003). Socially shy individuals are enabled to express their inner feeling in text-only correspondence, without the pressure of instant face-to-face reactions. CMC accelerates the process of relationship-building (Burnes, 2003). When the personal religious information and identity are rather hard to be spoken out face-to-face, I would assume CMC helps to give off sound, if the religious users experience enough sense of security.

In Campbell's model, the Religious Identity as a function may have a slightly

different focus from personal presentation of self-identity, but more on the communal religious identity construction. The idea comes first by the work of Mia Lövheim and Alf G. Linderman (2005) of Uppsala University. By discovering the religious identity formation of Swedish youth on discussion boards, they have identified three functions where Internet may provide for the individual users:

- Information: Finding and spreading information about diverse beliefs and practices
- Interactivity: Responding to and getting responses from people in different contexts
- Interdependence: Constructing and upholding networks across time and space (p. 126-127)

Through the three functions above, users can connect to some form of religious collectively. While Internet is often used to connect people with a particular background, the affirming communal values and beliefs enhance religious users' lifestyle and identity.

Moreover, elaborating the concept of Internet as 'transition place' or 'moratorium,' proposed by Sherry Turkle (1995) in her book *Life on the Screen*, Lövheim (2005) argues that since the construction of personal religious identity is built on the base of multiple, complicated, and diverse life experiences, the Internet can be a 'transition place' for different practices of religion and identity, By conducting a survey on youth Swedish internet users, she found internet users can experiment their self-expressions and interactions, and thus explore their self-identity, their own situation and environment, and Religious system. In this way, Internet can be seen as a transition space for the growing process of youth. Although Walei is a Christian-founded website with Christian mission as the motivation behind, the openness provided for

users from diverse religious and life background, may not exclude itself from a transition place for users to develop their identities.

## 3.4. Functions of Internet for religious use

Knowing the religious attempt of the Walei founder, and the possible religious identity construction in this online environment where information and terminology of Christianity can be found, it is important to know how the youth users are using and perceiving it. There are not too many studies about non-religious users facing religious Internet use, but Campbell's model maps out how Internet is used by religious users can at least be helpful for analyzing Christian users of Walei.

Exploring how the Internet is being studied and conceived as "a sacramental space", where religious users see the internet as a viable place for presenting their beliefs and practices, Campbell (2005c) suggests four other dominant conceptions and models of the Internet: 'an information space,' 'a common mental geography,' 'an identity workshop' and 'a social space,' and adds internet as 'a sacramental space' by considering several additional typologies of online spiritual communities emerging from a recent online community study. Internet as an information space refers to the communication online and information exchange. As a common mental geography, the Internet is not only serving as a communication tool, but "a mechanism that individual can use to construct a common worldview" (p114), or a machine representing the world. With the possibility to test and learn new ways of presenting oneself, the Internet is as an identity workshop for personal empowerment. But the tendency to focus egocentric individualism of users can lead to positive and negative outcomes. Internet as a social network emphasizes on the relationship built online, for

the Internet connects people and creates new social interactions. Moreover, by encompassing the traits of the four models, the Internet is as a sacramental space, where users consider their activities and experiences online a part of their religious life, "whether the pursuits are individual, communal, or informational (p.118)."

Campbell(2005c) further defines the four possible functions that online religious or spiritual community can utilize the Internet, in correspondence to the four models of Internet: Worship space--as a spiritual tool to gain and transmit religious information, Religious identity--a network to form and promote a communal religious identity, Spiritual network--a space to achieve personal spiritual pursuits and to "search out personal spiritual destiny that can be interpreted though a narrative of shared experience (p.127)", and Support network--a sphere to attain social spiritual support and cultivate relationships.

Each function is exemplified by an existing online religious community. For instance, Christian groups have prayer meetings by using chat rooms, IRC, or virtual reality environment. They search and exchange religious information online, so that the Internet becomes a space of worship. As for the common religious identity, the Anglican Communion Online identifies itself as "a microcosm of the larger Anglican Communion (p.126)." There the Anglican tradition is preserved and common belief is shared, so "identity comes from reinforcing a particular set of beliefs or rituals that are transported online. Members encouraged one another in their shared convictions and supported this unifying narrative through supportive discussion on their choice of religious identification (p.126)." The community of Prophecy demonstrates the spiritual network. Taking Internet as a space given by God for divine purpose to influence the whole Christian community, members of this community perceive

themselves as pioneers with specific mission. As for support network, positive

messages and affirmations are shown in the newsletter for new subscribers of Online

Church, which provide "a spiritually and emotionally supportive atmosphere (p.127)."

| Models | Sacramental Space Model |
|---|---|
| Information space | Worship space |
| Common mental geography | Religious identity |
| Identity workshop | Spiritual network |
| Social network | Support network |

Fig. 15: A table organized by Campbell's models and functions

Using this model to examine several existing Christian websites and their users in

Taiwan, Wu (2007) discovered the Internet for religious use is mainly the two

functions: "Worship space" and "Support network." Christian users mostly use the

Internet to obtain religious information, and to socialize with other Christian internet

users. Functions like "Religious identity" and "Spiritual network" are less seen.

However, the form of social networking sites has not been included in her studies,

which makes Walei worth exploring on how these functions may work.

# 4. Research Methodology

As mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, qualitative research strategy is applied. Methods like Observation or Archives and Collections were utilized for the background understanding and contextualization. But the main method used for data collecting consists of conducting interview with Walei users, which will be explained more in details in this chapter.

## 4.1. Interview

Interview, as a conversation with different forms and styles determined by the purpose, is used for research to "obtain information and understandings of issues relevant to the general aims and specific questions of a research project." (Gillham, 2000: 2) It is also one of the favored qualitative research methods, among observation and document analysis. (Mann C. and Stewart F., 2000) Comparing the traditional Face-to-Face (FTF) interview, online interviews have been conducted more largely in recent years. According to Mann and Stewart (2000), there are two distinctive forms of interviews: standardized (structured) and non-standardized (unstructured). Structured interviews can be in the form of email and web-page based surveys, whereas non-standardized ones can be of online one-to-one interviewing.

Walei itself has conducted several annual web-page-based surveys, in the form of online non-anonymous questionnaires. According to the main founder of Walei, online questionnaires are used to obtain users' feedback and comments toward the functions. Users can also take part in the survey of religious status by filling the

questionnaire from Church Planet voluntarily. Meanwhile, Walei tries not to address religious issue on their own so much so that it may have led to some negative feelings. Nevertheless, in order to understand and consolidate better the users' subjective experience, as well as the role of Walei played in individual life, I had considered that interviews would be more effective than general questionnaires. Having developed an outline of questions, I then conducted semi-structured interviews.

Baym's (1995) five factors for considering the possibilities and restrictions of online interaction for research, which has been presented by Mann C. and Stewart F. (2000), are now taken into my concern. The check list of questions includes: (1) the purpose of the interaction, (2) the temporal structure of the research, (3) the possibilities and limitations for interaction when being built into the software used, (4) the characteristics of the interviewer and participants, and (5) the external context of the research. Concerning not only my physically being abroad, but also my willingness to exemplify the computer-mediated communication, I had decided to conduct the interviews online, with the help of computer technology and the Internet. Since the participants might be teenagers, online interview could help provide more anonymous security than FTF interview. I also chose not to use web camera, but to type texts for the communication.

Instead of writing emails as an interview method, I had decided to use instant chat software Windows Messenger, which is rather commonly used in Taiwan. With instant chatting, the response of participants was more simultaneous than emailing. Comparing with voice communication, the typing process might bring more considerate response than talking through online telephone like Skype. In this way, the concerns were: 1). to provide interviewees enough time to think before they give

still rather spontaneous response, 2). to still keep the flow of conversation rather than waiting for mails, and 3). to remain the feeling interviewees obtain from Walei, where they normally interact with each other without seeing nor speaking to the real persons.

One had to ask the crucial question of qualitative approach about how to gain access to interviewees (Mann C. and Stewart F., 2000). I personally had conducted my pilot interview in September 2009 with a friend I knew as an active Walei user. My pilot interviewee later connected me to another user, who was willing to be interviewed. At that time, I got in contact the main founder of Walei—Irene Lin. After our discussion, we agreed that the interviewees would be selected by Walei staffs based on my preference and requirements. The three groups of expected interviewees I required were 'Christian users,' 'Non-Christian users,' and 'Users who became Christians because of Walei.' All these religious divisions were defined by their personal identification on surveys of Walei. After the pilot interview, I evaluated that it was more effective that the interviewees' status were know beforehand. So based on my outline, I created a preliminary questionnaire with open questions, based on my outline. The preliminary questionnaire were formed and later approved by Irene, and it was agreed that the questionnaire should be presented to the selected users when sending out the interview request.

