The Rinpoche Sent me a Friend Request: The Roles and Perceptions of Social Media in Buddhist Religious Life

Solveigh Barney

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The Rinpoche Sent me a Friend Request

The Roles and Perceptions of Social Media in Buddhist Religious Life

By Solveigh Barney
The Rinpoche Sent me a Friend Request:
The Roles and Perceptions of Social Media in Buddhist Religious Life

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Abstract

When I first heard about His Eminence the 8th Chokyong Palga Rinpoche, I didn’t expect to find an Instagram page consisting of gym pics and sunglass selfies. As I kept scrolling through Instagram, I soon found out that Palga Rinpoche is not alone in this influencer-like social media façade; he is a part of a younger generation of Buddhist monastics who are trying to be what some call monkfluencers. These monastics are growing up in the digital world of social media, making it more accessible to share with the outside world the #monklife. My goal is to investigate the relationship between Buddhism and social media and why some members of this religious life decided to pursue a social media persona, specifically on Instagram. By using prior academic research and the perceptions I gathered from monastic and non-monastic Buddhists, I will determine whether the digital world has space for these monkfluencers.
Acknowledgements

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I walked into the Sacred Garden of Lumbini, not knowing what to expect. I knew that I had one objective— to find my way to the Maya Devi Temple, better known as the birthplace of the Lord Buddha. However, when I arrived, I was immediately overwhelmed by the number of devotees cramming their way into the temple; I decided to carry on a different path. I walked around the garden, observing and taking in as much as I could. As I walked deeper and deeper into the grove, I noticed the various trees and foliage that riddled my path. It wasn’t long until I observed something else: massive wires swinging from these natural entities. As I followed the wire, I saw metal poles that matched the height of the trees, gleaming with solar panels instead of leaves. I continued on, and eventually, I passed a giant statue of the golden little Buddha, pointing to the heavens. I stopped to read the sign; it was gifted by Thailand. When I looked up, I saw at least three groups taking photos in front of it and a couple or two taking a selfie. I carried on once again and found myself in front of some monasteries. Before I could reach the gate to enter this part of the garden, a young woman stopped me and asked if she could take a photo with me. I obliged, gave a cheeky smile, and once more, carried on. Once I finally made it to the monasteries, I witnessed the same behavior as I did at the statue— people taking photos, making videos, carrying selfie sticks, etc. As I
strolled around the pond, I stopped for a moment at the Great Lotus Stupa as something grabbed my attention. Despite the ornate and astonishing anterior of the temple, the sign on the front gates was what bewildered me. Although it was in Nepali, the message was clear. It bared the TikTok logo with a massive “X” across it. I did not know whether to accept this image as a sign of the times or judge our generation. In response, I wondered, *what would the Lord Buddha think of this?*

After, I went to my hotel room, exhausted from roaming around the entire garden. To unwind, naturally, I grabbed my phone and clicked on Instagram. I awaited a feed that became littered with the Buddhist monastics I started following in the last month. I click on their stories, starting with Palga Rinpoche. He enjoys posting memes; today’s was one about cats and reincarnation. Next was monk Dorjee Thaye's story, popping up with the message of “needing to focus” as he flips through Buddhist texts bursting in Tibetan. Finally, I see monk Aaachen Tenzin Thupten's story that relates to my own. It is a selfie of him in front of the Thai Monastery in Lumbini. What I observed that day is indeed a sign of the times. Now even my Instagram encompasses this generational shift with a new era of Buddhist monastics, an era I call *monkfluencers.*
What is an Influencer?

I should start by explaining the origins of this curious word *monkfluencers*. Let’s begin by discussing what an influencer, the latter part of the term, means in our 21st-century context. In pulling a definition from the Nashville Film Institute, an influencer is a digital creator with a large social media following who offers high-quality online content that educates, entertains, or encourages their audience, allowing them to engage with their fans.¹ My generation, Generation Z, has grown up in a time surrounded by such characters.² We saw the rise of YouTubers like David Dobrick, Emma Chamberlain, and Shane Dawson. We mourn the loss of Vine, still quoting many of those short comedic clips to this day.³ Now we find ourselves with its successor TikTok honing a new age of personalities to follow, including Charli D’Amelio, Addison Rae, and Jojo Siwa. It’s a matter of time before the next phase of influencers swoops in. The truth is, it could be anyone. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have democratized the industry with their easy use and lack of restrictions, allowing anyone, anywhere, to become a content creator.⁴

Even though I grew up in an age where anyone can be an influencer, I was a little thrown off when I came across Palga Rinpoche’s Instagram page while I was in Ladakh.⁵ I couldn’t help but laugh at what I

² Generation Z is the generation born between 1997 to 2012
³ Vine was an American mobile app that enabled users to record and share short videos. I was discontinued in 2016.
was witnessing—a Buddhist monastic posting selfies, memes, and gym pics with the caption “no pain, no gain.” His profile totally threw off my perceptions of devotees to religious life. It almost seemed as though this Rinpoche, with 33,400 followers, was exuding the energy of what I knew to be an Instagram Influencer. Immediately, I was intrigued.

I began by seeking out resources, trying to find any writings that explained this phenomenon. Naturally, I started by typing into my Google search bar “monk influencer.” There was only one article that encapsulated this subject matter; Its title gave language to this anomaly. It was named *Monkfluencers: how #monklife became a social media sensation.*

The author Sarah Manavis provides a narrative looking at the profiles of the monk Shayamal, former monk Jay Shetty, and the journal company, the Monk Manual. Manavis focuses more on the appeal of what represents Buddhist monkhood, such as mindfulness, meditation, and yoga. She suggests that we could all use a bit more Buddhist content on our phones. What if instead of having an endless feed of beauty products, political ads, and TikToks, we were faced with quotes by the Dalai Lama, meditation-videos, and tantric images? With the chaotic nature of the digital world, I question, does social media have the capacity for these Buddhist messages and practices? Does it have space for this new generation of monkfluencers?