After receiving the list of interviewees, I was suggested to create a new account in Walei. Usually users can only apply for one account with their personal ID number. Being an existing member, Irene thus allowed me to apply with my passport number. In this new account, I intentionally left out more of my personal information, especially the religious status. My concern was that the interviewees would not then have certain presumptions of my research position. Meanwhile, Irene sent mail to the

inbox of those selected users, as an official representative from Walei governance

office, informing my research, my requests, and my account name. In doing so, the

officials from the governance office kept their credibility of maintaining the security,

and guaranteed my future contact would not be spammed with messages. With the

involving of the authority of the website, the trust between the participants and me,

the interviewer, was established. Then I also sent them messages through Walei inbox,

stating my research background and purpose, including my MSN contact address

information. The preliminary questionnaire was also attached. After such groundwork,

I then waited for their responses.

### 4.1.1. Preliminary Questions

Since there were preliminary questionnaires, the interview process could be

approached in as two phases. Apart from making appointments to meet online, firstly,

interviewees would need to answer my rather brief and natural questionnaire through

Walei inbox, or send me back a Microsoft Word document file through instant chat or

email. After that, I would elaborate the questions accordingly, and obtain in-depth

experiences of users in the second part of the interview, where the interviewees could

have conversations with me through instant chat.

The following are the questions on the preliminary questionnaire in English, though

they were presented to interviewees in both Chinese and English—

・How did you get to know Walei?

・How long have you been a member of Walei?

・How frequent do you use to get online per week? How often do you use Walei?

・Have you used: (**It's better if you remember when and what functions you have used.**)

1. Guardian Angel

2. Secret Planet

3. Leaving message in your neighbors or strangers' board? Sending "water ball" (instant message)?

4. Leave message on some discussion boards

5. Keeping diaries

6. Church planet

・Do you still have other online spaces, like Wretch, Pixnet…?

・What would be the reason for you to (not) keep using Walei?

As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire was an adjustment after my pilot interview. It was also a practical concern for both myself and the interviewees to have some initial understandings before the instant chat part. With limited time to conduct online interview, due to time differences between Europe and Asia, and with the comparatively slower response in typing, the questionnaire was a helpful references to throw further questions. Then in the second phase of the interview, I could ask questions with flexibility, digging in according to what the interviewees had known better and engaged more, or simply what they had more to say.

Nevertheless, there were some religion related issues, which I did not think it was wise to give interviewees the ideas in advance. But I outlined some of the advance questions for both the Christian users and the non-Christian users, which were not included in the preliminary questionnaire but were only used during the second phase of interviews:

- For Christian users

・Do you know Walei was founded by Christians?

・Would you normally show your Christian identity on Walei, or publishing faith-related content?

・Do you feel Walei being helpful for your faith or not? How?


- For Non-Christian users

・What are the influences in your life by using Walei?

・Have you noticed any Christian-related information on Walei?

・How do you see the information? Do you agree them?

・Did Walei influence your opinions towards Christianity?

・Have you interacted with Christians online in general or on Walei?


### 4.1.2.   List of interviewees

There were originally 13 possible participants on the list from Irene of Walei, but eventually only 7 out of the 13 were being interviewed. The rest was either simply fail to reply, or did not have enough time for the interview. For instance, one of them only replied the preliminary questionnaire, but was not able to set a time to meet online for the second part of in-depth interview. It required a fair bit of waiting time to receive the participants' reply, and even the second phase of the interview was usually not done at once. Therefore, the whole interview period was rather time-consuming. It started from December 2009 on, and I had to put an end to the long waiting. So the last interview was conducted in April 2010.

In the following table, the listed interviewees received my in-depth interview, namely the second part of the interview. There are 7 from the list and 2 from my own resources, including the first one as the pilot interviewee. (The letter following the ID in the table below shows their gender religious status.)

| Walei ID & gender[24] | Age | Current status | Position held in Walei |
|---|---|---|---|
| yz723119 (F/Y, pilot) | 23 | Senior student | Guardian Angel |
| Miiilovegod (F/Y) | 30 | Working | Guardian Angel |
| blue1087 (F/Y) | 29 | Working | Guardian Angel |
| genius22 (F/Y) | 16 | 1st grader of Senior high student | Representative of Interstellar Senate |
| Dreammaker (M/B) | 25 | at military service | Board Master (once) |
| Farewell (F/B) | 18 | 3rd grader of Senior high student | Representative of Interstellar Senate, Cheerleader for New Friends |
| chengfong202 (F/N) | 17 | 3rd grader of Senior high student | Representative of Interstellar Senate, Board Master |
| yoyoj1105 (M/N) | 19 | Freshmen student | Chief Cheerleader for New Friends |
| ee701231000 (F/N) | 19 | Freshmen student | Chief Cheerleader for New Friends |

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[24] F stands for Female, M stands for male. Y stands for Christian, B stands for Becoming Christian because of Walei, N stands for non-Christian

# 5. from Walei User to the Digital Culture

Walei users came from different background and had various usage experiences with Walei. On the way of exploring their users' experiences, I picked up many unexpected perspectives and life stories of users. Hence, I would present their individual cases, divided by their religious status—Christian users, Users who became Christian because of Walei, and Non-Christian users. Through quoting their words and examining how they defined and described their experiences, some common cultural phenomenon and social reality can be reflected. In the second part of this chapter, I will analyze the main findings with theories.

## 5.1. Interview cases

### 5.1.1. Christian users

| Walei ID & gender | Age | Current status | Position held in Walei |
|---|---|---|---|
| yz723119 (F/Y, pilot) | 23 | Senior student | Guardian Angel |
| Miiilovegod (F/Y) | 30 | Working | Guardian Angel |
| blue1087 (F/Y) | 29 | Working | Guardian Angel |
| genius22 (F/Y) | 16 | 1st grader of Senior high student | Representative of Interstellar Senate |

For these Christians users, it appears that their religious identity play a major role in their use of Walei, although they may not necessary be aware of it. In spite of the different individual usage, Walei is used as a tool to meet more people and to share

love and care. They take such experience as a responsibility from God or a response to God's love to them. In this way, they may even consider to use Walei to serve others, instead of just fulfilling their own needs.

**Yz723119** was a 23 years old female university student, studying in her 4th year of the bachelor degree program. Her experience in using Walei was closely related to her offline life and Christian faith. It was back in her Junior High school years when she first heard from her classmate about Walei. She registered for an account when she was 15. In the beginning, she used more of the Entertainment Planet, where she got Christian music to listen and topics of Faith to discuss. However, due to the limited time of using the Internet, she used it once a week back then. She described herself as relatively shy person, and she was not actively posting many articles or getting to know new people on Walei. She used it more for following the news on the discussion board of the high school fellowship, which was created by CEF. But later she only logged in when she received the reminder email. Somehow she still preferred to keep her membership though she was not using Walei often at all.

She switched into an active user after a Youth Mission Camp in 2006, also held by CEF. Using the word "*burden*[25]" to describe her heart for youth's ministry, she felt it was more suitable for her as a shy person to do it online without face to face contact. Subsequently, she applied to be "Guardian Angel," whose "*main task was to take care of the youth online.*" Now being the Guardian Angel of Life Shop, she read users posts and checked if they needed some help through their expressions. "*I think many*

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[25] Since the interview was conducted in Chinese, I translate the script into English and then cite interviewee's words in Italic font in this thesis. The translations are chosen to meet the expression, rather than literal translation. I consider it important to see their words rather than my paraphrasing it, for their wording may reflect certain ideology.

*people online cannot find people to talk to offline. They also have many problems which they do not know how to solve. [I'll] provide my opinions as references, and talk with them about what they encountered.*" By leaving messages on their wall or sending private inbox, she tried to interact with other users more.

She updated her diaries in Walei while also used the other platform Wretch. Before, she had the intention to make more people acknowledge Walei by postig her diaries in Walei and the URL to Wretch. But she discovered that non-Walei users could not make comments on it. Instead of quitting Walei, she now posted the same contents in both spaces. She mentioned more about her faith now in her diaries, but she evaluated Walei as less helpful for her spiritual growth directly, at least not from Church Planet. Nevertheless, by becoming a Guardian Angel and attending some training sessions with the "Volunteer Growing Camp," she considered the camp helpful for her to know herself and the Christian faith better. It was also only after the camp that she started to realize the chance and to use it to take care of other users.