There is also the question of content. It is no guarantee that these monkfluencers will share Buddhist-themed posts. After all, they are a type of social media influencer and adhere to the typical influenceresque posts like selfies and reels. However, they also must heed the

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7 According to Instagram, “Reels invites you to create fun videos to share with your friends or anyone on Instagram. Record and edit 15-second multi-clip videos with audio, effects, and new creative tools.”
principles of Buddhism and the notion of representing the Buddhist religion. With this impression, I also question, what are the rules that come with being a Buddhist Monastic online? With both the democratizing and untamable nature of our digital world, should such a framework exist?

In this paper, I will explore how Buddhism and social media coexist in the twenty-first century. I will also recognize the necessary adaptations the Buddhist community has had to make in order to readjust to the next generation. I will then focus on how monastics use these social media platforms and discern the generational shifts that have occurred among the ordained. Accordingly, I will then determine what makes a monastic a monkfluencers. Next, I will discuss the perceptions gathered regarding the relationship between social media and Buddhism. Finally, I will reflect on the impact this new wave of monkfluencers has on both social media and Buddhism and consider what we can learn from them at this moment in time.
The Relationship Between Buddhism and Social Media

In trying to grasp these two complex topics, I wanted to begin by understanding this paradoxical relationship between Buddhism and social media. When I first attempted to see if there was any merit in this subject, this futuristic-sounding term—cybersangha—kept popping up. Initially, I did not know what a sangha was, let alone what a cybersangha was. Hence the cyber, I knew it had something to do with the digital. It wasn't long until I learned that sangha is the Sanskrit word used for a Buddhist community, making cybersangha a clever slang to define the online Buddhist community. The cybersangha is a unique zone of Buddhism as it “transcends boundaries between the variety of Buddhist traditions, sects, and distinctive cultural differences.” If one has access to the internet, this online community allows anyone, anywhere, to connect to Buddhism online. For example, Buddhists in rural America have an avenue to teachings by their favorite guru from the comfort of their home. With all our technological advancements, the cybersangha will not disappear anytime soon.

The cybersangha also presents itself as an opportunity for curious non-Buddhist to get involved in Buddhism. This connection is especially true for Europe and North America as according to religious studies scholar Morten Schlüttter, “online Buddhism seems most popular amongst Western practitioners.” Some scholars refer to this Westernized form of Buddhism as “DIY Buddhism” as it allows practitioners to go beyond lineages and sects to curate a form of the religion that appeals the most to them. I came across a company based in the United States that was one of the first forerunners of this premise. It is called Buddhist

Geeks and since 2006, they have been sharing the Dharma with a “Western” audience through podcasts, virtual trainings, and conferences. Vincent Horne and Ryan Oelke, the founders of Buddhist Geeks, began the podcast, “to explore issues that were particularly relevant to them as young Buddhist practitioners in the twenty-first century.” They wanted to understand where their practices lay amongst their geographical location in America and this new wave of technology they were facing. Eventually, Buddhist Geeks became a huge success amongst both Buddhist Americans and Americans who were simply interested in Buddhism. With this success, the company devoted itself “to celebrating how technology and social media are being used to both aids traditional Buddhist practices and enable the emergence of radically innovative forms of Buddhism.”

Horne and Oelke have both expressed how this generational shift into the online realm allows for greater accessibility to Buddhist teachings and practices that spans beyond geographical boundaries and cultures, making the Dharma pragmatic.

This access to digital teachings is also commonly discussed when talking about Tibetans in exile who remain dedicated to their Buddhist practices. I witnessed this dedication a handful of times throughout this semester. While at my homestay in Boudha, I recall the numerous times I walked into the prayer room to find Tibetan Buddhist chants playing on the television. When staying in the Tibetan settlement Tserok in Lower Mustang, my homestay Momola was gleefully watching a video of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama on her phone from her living room floor. On the same day, when I walked into a local shop in Marpha, the Tibetan shopkeeper was also watching one of the Dalai Lama’s teachings. He immediately drew me in to watch it with him, explaining how we should follow what the Dalai Lama has taught us about compassion and kindness. To be honest, I appreciated this little reminder amid a

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13 Gleig, 19.
14 Duo, Ding, Caitlin Dwyer, and Zhang Jing. “Buddhist Communication in the Social Media Age,” 2012.
chaotic day. Since our cell phones are almost always in hand, these little reminders have the capability to be only one tap away.

The New Wave of Technology

Whenever discussing technology, I always wonder—*How far is too far?* I find myself with a similar line of reasoning when thinking about the effect technology has on Buddhism. In my research, I encountered some curious Buddhist digital practices that show how far this technological adaptation has gone. In ethnology, *Buddhism, the Internet, and Digital Media: The Pixel in the Lotus*, Historian Gregory Price Grieve writes about his own experience with the *cybersangha*. He begins by painting a picture of his time at Hoben Mountain Zen Retreat. Grieve writes, “[I] was also aware of standing in front of a wooden building, through the glass door of which I could see a long wooden altar with incense, candles, flowers, and a large statue of Shakyamuni Buddha.”¹⁵ This imagery sounds quite accurate for a Buddhist retreat center; however, there is one catch—this center exists only in *Second Life*, a virtual world.¹⁶ Grieve's academic interests involve studying the practices of Buddhism within these online realms. Like Grieve, anthropologist Jessica Falcone was also curious about deciphering this new virtual way of practicing religion. She writes, “I want to understand why this is happening in a virtual space… for some Buddhists, they may be living in an area without a Buddhist community, and this may be the only place where they can practice their religion with other people.”¹⁷ These scholars raise the question of whether sacred spaces can exist in a digital realm. Virtual Reality headsets also bring this question to light. Author Deepak Chopra has been a champion in bringing the conversation of virtual reality and Buddhism together. In 2016, Chopra partnered with Wevr, a VR production company, to

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¹⁶ *Second Life* is a multi player online virtual world where user create avatars and interact with other users online.

publish a “virtual reality meditation simulation” which leads practitioners through a guided meditation led by Chopra himself.\(^\text{18}\) As one hears the soothing voice of Chopra, the VR headset displays elaborate Buddhist imagery that transcends the practitioner away from the distractions of the real world. In addition to these virtual reality opportunities, Buddhists also have access to a plethora of other mediums for their practice.