Another Guardian Angel, **Miiilovegod**, in her 30s, not only puts her faith into practice by using Walei, but also witnesses the rapid change of technology. She came to know Walei during a promotion in the camps that she was attending with CEF in her university days. However, after graduating from university in 2003, she was busy working, resulting in not able to use Walei frequently anymore. In 2004-2005 her user account was removed by Walei. In 2009, she decided to register again with Walei, trying this time to "*leave traces of my own thoughts and feelings.*" While using Walei, she mainly wrote her diaries there. She would visit some neighbors or friends from time to time, mainly to the Christian users she knew. "*At our time then, Blog was not even popular. Or I should say people I know were not into online world. We are more*

*outdoor type of people. Getting online was mainly for reading some announcements on BBS. Back then we didn't have MSN, ICQ or that sort, either.*"

In 2009 May, while joining "Fly and Roar," the ministry for Junior High school students of CEF, she heard about Guardian Angel and applied for it. Feeling determine of getting involved with student ministry, she said that, "*Now students' parents are busy with works, not giving them enough time to take care of them or to listen to them. This is causing many social problems. If we can use this platform to direct one more positive development, then one social cost is ceased.*" For her personally, using Walei rested largely on the fact that it could be "*a platform to share the gospel, which young people like.*" "*Nowadays young people like to get online. They don't like face to face. For young people, they feel more familiar with the computer than with people [in person],*" she defines.

Comparing with other websites, she mentioned about the differences she felt from Walei, regarding the security feeling. "*Some people prefer Facebook or Wretch, which are 'free' blogs. 'Free' = 'no restrictions' = 'dirty.'*" Walei would control and prohibit nasty wording or pornography. And she identifies with the regulation of not posting personal photos. "*For me the point is to tell the gospel, to say encouraging words, but not just to perform oneself.*" "*Basically, blogs [in general] are more for people to present themselves. But people who come to Walei require more help.*"

She did produce Christian-related content on Walei. Though not using Church Planet that often, she still saw the spiritual help of Walei: "*Because you can reflect the relationship between God and you can share own experience with friends who also use Walei. It's a good chance to let people know God's love.*" For her, she took care of

others on Walei by asking how their daily situation was. However, if she talked anything about Christian faith, she would use English instead of Chinese words, like "God bless you," or "God love you." She would think the reason was just because she used English at work, and these phrases were not difficult to understand for youth. However, the switch of language may show the trickiness of speaking of Christianity to people in Taiwan.

Miiilovegod mentioned another Guardian Angel—"**Blue1087**," a senior user, who would send out messages to volunteers informing which user is in need. Blue1087 was introduced by college classmate to Walei and registered in July 2001. "*At first I used it for fun. But ever since I graduated to work, I've started to keep my dairies in Walei. Also after I was baptized as a Christian, I started to take the job as a Guardian Angel. When I gave attentions out and cared others, I felt happy at the same time. I felt it is so good to work for the Lord. So I continued all the way till now.*"

According to her, Walei had indirectly affected her from becoming a Christian. "*At that time, most users were Christians in Walei. I felt their 'terminology' were quite different…such as "Emmanuel," "Jesus loves you"…so I would like to know more.*" Because of studying in a Church school, she did not feel negative about those unfamiliar expressions but thought: "*Wow! It is so special that there is such a Christian website!*" Those "terms" later became something she tries to avoid using in the first place, especially when leaving caring messages to non-Christians. "*Because I was converted from non-Christian, I knew I dislike seeing strange messages.*"

In the beginning, she used Walei frequently for leaving messages and posting pictures to other's wall. But later she also used Walei largely for keeping her diaries, where

she then wrote Christian related content. "*The best part of Walei is that, in my own Wall and Diaries, I can be true to be myself.*" By "*true to be myself,*" she explained how she used to write diaries and set it with high privacy, which was invisible for other users. "*When I lack of confidence…or dislike myself…I would wish people online feeling me being mysterious…so there will be different personality online and offline. But when I knew I was loved, God gave me great sense of security. Then I wouldn't write many secret diaries, but be myself truly both online and offline.*"

Basically she obtained the sense of security not by using Walei but more by becoming a Christian. But comparing with Facebook or Wretch, which she is also using or has used, she still feels better with Walei. "*The articles I posted on Walei usually brought me many comments and encouragements, but this doesn't happen in other spaces.*" The way people responded to others or calculate the 'popularity' (visits rate) on Wretch, and the films and photos with "*strong taste,*" makes her uncomfortable. Facebook for her is more to connect old friends to whom she lost contacts for a long time again. "*They are different spaces.*" "*Walei has the purity and passion which Facebook doesn't have.*"

Publishing Christian related content on both Facebook and Walei, she felt "*Facebook is really open. Easily I can find Christian friends. Walei is more private. There are more non-Christian kids. They are not so familiar with this faith. We won't keep saying on purposely how much we love Jesus, because we are afraid this arouses the negative feelings.*" This perhaps was because the network of relationship on Facebook relied more on existing ones, whereas in Walei she confronted more new people. Therefore, she also admitted that with the freedom to express her faith on Facebook, it was slightly less motivated to use Walei.

The youngest Christian user I had interviewed--**genius22**, had another viewpoint about Walei. Now being a 16-year-old high school student, she came to know Walei through a '*beautiful flyer*' getting at school about three years ago. But she has been an independent user without having her classmates or friends from church in Walei. With rather limited time of using Internet, at the most 3-4 hours a week, genius22 was a typical high school student who was busy with studies. She decided to put more efforts on viewing others' profiles and leave encouraging messages, instead of writing her own diaries, especially after she became the Interstellar Representative. She defined her duty as "*to patrol residences' home, to care for them, to ask their condition, and to check if there are some inappropriate expressions (like violence or depression…and etc).*" She was in charge of altogether 180 members, and she was happy about interacting with them. Usually she viewed diaries and status of averagely 60 of them and left message on their Guestbooks. She wished through the volunteer work, she could "*care more people, and get to know more friends.*" So far, there were about 4-5 members who became her closer friends because of what she was doing.

She found Walei a Christian website by discovering Church Planet and encouraging topics there. She usually visited there for listening to Christian songs and watching videos, which for her were meaningful and touching. "*Once I read an article about a shy and silent student in school. After reading it, I decided to spend more time to care that type of classmates. After all, they need to be loved.*" She also felt Walei was helpful for the growth of her faith by having Church Planet, which had answered many of her questions. However, due to the dependency of her family, she could not freely join those Walei physical meet up gatherings, which could take place in another city. Nevertheless she managed to meet other Christian users in Walei, and to share

prayer requests with them.

For her, "*Walei is a place of knowing new friends, having emotional sustenance, and obtaining information.*" As for her membership with Facebook, she perceived Facebook to be more for playing certain games. Given the opportunity, she would introduce and promote Walei with these words: "*It is a great website suitable for teenagers. Here you can learn more sincere truth than from other websites. Kids are not going to become bad, but should to be helped to grow and directed to go the right way.*"

## 5.1.2. Users who became Christian because of Walei

| Walei ID & gender | Age | Current status | Position held in Walei |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dreammaker (M/B) | 25 | at military service | Board Master (once) |
| Farewell (F/B) | 18 | 3rd grader of Senior high student | Representative of Interstellar Senate, Cheerleader for New Friends |

**Dreammaker** was introduced to Walei by his friends during his college days. It was also while blog was not even existing in 2002. Having had the interest in new ideas Walei presented, he first used Walei for writing blogs, visiting others' homes, and participating in the discussion boards. However, his user account was removed later for he was busy with studies and other extracurricular activities and hence reduced his usage in Walei. But he registered again when he was in first year of study in his master degree program. "*Maybe it was God's leading.*" At that time, he was not too occupied with his studies, so he had a bit of luxury to get online. Then he looked to

Walei. It had been nearly three years of absence from Walei, and in order to express his feelings this time, he often wrote his diaries, as well as visiting the discussion board of Secret Planet.

His steady visit in Walei not only because of his personal need to express, but also because he got to know some of Walei's working staffs during his use. They had noticed dreammaker for his frequent messages on discussion boards in Secret Planet, and thus even invited him to be the administer of a board called "Men's Talk." Back then, a staff offered herself to be his Guardian Angel. *The Guardian Angel gave me much help during my depressing period of life. I myself later became a Guardian Angel, too.* According to him, he had a rather positive impression about Christianity through the care and help he received from the Christian staffs. Subsequently, he started to read some Bible verses and joined some activities at Church Planet. All these eventually let him to a church.

Because his grandparents were Christians, it was not too difficult to understand the Christian verses displayed on Walei in the first place. His many questions towards Christianity were answered through many activities at Church Planet. Having become a Christian because of Walei and calling Walei as "*the starting point*" of his faith, he had the urge to help others. As such, he applied to become a Guardian Angel. Although he was assigned to only one user, they had become good friends in real life. After becoming a Christian, he also tried to show his Christian identity by sharing some Christian songs he liked, or writing afterthoughts accompanied by some Bible verses. However, nowadays he became slightly less active than before, mainly due to

the change of the systems in Walei.[26] But among other sites that he was also using, he somehow preferred to continue with his account active in Walei, even though honestly he was not sure how much he would devote himself in Walei after his military service.