These include live webcasts of the Dalai Lama’s teachings, meditation apps like *Buddhify* and *Headspace*, and social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram that contain an abundance of Buddhist-related feed. If they are willing to readjust to these new technologies, it seems the opportunities are endless for Dharma seekers online.

**Adaptation**

Buddhism has always been accepting of the changing nature of our world. As noted with the technological changes above, Buddhism is a friend to readjusting itself to meet practitioners according to their positionality.\(^\text{19}\) Thus, a key component to understanding the relationship between Buddhism and social media is this need to adapt. All the technological developments discussed primarily focus on the practices of the non-monastic Buddhist follower. Consequently, I want to consider the effects our cyberspace has on the Buddhist monastic. In June of 2022, Journalist San Pisith wrote an article about the lives of Cambodian Buddhist monastics and discussed how they are dealing with this generational shift. He explains the crossroad many monastics are facing between balancing modernity and still living a meaningful life rooted in Buddhist traditions.\(^\text{20}\) Traditional Buddhist monastics take vows of poverty and deny the materialistic aspects of this world.\(^\text{21}\) In many doctrines, “monks are not allowed to engage in any sort of entertainment such as dancing, singing or music.”\(^\text{22}\) However, the need to appeal to the next generation weighs itself into the conversation, as many fear, “to reject all social media would entirely cut the Sangha off from society.”\(^\text{23}\) Some argue that this balance can be


\(^{20}\) Pisith, 3.


\(^{22}\) Pisith, 6.

\(^{23}\) Pisith, 6.
best accomplished through the middle path approach that emphasizes the avoidance between two extremes. However, decoding what this balance is, is a challenge in itself.

Many monks have expressed their intentions for logging on to the digital world. Ven Nandaka, a Burmese monk who uses Facebook and YouTube, believes that “taking part in these Western experiences firsthand helps him bridge the gap between his students in a country [Myanmar] that has long been isolated from the rest of the world.”24 This sentiment conveys the exciting side of technology that informs the hope-driven potential this innovation has in sharing the Dharma. San Pisith indicated that this digital media is a blessing for his sect of study, Khmer Buddhists. He writes, “one can now reach wider audiences faster than via traditional media, i.e., one Sangha member has the potential to reach a hundred, thousand, or even a million people through just one livestream Dharma talk.”25 Some Buddhist teachers are already on this wave. For example, the Dalai Lama has a Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube page with millions of followers. Another example is the Bodhi institute I visited in Lumbini. They have a Facebook page that was started and is run by one of their twenty-five-year-old students. This alludes to the younger generation's inclination to be online.

Another more controversial example is the case of the former Thai monk Phra Maha Praiwan Worawano whose defrocking is linked to his social media stardom. Initially, he was delighted by the digital Dharma. He shared his desires for this digital shift with Reuters in 2021 stating, “I want Dharma and the young generation to coexist… Without reaching out to the young, what will be the

24 Pecorella, 1.
25 Pisith, 3.
place of religion in the future?" His excitement was contagious, and he gained a massive following on Facebook and TikTok alongside his monastic partner Phra Maha Sompong. However, this digital persona ultimately led to his departure from the Buddhist monkhood. In response to his disrobing, Thai journalist Natcha Patanasophon shared the grievances posted on Thai social media after Phra Maha Praiwan Worawano announced this withdrawal in a Facebook livestream in October of 2021. She writes, “Unlike other Buddhist monks, Phra Maha Paiwan has reached out to young people as he mastered fluency in youth slang and poked fun at current affairs and politics.” This anecdote about Phra Maha Praiwan incites the discussion of whether a Buddhist monastic should engage in social media. If so, what are the guidelines they should adhere to prevent such controversy and protect the name of Buddhism?

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Guidelines for Monastics

There have been several attempts to define social media guidelines for Buddhist monastics. The most notable is from the accredited Buddhist Lama and author Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, who was one of the first to attempt to appeal to the younger generation of Dharma seekers. In 2013, he shared a post on his Facebook page titled “Social Media Guidelines for So-Called Vajrayana Practitioners.” In summary, he boils Vajrayana ethics down into two essential points for his students: (1) Maintain the secrecy of the Vajrayana; (2) Avoid giving in to the temptations of spiritual materialism and using Dharma in service of your ego. The first instruction contains three additional sub-guidelines: (a) Don’t post tantric images; (b) Don’t post mantras and seed syllables; (c) Don’t talk about your empowerments. The second point contains seven additional sub-guidelines: (a) Don’t share your experiences and so-called attainments; (b) Don’t boast about your guru; (c) Don’t attempt to share your so-called wisdom; (d) Don’t confuse Buddhism with non-Buddhist ideas; (e) Be respectful to others; (f) Don’t create disharmony; (g) Always be mindful of your motivation. Although Dzongsar Khyentse writes solely to Vajrayana practitioners, these guidelines could arguably apply to all Buddhist monastics and all Buddhists online.

Another method scholars have used to define these social media guidelines for Buddhist monastics is drawing on ancient teachings and applying them today. Thai Professor Somboon Watana believes that the threefold training or Trisikkhā in Pāli should be considered for living amid online social media. This discipline contains three central features: (1) training in higher morality (Silasikkhā); (2) training in higher mentality (Samadhi); and (3) training in higher wisdom (Paññāsikkhā). He argues that if we keep these three points at the center of our practice, we can improve knowledge, wisdom, consideration, and discretion when consuming social media. In using this framework, Watana concludes that monastics should use these digital platforms for the sake of propagating Buddhist teachings, use them in accordance with Buddhist disciplines, will not wield it for entertainment, manage it to build a system that supports the practice of meditation for all people, and finally, use it for promoting and cultivating religious morality for human well-being. Essentially, Watana trust that these foundational Buddhist teachings will translate to monastic behavior online.

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San Pisith also has his take on how to respond to the question of monastic guidelines online. He argues that these ancient Buddhist teachings are not outdated in our digital age, as social media is just another space for leaders of the Sangha community to share the Dharma. He suggests we look at the discourse Udayi sutta in which the Buddha tells his attendant, Venerable Ananda, the five tenants one should establish before teaching Dharma to others. This code of conduct states, “I will teach step by step, I will teach explaining my methods, I will teach out of kindness, I will not teach while secretly hoping to profit, I will teach without hurting myself or others.” Pisith asserts that these principles must be mandatory for Buddhist monastics and offer the possibility that all social media influencers should consider these core principles when logging online.

Unlike Watana, Pisith pushes these guidelines to a new extent, believing that we need to go beyond just learning traditional Buddhist teachings to respond to this world-altering development. He regards social media as something that needs to be a “prioritized issue” amongst Buddhist leaders. He writes, "it is up to the Sangha leadership—Sangha Council, Abbots, and scholar monks— to guide, encourage, and to set boundaries." Pisith even recommends these leaders, “to develop digital leadership competence and require monasteries to introduce training programs on the potential risks and benefits of living in the digital age for its new and old members.” Additionally, he proposes ideas for behavioral research, workshops, conferences, an official code of conduct, books, and articles, all regarding how monastics should approach these social networks. He concludes that these resources could be and must be dispersed for the benefit of all sentient beings.

30 Pisith, 5.
31 Pisith, 6.
32 Pisith, 7.
Guidelines for Non-monastics

There are also a handful of articles that offer advice for how Buddhist lay people should act on social media. The Buddhist magazine Tricycle provides a “Western” Buddhist lens in its blog post “Ten Mindful Ways to Use Social Media.” In the article, author Lori Deschene shares her own journey through the online world. She knew she wanted to use this access to the internet for the benefit of others and began her blog “Tiny Buddha” out of a desire to spread small doses of wisdom in our complex lives. Deschene uses Twitter as her main platform and has been tweeting daily Buddhist-related quotes since 2009. In the last decade, she has grown in her social media endeavors and wrote this Tricycle blog post to share what she has learned to be aware of on these digital platforms from a Buddhist point of view. Her first trinket of wisdom is to know your intentions by asking yourself, “is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?” By recognizing these intentions, we can present our most authentic selves while sharing online. Her next tip is to “offer random tweets of kindness.” Through this small click of action, one can foster positivity for oneself and their followers. She also advises that we must use social media more sparingly and practice separating ourselves from our posts, as by doing so, we can free ourselves from our online egos. Finally, she concludes her ten-point blog post by simply stating to enjoy social media. From Deschene’s point of view, social media doesn’t have to be the source of anxiety that so many view it as today. Rather, it can serve as a place of mindfulness and joy.

Buddhist blogger Jessica Leon offers similar advice in her blog post, “How to Engage with Social Media Like a Buddhist.” Like Deschene, the first statement she makes is that we must look at our intentions when posting online, signifying how important this first step is.

in the Buddhist tradition. Leon also brings up this idea of being aware of our emotions when we log on, when observing others’ posts, and posting our own feeds. She stresses how essential it is for us to detach from our posts as “we are not our content.” She closed her argument by asserting that we need to demonstrate only love, which is something we should do both on and offline. These two blog posts share similar attitudes about what it means to be a Buddhist online. In reality, these simple guidelines could be applied to anyone’s digital behavior. They can cultivate a cyber realm that would no longer be associated with statistics of depression, anxiety, and FOMO (fear of missing out).

Since I was researching social media, I decided to see if there were any social media platforms that discussed this relationship online. I found a Reddit thread that provided some guidelines from a non-monastic and social media users' perspective. It begins with a new practitioner of Buddhism asking, “What are your thoughts on using Social Media as a Buddhist?” There were a handful of responses, mostly about different Buddhist users' personal experiences. Despite the irony of them using Reddit, most agreed that social media is distracting and shared some harsh and negative views of it. Others did provide the advice of following more Buddhist-focused content or more positive content in general. These first-hand anecdotes on Reddit lend some insight into what current non-monastic social media users are dealing with in this battle over what is right and wrong in the cyberspace.

Scholars are also thinking about this idea of non-Buddhists looking towards Buddhist principles as a guiding tool for how to make one’s time on social media the most beneficial to one’s well-being. Watana insists, “Buddhism instructs people to be more aware of how they consume social media and to avoid using social media if it creates greed, anger, and delusion.” Additionally, he campaigns for online meditation to serve as a gateway for users to become more mindful and build social immunity for overall well-being in daily life. He suggests that monastics who use social media should be the model for propagating this new enlightenment age, indicating how important it is for monastics to be “socially engaged Buddhists” to spread these positive, Dhammic messages to the outside world.

34 Leon, 4.
36 Watana, 17.
Dr. Alexander Berzin, a Tibetan Buddhist scholar, also made a similar argument claiming that “Buddhism may be of help to amplify the benefits and lessen the harms that are coming from this social change [social media].”\(^{37}\) In his essay, *Applying Buddhist Principles in the Age of Social Media*, Brezin makes the distinction between the “conventional me”, which is the persona that is performing actions—I am sitting; I am eating; I am sleeping; etc.—versus the “false me” which is the self that exhibits an ego with self-importance. He argues that this “false me” plagues the content we see online as we constantly try to gain approval from our so-called friends. He suggests that by losing this “false me” as Buddhism advocates for, we can create more sincere and meaningful connections on social networks. As alluded to earlier, this concept also relates to the theme of detaching from our posts.\(^{38}\) Additionally, he discusses the potential social media has in inspiring others, sharing spiritual messages with a wider audience, and existing as a protected space in a stressful world. He uses the Dalai Lama as an example, as he currently has 19.2 million followers on Twitter.\(^{39}\) The Dalai Lama’s Twitter feed consists of messages of compassion and bits of Buddhist wisdom that reach millions of people almost every day. Seeing these little positive quotes amongst the unhinged nature of Twitter could be extremely beneficial to one’s mind when in cyberspace. To keep our minds healthy, Berzin remarks how we must develop the Buddhist principle of “discriminating awareness” when we log on. By developing this mindfulness tool, we can discriminate between what information is best to take in and what information is best to share with the rest of the world. What this principle amounts to is simply, “what is our motivation when on these social networks?”\(^{40}\) This question of intention and motivation has been a constant theme throughout my research into these Buddhist-themed guidelines for social media. If more users, become akin to these principles, define their goals and boundaries, and follow more mindful and beneficial content, social media could be an incredible tool for bonding together and spreading positivity.