**Farewell** also defined herself becoming a Christian because of Walei, and she involved in many volunteering roles in Walei. About 6 years ago, she moved with her family to Mainland China because of her parents' jobs, and she studied there for 5 years. Back then she indulged herself in online games, and used the Internet a lot during her spare time. A friend online then introduced her about Walei when she was in her first year of junior high. Ever since, she had been using Walei. Then she first used Walei, she mainly took quizzes, wrote diaries, and left messages for people in order to earn Walei money. But she enjoyed Walei mostly in receiving people's encouraging words and expressing her own emotions. "*When I was in a bad mood, there would be someone coming to help me and giving me advice. When I was extremely down…I even wrote to Secret Counselor…it was really great.*" But back then she could not introduce it to most of her classmates in China, because Walei had traditional Chinese characters[27]. However, through Walei, she not only obtained helps from Secret Counselor, but also knew more friends in Taiwan. That way she could feel less lonely or sad when studying there. She only managed to meet up with those friends from Walei until she returned Taiwan 2 years later in Walei Official Meeting Up and volunteer trainings.

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[26] Before when he wrote diaries there and re-posted them to a more open space, "Diary Tavern," he could earn some Walei money, which he used to buy some decorations for his home in Walei. But now when Walei is updated, he did not know how to operate the same function, so he kept more of his diaries on MSN space.
[27] In China, people use simplified Chinese characters.

For her, the starting point of her faith was when an older female friend sent her an encouraging Bible verse online. The verse gave her hope while she was feeling depressed. Through that sister, she had the initial knowledge about God. *"I was already willing to be a Christian before, but I didn't know any means. Preciously I got this chance, so I accepted Christianity, and I feel good. It happens to be that sister was in Shanghai. She also studied in China, so she called me by phone to make the Salvation Prayer. Soon after I became a Christian, I went to Shanghai for a trip. There I participated in fellowship meetings…hoping to know more Taiwanese people. Therefore, my faith was strengthened. And coincidently…that sister also attended that fellowship…"*

The idea of Christianity was interesting yet primitive for her, since she mainly knew it from western movies and she could feel the holiness that is portrayed in films. She did not visit Church Planet often right after her registration in Walei, but later she met Christians through Walei and got to know more about Christianity, she realized Church Planet was a helpful resource for her spiritual life. *"It teaches me how to be closer to God, and how to seek God when I need help."* But she would only mention about God occasionally whenever she was sharing her mood. *"I don't have strong religious color. Facing non-Christian friends online, I would not mention that I am a Christian on purposely. There [on Facebook] even no one knows I am Christian."* Meanwhile using Facebook and Wretch, she was in rather different circles in different online spaces. *"I will keep using Walei…Walei is a more private website…less people know. So I can boldly speak my mood out…and there will be many people come and care!!"*

Being a volunteer of Walei for her was not exclusively due to her faith. *"I could have*

*also served in the church. I just felt that Walei helped me a lot, so this is kind of my repay to Walei. But in the trainings from Walei, I deeply understood that God will remember all these servings.*" There were meeting sessions on monthly basis, where volunteers read books and brainstormed ideas. Because of her love for Walei, she did not take these trainings as extra burdens. Nor did she get discouraged when receiving only a few feedbacks from the users, to whom she spent time to leave messages. She felt it was to help staffs of Walei. She also participated in discussions of Walei's functions: "*The staffs would like to know about Youth's opinions…to get our thoughts about how to improve Walei, and to attract more teenagers staying in Walei.*" On top of all these, she even helped to promote Walei by distributing some printed advertising card to her classmates or schoolmates.

### 5.1.3. Non-Christian users

| Walei ID & gender | Age | Current status | Position held in Walei |
|---|---|---|---|
| chengfong202 (F/N) | 17 | 3<sup>rd</sup> grader of Senior high student | Representative of Interstellar Senate, Board Master |
| yoyoj1105 (M/N) | 19 | Freshmen student | Chief Cheerleader for New Friends |
| ee701231000 (F/N) | 19 | Freshmen student | Chief Cheerleader for New Friends |

Unlike the other users mentioned earlier, **Chengfong202** was not introduced to Walei. Instead, she actually found Walei three years ago through Yahoo searching engine. It happened when she was looking up for information about Jin Yong, a classical famous Chinese Martial Art Novel writer. She registered herself in Walei right away, and had considered Walei as a very important place. She described it in a poetic way:

*"Walei is what my heart relies on. Articles in Church Planet provide my mind positive growth. The personal board in Entertainment Planet let me talk my mind freely. Not to mention the annual Meeting Up. It warms up my heart."*

She used messages and instant chat to communicate with friends, and expressed her emotion in diaries. She even exchanged cute or lovely pictures with other users by attaching them to each other's Guestbook, which she thought was 'what she had been best at.' Being active in Entertainment Planet, she was put in charge of two boards: board for fan of Jin Yong, and the novel board. She described that administering the boards was to bring her knowledge and talents into full play. The tasks she had to do included managing new discussion topics; policing the discussions to ensure it did not violate the law; developing new activities[28]; decorating the board; and publishing board newsletters. She spent 2-3 hours a day on her duties and enjoyed it a lot. According to her, she made many new friends through Walei, and she would even invite other friends whom she knew through other online spaces to Walei.

She could feel the warmth of Walei by receiving the assistance from 'Cheerleaders for New Friends.' In addition to this unique friendliness, she also felt Walei was better than other online spaces, with its editing function available for users. Educated in Information Processing, she knew more about technical settings of websites. Walei allowed her to use her skills to edit the board. Besides, by reading articles in Walei and responding to them, she felt not only that 'her mind was elevated', but also that her writing skill had improved significantly.

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[28] Those activities were like inviting people to write martial art novels, and to practice their writing skills, which take place every half a year.

When asked if she was a Christian, her answer was not a clear yes or no, but: "*I just haven't got baptized.*" Influenced by some of her family members who were Christians, she went to church several times and felt Christianity more reliable. She felt using Walei was helpful for her spiritual life, and for obtaining more information from churches or evangelical activities. She also had requested to have a Guardian Angel when she was stressed with her studies. Talking with Guardian Angel had relieved her pressure, and listening to music from Church Planet comforted her.

**Yoyoj1105** knew Walei from school, just as genious22. In his junior high, he had the course called "Champions[29]," where the teachers introduced the pupils about this website. Now studying in his first year bachelor degree program, he had registered in Walei for 4 years. Keeping his diaries was his initiative to use it, and he also made some new friends through getting comments on his diaries. Having another online space Wretch, he felt Walei is warmer. "*In Wretch you don't get strangers leaving messages to you. If you do, then they are mostly advertisements.*"

He became a volunteer in Walei after using it for a year. He saw the announcement, and applied to be Cheerleader for New Friends. It was just for trial in the first place, but he found himself enjoying making new friends through his duty. He only dropped off once in his second year of senior high, and he rejoined again the next year. Today, he had been the deputy leader of the cheerleading team, administering team members.

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[29] Champions Education Association was founded in 1991 by Dr Steven Long and Vicky. The goal is to combine the resources of school, family, and social community, and to assist teenagers establishing good characters, improving abilities, and being prepared for a future leader. The association has offered free courses about problem management, emotion management, leadership training, gender educations, and etc. Over 5000 volunteer teachers were sent to more than 400 schools. Based on Christian values, it has cooperation with Churches. The course is mainly provided for students in the first year of junior high school. The official website (in Chinese) http://www.champ.org.tw/

He did not apply for Guardian Angel, but somehow he received one. They had some conversations about life and religion, but altogether they did not become closer friends. But he found articles about life and relationship in Secret Planet being helpful for him. "*In the end of some articles, there are analysis, analyzing the whole thing, and what is better to do. These are pretty practical.*" But he did not pay much attention on Christian-related information on Walei, since he defined himself as an atheist coming from a Buddhist family background. However, by knowing more about Christianity through reading articles in Walei, he felt if he had a choice of a religion to believe in, he would choose Christianity: "*Maybe because now I have more understandings [about Christianity]." "Christians don't need to light the incense. It won't pollute the air.*" But he mentioned that when discussing faith with other people online, sometimes he would try to avoid some possible conflicts brought by different viewpoints. He also considered that those religion-related contents in Walei would not affect his usage of Walei.

As a non-Christian user, **Ee701231000** was also a freshman from university. When she heard from her junior high classmates about Walei, she used Walei out of curiosity, and also for need of a space to express her emotions. In the beginning, about 6 years ago, she did not own a computer at home, so she only got to use Walei when she went to Internet Café or in school. When she was in the last year of her junior high, she finally had a computer at home, so she started going online more frequently.

For her, Walei was like "*a secret base.*" "*Back then, Walei was a place that I can freely express my feelings. I don't need to be afraid of that someone discovers who I am. I can type articles without worries….here I don't need to be afraid to be scold, be questioned. What it has were only encouragements and cheers.*" She remembers when

she was in the last year of Junior high, many things happened to her. "*It was friends from Walei cheered me up, so that I could simmer and conquer.*" She was using Walei rather independently, and considering it fine to have some friends whom she did not know in real offline life. She would also like to meet up with friends online, but she could not join the annual Official Meeting Up from Walei during the first 4 years. And the first offline meeting she took part was neither the official meeting-up, but the dinner for the volunteers.