\(^{38}\) Berzin, 2.

\(^{39}\) Brezin, 4.

\(^{40}\) Brezin, 8.
Fear and Criticism

With all these drastic technological changes to society comes fear and resistance; social media is by no means an exception. This fear is especially pertinent in the case of Buddhism on social media. Even with the advancements of virtual reality, meditation apps, and livestreamed teachings, I wonder, will social media be the tipping point that goes too far beyond tradition for Buddhists? I found several critiques by Buddhist scholars regarding modernity harming the authenticity of Buddhist practices. From a consumerism angle, Thai Buddhist Economist, Sulak Sivaraksa argues, “modernity has uprooted our traditional ways of life, shopping malls replaced temples at the centers of communal life.” San Pisith also addresses the fear of the rapid development of technology, adding, “we need to watch it [technology] from the point that it doesn’t get to the point where it uses and controls us.” Buddhist monk, Ven Nandaka expresses his own concerns in trying to understand the magnitude of technological implications. According to Global journalism scholar Paula Pecorella, “he [Ven Nandaka] worries that the distractions will poison their [his students] purity if they do not learn how to use it [technology] appropriately.” He believes that technology should only be used for gaining higher knowledge, not for entertainment. Additionally, if one does use it for entertainment, he argues, “you are a slave of technology.” All of these qualms hold significant merit as it is true that technology feels that it’s developing too fast for us to keep up. We constantly have our phones by our side, 24 hours a day. According to the website tech jury, the average internet user spent 2 hours and 30 minutes daily on social media in 2022. At this point, it’s difficult to escape the constant stimulation, and no one is immune to it, not even these aesthetically conceived Buddhist monastics.

41 Pisith, 3.
42 Pisith, 4.
43 Pecorella, 3.
As witnessed in the case of Phra Maha Praiwan, there has been a lot of criticism and fear regarding Buddhist monastics using social media. Pisith writes, “recently we have witnessed an increasing number of Sangha members getting involved in social media…Some of them are trying to be Vloggers, YouTubers, film directors, or even taking an acting role in some cases.” He acknowledges that these trendy monks will gain short-term popularity. However, he also agrees they, “risk endangering the future of Buddhism by slipping into secularism and eventually falling to the path of worldly attachment.”

He argues that this will ultimately lead to the Buddhist religion unable to keep its identity. Some believe that by being exposed to this online world of attachment, monastics will want to leave the monkhood like Phra Maha Praiwan. Watana also addresses this issue; however, he believes that monastics should be online and that there is a correct pathway for them to do so. He distinguishes between two types of monastic social media personalities. He shines a positive light on the first group, who are the ones who use social media for the public interest, not for their own purpose. The other group is the monks who use Facebook for personal purposes or for recreation. He cautions them to be well disciplined and careful in communicating with others because although they use social media for themselves, they are still representing the Buddhist religion.

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45 Pisith, 5.
46 Ibid.
48 Watana, 16.
Buddhist Monastic Social Media Categorization

Buddhist monastics are in this position of trying to balance keeping with traditions while reaching the next generation of Buddhists. Ultimately, there is no one official guiding principle for how a monastic should act on social media, making it an individualistic matter of what they choose to post. This is where I want to reintroduce this new phase of monastics called monkfluencers. To articulate what a monkfluencers is, I analyzed thirty profiles of Buddhist monastics on Instagram and organized them into four distinct categories that encompass their social media persona (see figure 1). I used Instagram as my primary digital platform as most Generation Y and Generation Z influencers use it as their main website for outsourcing content.

Figure 1: Buddhist Monastic Social Media Categorization Chart
Celebrity Monastics

The first group of monastics are those who achieved celebrity status before they were on social media, and their credibility is independent of their social media presence. They tend to be of an older generation that grew up in the time before the internet. These individuals generally use social media to share their ministry work with a wider audience, promote books and events, collaborate with other monastics, and share small Buddhist reminders of wisdom and compassion. Their posts tend to be light-hearted, Buddhist-centric, and stray away from controversy, as this group contains well-known names of Buddhism who must maintain a cordial reputation. The most recognized figure in this category is His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama with 2.1 million followers on Instagram.49 In the case of the Dalai Lama, as well as most monastics under this umbrella, they do not personally run these accounts and hire someone or a team of people to run them for them. This factor eliminates the direct engagement that comes with being an influencer. In truth, these monastics are simply too big to fixate on their next post or how many likes they will get. To them, social media is merely a means of communication.

Monkfluencers

The second group is the monastics who are influencers. These individuals are characterized by their age, the content they post, and their direct engagement with their followers. These monkfluencers’ ages veer towards Generation Y.50 Their posts stand out from the first group, as they are Buddhist monastics who post Buddhist-themed material, however, they also do not shy away from posting more applicable content that reflects daily life. This choice of posting relatable content


50 Generation Y or millennials are those born between 1982 and 1994
distinguishes this group as they are blending both the use of social media for personal reasons and for the purpose of others. Their profiles also exhibit openness and vulnerability, creating a sense of approachability for the younger generations who use Instagram as their central source of information. These individuals average around 22,000 followers and post almost every day. Someone like Palga Rinpoche falls perfectly into this category. He assures that he keeps up with posting videos and images of Pujas, retreats, and teachings, displaying the Buddhist content necessary to be a monastic online.\(^51\) However, he creates space for also posting pictures of himself at the gym, selfies, and memes.\(^52\) Some monkfluencers also fall into this category because of a niche, such as meditation or dancing. Although these trendier monastics sometimes face criticism for their online personas, they are relatable, especially amongst younger generations which has fruition in keeping the religion fresh and alive.

**The Inbetweeners**

The third category of monastics is a combination of the first group, celebrity monastics, and the second group, the monastic influencers. They fall into their own separate category because they do not meet certain criteria such as their age, having someone managing their account, or having too many followers. However, the distinction here is that they do make an effort to post content that is more personable for their audience, adding that tone of engagement and relatability. The Gyalwang Drukpa, the head of the

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51. "A puja in my Buddhist tradition is a ceremony that includes reflection, chanting and offerings that deepen appreciation of The Buddha and his teachings."
Drukpa Lineage of Vajrayana Buddhism, can be an example within this group. Although he is a highly respected Buddhist figure and is considered a Baby Boomer, he consistently posts selfies, photos of his pets, and his passion for cycling. As they exist as celebrities to an extent, these monastics tend to have more followers than the monkfluencers, somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000.