She applied to be a volunteer during her last year of junior high, but one year later she stopped for a short while, and she went back to it again. The reason for her to be the volunteer was because she enjoyed making new friends, and she wished to pass on the assistance she received from others. She played the role of Cheerleader for New Friends, and the Interstellar Representative. In her opinion, sometimes it was discouraging, when some of the new users just deleted or ignored her messages, or even quit using Walei later. But it was nice to have them replying, especially some would even be rather friendly. When asked if taking care of other users would consume too much of her time, her answer was: "*Sometimes it's too busy. But I like the feelings Walei gave me, maybe because compare with the reality, Walei is too good.*" "*I can't express the emotions I want in reality, but I can type them in Walei, and share them with familiar friends online.*"

Besides expressing herself, she participated in activities from different planets quite regularly, by reading some stories provided, doing quizzes, answering questions, or leaving messages. The use of animations, which was preferred than texts, actually helped her identified with most of the values, except the one in Church Planet. She read comparatively few articles from Church Planet, though she admitted that she was

inclined to Christianity, compared with other religions. "*There are some parts that I still can't understand. I don't mind reading. But whether I can absorb, it depends on the contents of the articles.*" Walei also influenced her opinions towards Christianity, with both positive and negative views. "*Some Christian friends online left encouraging and caring messages, but some would tell me some religious issues which I can't really accept.*" She felt she was skeptical toward some expressions about believing God was the only correct thing.

She once applied the Guardian Angel facing some problems at home and at school, but it was less helpful comparing with other friends in Walei: "*Suddenly too many things happened. I couldn't take it. So I want someone to talk to…..I just hope to be listened, but my Guardian Angel seemed more like giving me advice…so we only chatted for few times.*" She once also had a conflict with one particular Christian user. However, perhaps since she was active in Walei, she had a rather close relationship with many Christian staff workers, whom she labeled as *high class*. She noticed that they were Christians by their diaries and messages, and she had no problem interacting with them. She even felt it was fine when they asked to pray for her. "*If it is not too aggressive about religion, I can accept.*"

## 5.2. Findings of Interviews

Overall, the interviewees were surprisingly open to answer many questions and to share their feelings and experiences. Generally speaking, though the users were having different stories encountering and using Walei, their impressions toward this website were considerably positive. For them, the most commonly used functions were keeping diaries, leaving messages to each others, and to read contents created by

both the official side of Walei and other users.

### 5.2.1.  Diary-keeping and networked public

To keep diaries, as personal use to express self and to record one's own life, is similar
to another popular form of web-based communication: blogging. According to Nardi,
Schiano & Gumbrecht (2004), there are 5 non-exclusive objects motivate people to
write blogs, based on activity theory: (1). Update others on activities and whereabouts,
(2). Express opinions to influence others, (3). Seek others' opinions and feedback, (4).
"Think by writing," and (5). Release emotional tension. (p.225). The theory clearly
displays that the action of self-disclosure is not only to unleash personal need—to
'think' and to 'release', but also to have others people in mind, demanding to 'update
others,' to 'influence,' and other interactions. These motivations may as well explain
the initiatives of Walei users keeping their diaries online, especially when they will be
receiving feedbacks from their friends, or from the networked public which they trust,
which may be the reason to choose Walei among many online spaces or blog sites.

In general, the networked publics in Walei are trustworthy for theses interviewees.
They will firstly be aware of the presence of the authority, or the official
Governmental side, and witness the benefit of strong filter that block filthy words and
spam messages. Subsequently, the caring thoughts and feeling in the messages and
comments, as well as the useful information provided, enhance the sense of security
when using Walei. Not only do the users feel safe to conduct self-disclosure through
public profiles, diaries and comments, but they also are more willing to make contacts
with strangers online, particularly after having been encouraged to leave caring
messages to others. According to the interviewees, the feelings of being truly cared

for provides them security and prompts them to commit to Walei, and to participate in Walei more by becoming volunteers.

### 5.2.2.　The volunteer roles and the social networking in Walei

For various reasons, all the interviewees sooner or later became volunteers in Walei. Apart from their personal preferences of usage, the volunteering duties required them to participate more, mainly to make more interactions with others online. Responsibility enhances their participation in Walei and sense of identification and belonging to Walei. I perceive the fulfilling the volunteer responsibility as an empowering process, for the youth who are generally less empowered in the society from many angles. For instance, under the Credentialism, youth are expected to perform well on their studies. This is prominent in one of the Planet designs in Walei, where information about how to choose the most suitable directions for future studies and future vocation is provided. If they are not in the Star Schools or Star Universities, they are reckoned as inferior in the competition of studies. Besides, Taiwanese youths are normally perceived as a group who need guidance and have little life experiences. Their opinions may be taken less serious and less influential. But once they become volunteers in Walei, they can find themselves helpful for the official side and the other users.

This probably further reflects the underlying need of human beings—to be influential and to make a difference. From the perspective of miiilovegod, young users are much needy there, and it implies how she defines herself being helpful for those in need, and perhaps the fact that there users search for others' approval or listening ears. Having chance to be a volunteer turns the position from receiving to giving. It is most

likely the reciprocal relationship Walei enables, by offering volunteer positions, outstand itself.

If considering the Christian users, who have ideology and spiritualized narrative of applying technology as a mission tool (Campbell, 2005c.), we may find that they too fulfill their religious intention through the voluntary roles. The Christian discourse of spreading the gospel to the world and be influential as "light and salt of the world" may be more emphasized in non-Christian countries. With the potential timidity to talk about their faith as a minority religious group, they are given more confidence by their volunteer roles as they become 'helpful.' They are also provided with the opportunity to be 'influential,' as they have to encounter more users than if they are independent users. "*I feel this is the only way to serve God,*" said blue1087.

These interviewees, who are all volunteers in Walei, may even experience a different scenario of the social network in Walei. Because of their roles, they have to actively encounter many new users or strangers, who do not necessarily become their good friends afterward. But if they happen to maintain the new relationship well, through interaction online or physical meetings, they may gain a firm and positive impression toward Walei, leading to another worldview from Walei. This is the result, as the model Campbell suggests--"common mental geography." They identify with the ideology which is conveyed through articles or animations on Walei, and utilize it to their lives without much rejection.

### 5.2.3.    'It's all about love!'--Support network to mission tool

According to the users who become Christian because of Walei and the non-Christian

users, they have gained rather positive impression about Christianity in Walei through interacting with Christian users, including staffs and other volunteers. It is obvious that the networking is designed for mission use. Walei does provide a platform for non-Christian users to make friends with Christians. Then through supportive comments and encouraging words, the community of Walei serves as a support network (Campbell, 2005c). For those who rank themselves as one who became Christian because of Walei, it is essential to meet Christian online. With the warm and friendly atmosphere, and through the networking and relationship establishment, non-Christian users are more open to the contents based on Christian values in Secret Planet and Church Planet, and gradually gain more interests in knowing Christianity.

The mission is not only achieved through online interaction, but also through the physical Official Meeting Up, for online interaction and face-to-face interaction have the cross-dimensional relationship (Cheung, 2008, p.21). Cheung concludes that when the virtual community gets to meet up physically, and if the offline impression matches the online one, the relationship tends to be deepened and further developed. This may explain the reason that some interviewees seemingly have a closer relationship or even friendship with Walei Staffs, whom they meet up in person in those annual Meeting Up and volunteer training sessions. With the friendship established, they are less resistant to the Christian contents in Walei.

It is also worth mentioning how important Walei triggers the interests of users to Christian faith, since generally Christianity is rather unknown and unfamiliar from these interviewee's reactions. They may gather impressions about Christianity from Western movies, or sometimes from certain Christians in their lives. Church Planet thus becomes an important information resource for them to probe Christianity

independently without facing attentions. Besides, since music is a crucial element for youth online (Boyd, 2008b), Christian songs with emotional lyrics and soft melodies in Church Planet also attract users, and generate new impressions of Christianity. Besides, the Christian music also expands the role of Church Planet, from 'information space' into 'worship space,' for those Christian users, at least as yz723119 and genius22. They use Church Planet not for receiving new information about Christianity, but they can enjoy the music and animations, which reminds them of God.

### 5.2.4. Christian religious identity in Walei

When it comes to the religious identity presentation of Christian users, one of my assumptions is that they may spiritualize the Internet and actively perform their religious identity, since minority groups tend to find media as their speaker. But to my surprise, only a few among the Christian users, mainly the older ones, consciously link their online experiences with their Christian religious identity. Not until those offline and physical meetings and trainings, do the younger ones have more concrete ideas about demonstrating their religious identity, and perceive the Internet as a mission tool.