The Young Monastic Influencers

The fourth and last group is the up-in-coming monastic influencers. I wanted to differentiate this group from the influencers because they are of Generation Z and are still gaining followership and grounding in their Buddhist practice. This group is also more likely to post content for their own personal entertainment rather than for the purpose of Buddhism. They present more of the identity of an everyday influencer and not necessarily a Buddhist monastic, as these monastics regularly post selfies, reels, and TikToks. Jetsun Dawa, a Tibetan Buddhist nun, is an excellent example of this fourth label. She dedicates most of her Instagram to posting selfies, comedic videos, and even marketing ads. Through their dedication to content creation, this group may match the concept of what we know to be an influencer the best. They articulately display the younger generation of Buddhist monastics and prove that there has been a significant generational shift between those who have grown up in the digital world to those who have not. It is undeniable that there has been this rise of influencers amongst these young monastics since it is almost impossible to isolate oneself from the cyber world. I am curious about this fear of losing authenticity amongst this generation that often plagues these conversations. However, I think there are many possibilities when it comes to meeting people where they are, and these young monastics may be doing just that to introduce outsiders to Buddhism. In truth, I would

much rather watch a Buddhist monastic in an amusing TikTok that puts a smile on my face than listen to the criticisms of Kim Kardashian’s latest fashion choice.

Methodology

I wanted to see what Buddhist practitioners, monastics and non-monastics, thought about this generational shift. For the last month, I wandered around Nepal, gathering answers and opinions about the relationship between social media and Buddhism. I ultimately conducted thirteen interviews all with members of the Buddhist religion, with six being monastics. These conversations were conducted both in-person and online. The in-person interviews were all in Nepal—three in Boudhanath, Kathmandu; three in the Tashiling Tibetan Settlement, Pokhara; two in lower Mustang; and one in Lumbini. The other four were done online—two via email, one on Instagram direct messaging, and one on a video call. In seeking out individuals to talk to, I decided to open the doors for conversation with anyone who practices Buddhism. I planned to consult a variety of people ranging in age and occupation. During my fieldwork, I went to stores owned by Tibetan shopkeepers, a handful of monasteries from several different lineages of Buddhism, and random restaurants and cafes, all in an attempt to strike up a conversation with someone.

As for the online interviews, I knew I needed to reach out to monastics who use social media, specifically the ones considered monkfluencers. Since I was using Instagram as my primary source of content, I direct messaged six monastics on this platform. They included Palga Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche, Aachen Tenzin Thupten, Avikrita Vajra Rinpoche, the Venerable Robina Courtin, and an edgy monk with the username @ozin.17. I received responses from only two—Aachen Tenzin Thupten and Venerable Robina Courtin. Aachen Tenzin Thupten and I kept the conversation on Instagram direct messaging, while Venerable Robina Courtin preferred to partake in the interview using a video call on WhatsApp. I also emailed four other monastics using the contact email from their websites, including Matthieu Ricard, Kyabje Yongzin Ling Rinpoche, Chogyal Rinpoche, and Gelong Thubten; however, I did not receive a response from any of them.
I always began my interviews by simply asking, “how do you feel about technology and social media?” Most people agreed that technology was overall a good thing. Sonam Rinpoche, a monastic located in Boudha, reminisced about the first time he encountered these technologies and how amazing they seemed. Similarly, most expressed how impactful technology has been on their lives. Many noted how it has expanded our means of communication and access to information from almost anywhere in the world at any time. Another component brought up was how essential technology has become in our lives. Peter, an American Buddhist business owner in San Francisco, says he wouldn’t be able to do his work without our modern technologies. Menlha, a schoolteacher in her twenties working in the Tashiling Tibetan Settlement adds, “nowadays everyone uses it [social media]. If you are not on it in today’s world, you don’t exist.” Most supported this idea that it is extremely difficult to escape the online world.

Everyone also agreed that this innovation is somewhat of a double-edged sword. The Venerable Robina Courtin, a Tibetan Buddhist nun who posts short advice reels on Instagram, mentioned that social media becomes a problem when we find ourselves attached to it out of boredom. Many also voiced this problem of addiction, as social media has become such a distraction in our lives making it quite harmful to our minds. Lekshad (ལེགས་པཤད), a Tibetan

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55 Sonam Rinpoche, Boudha, Kathmandu, November 13, 2022
56 Peter Dean, via email, November 16, 2022
57 Menlha, the Tashiling Tibetan Settlement in Pokhara, November 17, 2022
58 The Venerable Robina Courtin, via video chat, November 28, 2022
teacher at Rangjung Yeshe Institute, alluded to the three poisons—ignorance, greed, and aversion—in our conversation about social media. He argues that when online, these often infest our minds, and we must ensure we find the best path to detach from these poisons, even if that means we log off online altogether. From a more general lens, Sociologist Marissa Dean cites the worrying trends she notices emerging. She details the hijacking of the attention span and the isolation that comes with FOMO (fear of missing out). In his position, Peter explains that due to the online nature of his business, his workday often seeps into his non-work life, making maintaining a work-life balance very tricky. Menlha offers the young millennial point of view, stating, “we go around searching for people, stalking people, and then we compare ourselves with them a lot. I think it’s not healthy.” The Venerable Metteyya Sakyaputta of Lumbini brought the ego into the conversation suggesting the person we present online is not the same as who we are offline. It is difficult maintaining a healthy balance as we often find ourselves mindlessly grasping for our phones. We want to retain these connections, but we often find ourselves in an insecure position when we let emotions like attachment, jealousy, and greed get the best of us. As Soman Rinpoche said, “we are making ourselves crazy.”

Perceptions of Social Media in a Buddhist Context

Since social media can be such a threatening distraction to our mindfulness, I wondered, how did my interviewees think about Buddhist teachings in relation to their online habits? I learned that it all boils down to having good intentions and that the only true Buddhist option is to use social media to benefit others. Although most focused on the producing side of social media, Menlha discussed her experience in consuming content. As a user of social media, she believes that consuming content is beneficial in spreading empathy. She informed me that from a Buddhist perspective, one recognizes when someone is posting for the sake of showing off. Instead of ridiculing them for their egotistical façade, one can offer compassion and feel sorry for them because they know they are insecure and feel they must prove everything. Additionally, she believes that social media could inspire users to help others. She referred to a YouTuber who during the pandemic went to India and started providing aid and support to the

59 Lekshad, Boudha, Kathmandu, November 13, 2022
60 Marissa Dean, via email, November 16, 2022
61 The Venerable Metteyya Sakyaputta, Lumbini, November 28-29, 2022
people who lived there. He shared his experience online, hoping it would bring awareness to his cause and motivate others to do similar work.

My next question sprung from this potential social media offers in spreading profound messages. I was curious to learn what people thought about Buddhist teachings online and whether they believed it to be an effective tool in spreading the Dharma. Initially, everyone agreed that it was a good tool; Sonam Rinpoche recognized that it is a gateway into learning about Buddhism, and the Venerable Robina defined it as a method “to bring the Dharma down to Earth.” These statements reflect this sentiment to meet people where they are, whether that be on a pilgrimage in Nepal or from a Lazy boy in America. Some monastics I talked to were active on social media themselves, including the Venerable Robina, Aachen Tenzin Thupten, Pema Lama, and the Venerable Metteyya.62 All these monastics use social media to share with the world advice, teach the world about Buddhism, and update the world on social work projects. Some lay practitioners recalled how they appreciated this monastic presence online during the COVID-19 lockdown; Peter even described them as a godsend for many students. Although there are many benefits to monastics using this medium, most agree that it is not the most effective tool for teaching the Dharma.

Through my conversations, it became evident that if one is going to be a true Dharmic practitioner, one must do more than watch some teachings online. Sonam Rinpoche expressed his concern as he believes that attempting to conduct these sacred practices, such as empowerments, through a digital sphere will take away from the specialness of it. All the lay people I talked with also emphasized the importance of face-to-face interaction with their gurus and other members of the Sangha. They argued that practicing Buddhism online is simply not enough for their own religious journey. Sonam Rinpoche also alludes to his frustration with

62 Aachen Tenzin Thupten, via Instagram direct messaging, November 22, 2022
some peoples' interactions with Buddhism only remaining in the digital realm. He specifically calls out Americans who always want to research the Dharma, but never want to follow through with the practices. This behavior has exponentially grown with our access to the world wide web. Additionally, he believes the online practices will not be sufficient enough, and there needs to be in-person interaction when practicing Buddhism.

Some also expressed this fear of authority, or therefore, lack of it. Anyone can post anything online and claim to be someone in power. Lay member, Lakshed (ལེགས་པཤད) believes that not all Buddhist monastics should be allowed to post online and that they should receive guidance from their root gurus before posting to avoid controversy. Marissa worries that some information presented is not cross-checked for accuracy. Sonam Rinpoche gave me the advice that when observing these monastics online, we must separate the religion from the person.

Analyzing Monkfluencers

My next undertaking in these conversations was addressing these monkfluencers I came across. I decided the best way of doing so was to present three monkfluencers’ Instagram profiles to my interviewees; they included Kalu Rinpoche, Palga Rinpoche, and Jigme, a monk from Skiim who is known as the dancing monk online.

I began with Kalu Rinpoche, a 32-year-old lama. He has a clean-cut bio regarding his recognition from the Dalai Lama, a profile picture of him smiling while wearing his scarlet robes, and mostly uncontroversial posts.63 Most of his posts are meditation videos trying to reach a more “Western” audience. He often talks about this attempt to appeal to the Western half of the world as his Instagram stories commonly display his travels to mostly European countries. Most people had positive responses to his profile. Lakshed (ལེགས་པཤད) said he should be upheld as an example in trying to reach a younger and

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wider audience. He also mentioned how it is valuable that he is sharing these meditation videos as more people should benefit from this traditionally Buddhist practice. Marissa mentioned what she already knew of this Rinpoche, stating, “I know that Kalu Rinpoche has used social media quite effectively, talking about difficult subjects like sexual abuse online that has really helped a lot of people immensely.” Menlha believes that he does an excellent job of relatability, saying, “many think these llamas are at some high place so they can’t relate, so if they do something like this [referencing his profile], many people think ‘oh they are human like us and they feel connected’.” I heard no critiques or criticism regarding Kalu Rinpoche’s Instagram presence, and everyone agreed that he was doing substantially positive work.

The next monastic I bestowed was Palga Rinpoche, the puzzling lama that drew me into this subject matter in the first place. Recently, Palga Rinpoche’s Instagram has been bombarded by a surplus of live streams and videos of Pujas and retreats, giving plenty of space for Buddhist-related material. However, he never shies away from wearing his favorite pair of sunglasses and posting memes on his Instagram story. When viewing Palga Rinpoche's profile, many respondents suggested that his online persona is due to generational change. His gym photos were a point of contention. A few brought up the problem of an ego that comes with posting images of your body online. On the other hand, one argued that by posting these gym images, he is actually trying to inspire others to take care of their bodies, arguing that one can't take care of others if one can’t even take care of themselves. There was no distinction on whether Palga Rinpoche’s Instagram was good or bad. Sonam Rinpoche insisted that it all comes down to what his intentions and motivations are to determine whether his social media personality is for the betterment of his follower. However, after scrolling through Palga Rinpoche's account, Sonam Rinpoche worries that some monastics are...

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becoming performers. With the next monkfluencer on deck, his suspicions would soon be proven correct.