However, even though they do not consciously acknowledge their practice of Christian identity on the cyberspace, Christian users are already displaying and experimenting their identity through many ways of presenting self online, such as their usernames and personal profiles, as what I assumed and added to the category proposed by Bechar-Israeli (1996) in Chapter 3. For instance, Miiilovegod's case, although comparatively rare, is still an obvious case of showing her identity through

her user ID—miii (sounds like 'me')-love-God.

In addition, except the non-Christian interviewees, the rest of the users choose to have Christianity-related contents, such as Bible verses or links to Christian websites, in their personal profiles. For instance, Dreammaker names his profile "ＭｅｒｃｉＦｕ ｌ・の・神・と・放手飛翔・の・ＢaＢu," mixing the use of Chinese, English and



Fig. 15: Outlook of Dreammaker's personal profile (Home)

Japanese, literally meaning 'merciful God and Babu, who flies without restrains.' In their categories of diaries, some of them will use "God," "life of Fellowship/Church," and "Jesus" as labels, or Christianity-related wording in their diaries. Farewell even uses images of Jesus as the background picture of her profile.



Fig. 17: Outlook of Farewell's personal profile

Even though most of Christian interviewees do not directly find Walei useful for their spiritual growth, they acknowledge using Internet as a tool to share love with others. The Christian faith is also one of the factors for some of them to decide to take part in the volunteering jobs. Therefore, the support network achieving in Walei is good for Christian users to practice their faith. Together with the warm atmosphere and sincere attitude in Walei, it becomes a positive cycle for users to gain sense of security, with which Christians users are comfortable to conduct self-exposure, mention and share their lives and values related to Christianity.

All the Christian interviewees admit that they do post some Christian related contents online. For example, they may share URL links of Christian songs, or quote some Bible verses in their posts. Nevertheless, during the interview process, it is interesting to notice that there seems to be a common tacit attitude not to make Christianity over explicit from the interviewees. While feeling secure to expose their own emotions and self-identity in Walei, the concern of arousing possible antipathy for non-Christian users results the comparatively weak multi-textual presentation of Christian identity. This consistent attitude among Christian users may reveal the collective religious identity formation, in correspondence to what Mia Lövheim and Alf G. Linderman (2005) proposed—information, interactivity, and independence.

### 5.2.5.　The irreplaceable Walei?

It happened to some of the interviewees that they stopped using Walei for a while. One possible reason is that they were rather independent users. If they had started to use Walei primarily out of person interest in the new technology, then when freshness faded and offline real life got busier, without the offline peer pressure to be bound, it

would be hard to commit to Walei. Surprisingly they were even willing to come back and re-register. Besides the unique functions of Walei, it may be influenced largely by their volunteering role and religious identity, through which they are having more social interactions and commitment with online communities in Walei.

Walei was made known largely through face-to-face communication in offline environment--the schools and the campus. Five out of nine interviewees heard about Walei from their classmates or promotions in the schools. Besides, all of the interviewees came to know Walei when they were students, whom Walei was designed for. Like mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, friendship maintaining and establishing is essential for Social Networking Sites. It seems Walei may serve firstly as a platform to maintain the existing offline relationships in these environment and groups, such as a peer group in school or a small group from a camp held by CEF. However, even though introduced to Walei by other people, they do not necessarily use Walei in order to keep up with their friends known from offline life. Instead, they tend to build new friendships online through the system Walei offers and through the volunteer roles they play.

In this way, it is not difficult to figure out how Walei users differentiate the use of other Social Networking Sites, such as Wretch or Facebook. First of all, Walei appeared even prior than many blogging websites in Taiwan. Back in 2000 its freshness to Taiwanese Internet users is unbeatable. Secondly, even when emerging social networking sites were coming with many other fascinating functions, site like Wretch was described as full of Spam messages and less interactions with strangers for the interviewees. Their attitudes towards Wretch were comparatively less positive. As for Facebook, which became a popular social networking site in Taiwan after the

Traditional Chinese version was made available on Jun 20th 2008[30], it was either used to connect old acquaintances or to play games[31]. Based on the experiences of these interviewees, if they have had positive experiences making new good friends, without explicitly showing their personal photos or their real names in the first place, it seems that so far Walei has been an ideal space for them to expand their interpersonal relationship and friend circle online. The unique secure feeling in Walei stands it out.



Fig 18. Walei Fan Page on Facebook

However, Facebook is currently integrating with many other CMC services, including Wretch and Plurk[32]. For instance, a user of Wretch can post a blog and publish it onto Facebook easily. For some interviewees, it appears that Facebook is also getting useful to update status and to obtain attentions from friends. Besides, Taiwanese Facebook users are not always using their real name, which may be similar to the pseudonym used in Walei. Moreover, the traffic between different websites is obvious when it comes to the promotion of Walei. In addition to uploading promotional and

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[30] According to Facebook in Wikipedia, Chinese version: http://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-tw/Facebook

[31] When Facebook first showed up in Taiwan, it was largely used for social game; the famous one was Happy Farm, which was suddenly attracting many users to Facebook in Taiwan, and even caused some conflicts in offline relationships. So the first impression about Facebook in Taiwan for the interviewees is about playing social games.

[32] Plurk is an oncoming micro-blogging service. Plurk in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plurk

introductory videos unto YouTube[33], a video sharing service, Walei is even adopting Facebook as a promoting platform. In 2010, a fan page of Walei is created in Facebook. It is obvious that Facebook is a burgeoning social networking site for Taiwanese Internet users in general, so that the integration of functions from other social networking sites is necessary. This is so in order to cope with users' habit change. Facebook may be a threat for Walei and other social network sites in Taiwan, in terms of gaining more attentions. Nevertheless, Walei may not be simply replaced with its special system of volunteers and the unique warm care its users feel.

Besides the integration of different Internet services, the intermediacy of the mixed use of online and offline media is seen from Walei. There are at least two printed books published by Walei and sold in offline Christian bookstores. Inside the book with colorful pictures and texts, there are stories, articles, and quizzes, in accordance with activities previously designed in different planets in Walei. Personal testimonies about using Walei and meeting God are as well consolidated. Cooperating with other gospel bands, a music CD is attached with the book. It is predictable that the books are appealing for some existing users, for they are familiar with the arrangement in the books from their online experiences, and perhaps for they are included in the books. And since it is designed to be a Christmas gift, it should be a tool of promotion. Christians may buy it and give it as a gift to other youth, especially for those who have not yet heard about Walei, so they can have a glimpse of Walei. And through the printed books, the mission goal can be further achieved for those who are not steady Internet users. This is apparently a motivation for Christian users either to find Social Networking Sites new usages or to keep a site like Walei alive.

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[33] YouTube is a website for video sharing and some social networking functions. YouTube in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube

# 6.  Conclusion

The interrelation of religion and Internet is one of the phenomenon in the world of digital culture today. Various religious usage of the Internet is seen through the different religions, while the Internet is also changing religion. On such study of social-shaping technology (SST), religious users' shaping Internet, which Campbell (2005b) calls it "Spiritualizing the Internet," has caught much attention. The foundation of Walei, is apparently exemplifying this process. Perceived as a space for information search and a platform for new interpersonal relationship building, the Internet allows the birth of Walei within the cultural context of Christianity as a minority religion. Walei is designed as a friendly place for young Internet users, targeting non-Christian users with one clear mission—"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age[34]."

In this thesis, the special Taiwanese social networking site, Walei, is closely examined. Both the special Taiwanese religious context and the definition of SNSs, together with the designed features of Walei, have been presented in the introduction of Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 respectively. Then in chapter 3, the studies of CMC and religion, as well as the religious design of Walei are explored further. In the final two chapters, research analysis is carried out. First, questions are asked to selected interviewees and they are outlined in Chapter 4. Two key questions are asked; one on how its users have utilized it in their daily lives, and the other, on how they perceive such a website

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[34]  It is known as "the great mission" in the Bible, Matthew 28:19-20, New International Version.

with their different religious identity. These re impactful to my research work and they are executed through on online interviews as a methodology to developing a desirable result for the purpose of this thesis. Individual interviewees' various stories are consolidated and presented in Chapter 5. This is then followed by organized discoveries which entails a rather significant function of diary-keeping of activities of for the users; youth users' active participation as volunteer; the implementation of the religious mission goal through online and offline networking; the unconscious and obscure religious identity demonstration; and the interrelation with other social networking sites in Taiwan. Finally, the role of Waiel, wich is based on Campbell's model is summarized in this closing chapter. Last but not the least, the importance of research restrictions and suggestion research directions are provided in the second half of this chapter.

## 6.1. Walei and its role for the users

There are mixed reasons for Walei users to use the site. First of all, the new technology is always appealing. It was important to note that when users enrolled in earlier phases of Walei, they did not have many choices to other identical internet services. Given that Walei was only a pioneer in the introductory of social network sites in Taiwan, it had successfully attracted users for its innovative functions and fulfilled the need for people to explore the self-disclosure and their interactions online. In other words, users, especially those early ones, had perceived Walei as a new technological toy to try and to play.

Secondly, the expansion of the friendship network was one of the main attractions for the youth, given the limitation of time and restricted mobility, as Boyd (2008)

discovered in her research among the U.S. youth. Taiwanese high school students faced heavy stress as they spent most of their time with their studies. Through Walei, they made new friends with different age groups and from various schools, cities, and backgrounds. The geographical distances apart between the users were overcome as they shared over Walei site on their common offline life experiences. It further enhanced their relationship. The youth were also motivated and enabled to discuss with friends online about their questions, and even to consult for opinions, which they found useful and helpful.

In comparison with other matured social network sites, Walei's special support system was outstanding. Users remained committed to Walei as they discovered the site offered a unique feeling of security, love and care. And all these were largely established on the encouraging words and supportive comments. With the accumulated difficulties they encountered in life and pressure of studies, they could rely on Walei to relief their pressures and as well as to help them regain their strength and vitality. In effect, Walei has provided an invaluable emotional support, which they do not necessary obtain from real life. This leads to the third fact that users were willing to take part in volunteer roles. For some users, volunteering was even like their repay to Walei for what they had gained. By attaining certain responsibilities at Walei, these volunteers were more intensively engaged as their sense of involvement and achievement grew. In the Asian cultural context, where youth were less empowered and expected to be obedient, such volunteer work also gave them a sense of self-realization through such volunteer roles. This also led users to see a more positive self-perception of themselves that they can be helpful to others.

Doubtless, the above are general reasons that the youths engage at Walei, which

reveals the special role Walei played in their lives: an innovated internet service; a safe place where they could express themselves; a platform where they could make new friends; a channel to obtain support and useful information; a chance to practice on giving love and care to others. However, for older Christian users, especially those who had attended offline training, their use of Walei might have been as a result of their acceptance of the discourse at spiritualizing the Internet and Walei. Together with other participants of the training, they perceived using Walei as a way to serve God. In this way, they were willing to spend more time and efforts caring for other younger users. In the meantime, they formed a network in Walei, within the Walei community, and screening the list of users who were needed to be cared for.

According to the Christian use of Walei from the interviews, it is obvious to notice the exemplification in Walei of the four models of Internet organized by Campbell (2005c): information space, a common mental geography, an identity workshop, and a social space. These models, however, are not independent of each other in Walei. For instance, users gain information about life and Christianity from Walei, not only through the available contents at Walei, but also through the interactions and networking with other users. They also perceive Walei as a different cyberspace, and so apply the terminology of the game-like narratives to their mindset when describing Walei. Furthermore, the influence Walei brought to their mindset, the common mental geography, was reinforced by their participation in volunteer works. With the volunteer roles, Christian users get to practice their religious identities by caring for other users, and non-Christian users are forming the impression of Christian behaviors and values. In this way, a spiritual network is achieved, and the identity of identifying Walei is constructed. Last but not the least, the friendship building in Walei demonstrates the function of support network. Users make new friends online and at

the same time, maintain an offline friendship with each other in Walei, a social space.

For the non-Christian users in this thesis, interaction with Christian staffs and with other Christian volunteers has made Christianity and Christian information more appealing to them. Since the impression about Christianity is derived from Western movies and some other limited resources, the friendly atmosphere in Walei may change a non-Christian user's attitude toward Christianity, which is still quite unknown to the majority of Taiwanese people. One of the reasons non-Christians or those who volunteer not for any religious purpose use Walei is the content of Walei. Those contents are considered interesting and useful, providing them more opportunities to ponder religious issues and their religious identity, which then lead them to have a more positive impression toward Christianity.

## 6.2. Research restrictions and future research directions

It was not a plain sailing in the research work as I met with some challenges to conduct the planned interviews. Technically speaking, the 6-7 hours time difference between Taiwan and Finland/ Denmark, did not help much in overcoming the bearer of finding a suitable time for both ends to meet online. Practically, when the interviewees were available during the evening and night in Taiwan, I would be studying at in the university in Europe. Hence, to meet at a convenient timing was a challenge. Especially so, if the interviewee was a high school student, they too would have limited time to get online, in comparison to those who are university students. I even had an interviewee who was doing military service when the interview was conducted. Therefore, the numbers of the interviewee were much less than expected. Some potential interviewees had replied the preliminary questionnaire firstly through

Walei inbox, but later they were not contactable, possibly because of the staggered timetable and the limitation of their time spent online. Moreover, it generally would take at least 2 short interviews to complete interviewing a user. The followed interview might come about 2 weeks. Therefore, the actual interview schedule is much delayed and prolonged than my original plan.

The prolonged time of conducting the research was adding more difficulties to conclude and analyze, plus for the development of technology and habit of internet use change rapidly. Social network sites were quickly evolving, and the ecology of cyberspace was changing constantly. As mentioned before, when the research idea was formulated, Facebook was still not popular in Taiwan. Now Walei has already created a fan page on Facebook, and both sites have updated into the version with advanced functions and techniques, exemplifying the convergence of media. In this way, some interview results that was obtained in 2010 would not be valid in the near future.

The fast development of digital services and functions in general could complicate the studies of CMC and of Internet Research. However, as Facebook is gradually more in favor of Taiwanese Internet users, it is predictable that more researches will be conducted on Facebook in Taiwan, regardless how fast things are to change online. In this research, it is obvious that the possible threat of Walei would not be Wretch but Facebook. Will Walei survive by owning the unique services like the volunteer system and life-related information? Or will its updated version be able to compete with Facebook? A more detailed comparison on Facebook and Walei may help us understand the real need and habits of Social Networking Sites' users, which requires research engagement of continuous observations and following-ups.

One of the flaws in this research is the selection of interviewees. All the selected interviewees had played or had been playing roles with "Walei governmental job," namely the volunteer works in Walei. On one hand, they are more active and stable users, and thus they may easily identify with Walei. Nevertheless, on the other hand, this may restrict the broader view of Walei's various users. Walei may be presented overly positive in their opinions. In this way, having users with various backgrounds and degrees of engagement shall provide a balance of the users' experiences and make the research more comprehensive.

Moreover, in this research, interviewees were divided by their religious identity. Other important factors of Internet use, such as gender, age, social classes, and internet access (Livingstone & Helsper, 2005), were not able to be included thoroughly. In the Taiwanese context, age determines school year. Each school year may have different study pressure, and high school students usually have less leisure time and are more stressed than university students. As for vocational school students, they may have another timetable of daily life other than high school students. These are all the important factors of their using of Internet and Walei. Studies concerning these factors will help broaden the pictures of the reasons and the experiences of using Walei.

Another crucial difficulty was the translation. All the web contents in Walei and the transcript of the interviews were in Chinese. To present the observed results and analyzing the materials, it required a great degree of intensive translating works from Chinese to English, which was disappointingly and inevitably limited. Although great efforts were made to find the most appropriate translations, the cultural mentality and the spirits of certain expressions might still be omitted within different languages. As

mentioned and discovered earlier, the language use is a significant tool to practice and present users' identity online, as well as a valuable reflection of cultures, including the popular Internet culture in Taiwan and the culture of Christianity in a multi-religious Asian country. Many users pointed out the fact that the terminology of Protestant Christianity in Chinese language was different from other religions and sometimes unfamiliar for the majority of the society, especially those who had never encountered Christianity. While presenting their identity online, some of the questions shall be taken into consideration; For example, how did religious users apply these terms and how the terms were mixed up with mainstream expressions of the Buddhism and Taoism terminology? One would conclude that the study solely on the language use might increase the accuracy of translation with more cultural explanations, and possibly produce a better solution to the insufficiency of this research.

Although the identity presentation in Walei is mainly on a pure text base, the nature as a site with multimedia applications should not be ignored. Most of the visual presentation and aesthetic style in Walei tends to be influenced by Japanese Manga, which is famous for being cute or lovable and less realistic. How the aesthetic style reflects and affects users' identity formation and experiences is unfortunately not yet well examined in this research. The interview set up for this research focused more on the perceptions of the ideas conveyed in the contents of Walei, instead of their forms. While there are many discussions and theories of identity formation online and avatars, it may be worth studying the interrelation of the aesthetic and the identity formation in Walei, as it is a website rich in multi-textual content.

In terms of the studies of Religion Online/ Online Religion, religious identity formation and reinforcement in social networking sites shall be thoroughly explored

by examining different sites. Will the Christian users, not necessary those engaged with Walei, find other equally famous social networking services, such as Facebook, Plurk, and YouTube, as new ways to present and fulfill their identity? Apart from this, religious authority in Walei can be further discussed. In Walei, staff workers design their monthly discussion topics and direct ideology through articles and interactions with users, which is different from most of the social network sites. It may be worth defining what kind of religious authority is working and how.

In conclusion for this thesis, my attempt to discover the interrelationship of Christianity and digital culture through the form of SNSs within a specific cultural context has been preliminarily achieved through the case study of Walei. Users' experiences and the roles of this special social networking site for its users with different religious identities have been explored through in-depth interviews. The interviewees overall perceive this Christian founded SNS as warm and safe, with a unique atmosphere which encourages them to engage more and share more care. Through offline training and online practice, Christian users get to strengthen their faith, displaying their religious identity through texts and images boldly and obscurely. Meanwhile, non-Christian users may change their attitude toward this minority religion and gain interest to obtain knowledge of it, mainly by interacting with Christians online.

Certainly further studies are needed as improvements, but overall the development, research and results have met the objective I first set off in this thesis, as to add the consideration of different cultural context and mentalities in CMC studies, as well as in the field of Religion Online/ Online Religion. Hopefully, the examination of this SNS, Walei, will call attention for the potential and influence of social networking.

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# Appendix 1: Questionnaire for Walei users

Hello! Dear Walei user!

I am Lee, Chia-Ying. My account ID in Walei is ruth0109. Right now I am taking a master degree in Digital Culture at University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Because of the thesis, I need to conduct some interviews, getting to know the users' experience and feelings of Walei, and thus discuss some phenomenon of digital culture. Since I am currently in Finland, I will conduct the interviews online, and also need to use instant chat software, such as MSN or Skype.

親愛的哇咧使用者，你好！

我是李佳穎，在哇咧的帳號是 ruth0109，目前在芬蘭育委斯區萊大學(Jyväskylä) 念數位文化的碩士。因為論文的需要，所以我需要進行一些訪談，知道哇咧使用者的使用經驗跟觀感，藉此探討數位文化的一些現象。由於我人目前還在芬蘭，所以我會以線上訪談的方式來進行，也會需要用到例如 msn 或 skype 這種即時通訊軟體來訪問你！

我的 MSN: [ruth0109@pchome.com.tw](mailto:ruth0109@pchome.com.tw)
Skype: ruthlee0109

Thank you for willing to assist my thesis interviews. If possible, please fill the preliminary questions, so then I can ask further questions based on some understandings.

謝謝你願意協助我的論文訪談！如果可以的話，請也把以下的一些基本問題先填答，所以到時候我可以根據一些了解，詢問更深入的問題。

Name 姓名：
Age 年紀：
Walei user name 帳號(for thesis use 屆時論文會用此呈現)：

How did you get to know Walei?
請問你如何知道 Walei 的？

How long have you been a member of Walei?
請問你成為 Walei 的會員多久了？
How frequent do you use to get online per week? How often do you use Walei?
一周可以上網的時間跟次數？多常使用 Walei？

What kinds of functions of Walei do you use more frequently? For example, which planet did you go more often?

平常最常使用 Walei 的哪些功能？例如去哪些星球？

Have you used:曾否使用過(**It's better if you remember when and what functions you have used.如果記得不同時間、階段使用哪些不同功能更好)**

7. Guardian Angel 守護天使
8. Secret Planet 秘密星球
9. Leaving msg in your neighbors or strangers' board? Sending "water ball" (msg)? 去鄰居或陌生人家留言、傳水球
10. Leave msg on some discussion boards 在討論版上留言
11. Keeping diaries 寫日記
12. Church Planet 教會星球

Do you still have other online space, like Wretch, Pixnet…?
是否有其他網路空間，像是無名、痞客邦…？

What would be the reason for you to (not) keep using Walei?
覺得會/不會繼續使用 Walei 的原因？

# Appendix 2: Example Script of interviews

Interviewer (in normal font): Ruth
Interviewees (in italic font): yz723119 (Y, pilot)

請問你是在哪時候知道，又是如何知道Walei的？

*國三時隔壁班同學介紹*

那你當時就成為會員嗎？

*是的*

你當時一周可以上網的時數大概是多少呢？

*一週不到2小時*

那在那些時間中　你大概會造訪walei多久?

*剛開始大概一週一次　後來在收到帳號要被刪除的信才會再登入*

那你現在使用Walei的頻率有改變嗎

*現在每天上一到兩次不等*

現在比較頻繁的原因是?

*現在擔任哇咧義工*

可以解釋多一點嗎？是怎樣的義工?

*是守護天使*

*主要的工作是關哇咧上的青少年*

你是什麼時候成為義工？又為什麼想成為呢？

*在97年的10月*

*當初參加青宣*

(你說的是民國齁)

*恩　是*

*發現自己對青少年的工作有負擔*

*當時滿害羞的　覺得網路的工作可能適合我　因為不用面對面*

那你過去最常使用Walei的哪些功能？例如去哪些星球？現在又有差異嗎？

*剛開始會使用娛樂星系　裡面有討論信仰和詩歌的版*

*還有大學和飛躍星系　但隨著團契的人漸漸不上挖咧就很少在上*

*現在比較常使用的是秘密星系的*

*愛寢診療室和生活雜貨店*

那你都是怎麼使用這些功能的？只是閱讀內容還是？

*新的活動都會在首頁顯現　如果是有興趣的就會點進去看*

*不過我通常都是投個票就離開*

*畢竟不是很喜歡看文章*

*現在因為是擔任生活雜貨店的守護天使*

*會需要留意留言板的部份*

*從留言中尋找有需要幫助的網友*

你自己有曾經接受過秘密星系來的幫助嗎？

*沒有*

那你尋找有幫助的網友後，怎麼幫助他們？

*我想滿多網友在現實生活中找不到可以傾訴的對象 也有許多問題是不知道怎解決的*

*提供自己的意見做為參考*

*陪他們聊聊遇上的事情*

你怎麼跟他們互動上的？留言傳水球之類？

*通常是會留言:*

*若是有比較私人的問題要討論會記站內信*

你本來會去鄰居或陌生人家留言、傳水球嗎？

*不會*

所以是當了守護天使之後才比較有改變嗎？

*對 可以這麼說*

或者說當了守護天使後，你有開始去鄰居或陌生人家留言、傳水球嗎？

*哇咧會寄信通知你鄰居生日 現在會去鄰居家留言祝她生日快樂*

那你會在哇咧寫日記嗎？

*會*

不過你是否同時有有其他網路空間，像是無名、痞客邦...之類:

*還有在使用無名*

那你在無名使用的狀況，跟哇咧有什麼差異

*現在來說沒什麼差別*

*以前比較常在無名打網智 現在會把網誌放在兩個地方*

一樣的內容？

*對*

*之前有試著讓多點人到挖咧 所以會貼連結在無名*

*但發現不是哇咧的會員就不能回應文章*

*所以就在兩處放同樣的文章*

那普遍來說，你書寫的內容會跟你的基督徒身分有相關嗎？

*最近有越來愈談信仰*

*但還是會有一般生活的雜事*

不過你本來就知道哇咧是基督徒建立的網站嗎？

*恩 知道*

那在網路上不同空間表露你的基督徒身分，你有感覺差異，或接受到哪些正面或負面的反應嗎？

*沒有差異 到目前還沒受到負面反應*

那你覺得使用Walei對你的信仰有無幫助，如何幫助？

*使用哇咧的本身對我的信仰沒有太大幫助*

但是因爲擔任守護天使 參加了義工成長營

對認識自己及信仰有幫助

所以本來還沒參加這些前 你不會覺得要特別去例如關心網友之類？

不會

那你在參加這些之前 使用哇咧是比較被動接受信息嗎？

是的

你有曾經想過要離開挖咧嗎？

嗯...沒有耶

只是常不常使用的問題

所以就算你不常使用 你也不介意在那裡有個會員籍？

是

所以你在擔任天使前，哇咧上的朋友都是你本來認識的？

嗯..沒有

只有少數幾個

所以你有透過哇咧認識新朋友嗎？

有的

你可以評量一下 你當天使之前會繼續使用walei的理由嗎？

因爲申請了帳號不想被刪除吧 我想

所以哇咧上的功能沒有太吸引你？

有些心理測驗吧

那你會常使用教會星球那些嗎？

不

或許不超過10次吧

所以以前你們團契的人還在上哇咧的時候 你會怎麼使用哇咧啊？

上去看看有什麼新消息

像是出遊之類的

所以主要是聯絡消息的討論版之類？

嗯

所以你會在你認識的群體的討論版留訊息 但是可能不會在一些哇咧專題的討論版上留訊息？

對

但那也是個要我很熟識的團體

我大概看了一年的鳳中團契版我才PO了第一篇文章

所以你使用網路也是會受你提過比較害羞的個性影響？

應該是說 因爲害羞的緣故即使是在網路上也不願意有更多參予:

不過現在因為你現實生活中的信仰比較成長，所以你開始在網路上有突破？

因爲信仰的緣故開始敞開自己

而網路成為另一個可以敞開的平台？

是個讓我想要敞開的地方