The last monk is undoubtedly a performer. Jigme, with the handle @monks_himalayan and 31,700 followers, is known as the dancing monk on Instagram. He was by far the most controversial monkfluencers out of the three. This contentious nature surrounding his name is because all of his posts are of him dancing, usually to popular Hindi songs. He does not shy away from the spotlight and sometimes partakes in acting in his videos as well. His bio, written in muddled English, claims his occupation as a video creator and professional monk. To address his controversial position, he writes, and I quote, “I love dancing, acting! But much more love to do Dharma.” He also asks people to stop DMing (direct messaging) him if they plan to tell him that monks can’t dance. Similar to these messages Jigme was afraid of receiving, I heard some dismay in my interviews. All the monastics I talked to in person told me that monks are not allowed to dance. Sonam Rinpoche explained that valid Dharma monastics are supposed to abandon music and dance. He agrees that some people may come across this and find it funny; however, he fears that others will recognize that monks should not be performers, and people will start talking badly not only about the monk but also about the Buddhist religion. Pema Lama of Marpha was also upset about Jigme’s profile remarking upon viewing it, "How did you find this? I think this is not good. Monks are not allowed to dance because it is entertainment." These cautionary remarks show how untamable social media can make things out to be. Although this monk may simply want to be a part of the dancing trend of our generation, many still believe that traditional values should remain upheld.

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66 Pema Lama, Marpha, Lower Mustang, November 19, 2022
Advice for Buddhist Online

In hearing all these opinions, I wanted to see if anyone could offer a solution. I asked whether people had any personal advice for these monastics online or Buddhists in general. In response, many offered recommendations for not only Buddhists but for all users of social media. Marissa says that everyone needs to do more checking in with themselves before they post online, and if one is using it to only advance their egos, maybe they should avoid posting altogether. The Venerable Robina extends similar guidance, saying, “the internet is to be beneficial to others, to be useful, and that can also be fun; but just to have it to be egotistical and to be arrogant, I mean, that’s just horrible, isn’t it?” Additionally, many discussed its addictive nature and how it leads to distraction spiraling out of control, and thus, we must be extremely cautious when using it. Others proposed more light-hearted advice as we should be kind and compassionate online and that we must curate an environment for the sake of our own happiness and others.

Drawing from this guidance, I wanted to know if anyone thought there should be official guidelines to advise Buddhist social media users. I received some mixed messages. Most of the monastics argued that by teaching their students about traditional Buddhist principles, these virtues will transfer to their behavior online. In traveling to various monasteries, I learned that young monks are not allowed to have cell phones in order to focus primarily on their studies. Some agreed that if it were possible, offering a class about the internet and technology in the context of Buddhism would be a productive enterprise. Additionally, simply offering some Buddhist guidelines, as Dzongar Khyentse did for his Vajrayana students, could go a long way toward protecting Buddhists and non-Buddhists online. There will never be a one-hundred percent answer to how we should best use technology. However, even in the face of its untamable nature, I think we should all try, Buddhist or not, to find a way to make it a more mindful space.
Discussion and Conclusion

In my research, I have discovered that trying to decipher the positionality of Buddhism on social media is a messy endeavor that does not have one absolute or complete answer. I am reminded of the problem that comes with trying to unify a religion under one doctrine. Buddhism is diverse, containing many different sects and cultures; what may be ok for an American Buddhist, could be sacrilege for a Nepali Buddhist. However, I do believe there should be some form of a guiding principle for monastics online. These guidelines could also be advertised and utilized by non-monastic Buddhists and non-Buddhists. Similar to how Dzongsar Khyentse created a list of advice for his Vajrayana students, I suggest that the separate sects of Buddhism or even the monasteries themselves should provide these guidelines as well as make time and space for classes and trainings on the Buddhist approach to behaving online. Having these guidelines and seminars could also lessen the threat of controversy and fear that surrounds the lack of jurisdiction in sharing Buddhist information on the internet. Additionally, I still wanted to attempt to decipher some guidelines based on the advice I read and received during my independent study period. From what I gathered, it all comes down to having good intentions and using one’s platform for the benefit of others and not for one’s ego. I have come to understand that compassion is the most central principle one must keep in mind when logging in to our social media accounts. If a monastic believes this compassion manifests the most through their dancing, I think it should be acceptable behavior.

I do believe these guidelines should be imperative for monastics because it is necessary for these religious figures to be on social media for the benefit of others and to maintain the religion’s relatability in our ever-changing world. These monkfluencers are valuable for appealing to the next generation and a wider audience. Although initially, I found their profiles comedic and something to joke about, they now make my social media feed a bit more amusing, positive, and hopeful. Instead of some snide joke about a celebrity, I now see the Gyalwang Drukpa playing with his dog and a caption that reads, “if you can’t be compassionate to yourself, how will you be compassionate towards others.”

As I keep scrolling, I watch a reel of Quinthup Pema Lachungpa walking through a beautiful monastery full of ornate and colorful

Finally, as I click on ozin.17’s story, I find myself gazing upon a silly bobblehead of Budai. I can’t help but smile as I view these images. I think more people could benefit from consuming this light-hearted content. I argue social media users should also listen to these core Buddhist principles of compassion and detaching from one’s ego. In doing so, we will construct a new social media environment that is a cyberspace of altruism, mindfulness, and a source to benefit all sentient beings. Maybe these monkfluencers are just what we need for a bit of inspiration.

Suggestions for Future Research

There is a lot of merit in researching the relationship between Buddhism and social media. It is an incredibly fresh topic, making the doors wide open for anyone who expresses any interest in looking at this topic. I would recommend spending time harvesting connections with various Buddhist monastics on all the different social media platforms. Through these connections, it would be beneficial to learn more about the intentions of monastics on social media. Although I primarily focused on Instagram, it would be interesting to see what role TikTok is playing in the lives of these monastics as it is increasingly becoming the most popular app amongst Generation Z. In a similar vein, I would concentrate more time on monastics who belong to Generation Z as they are ultimately the future leaders of the Buddhist religion.
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The Venerable Robina Courtin, via video chat, November 28, 2022
The Venerable Metteyya Sakyaputta, Lumbini, November 28-29, 2022
Appendices

Appendix I – Project Advisor

Marissa Dean is a sociologist at-large in San Francisco, California, United States. She received a doctorate in philosophy and sociology from the University of Hong Kong in 2006. Later, she received a master’s degree in Buddhist Studies from the University of Hong Kong in 2015 and conducted her dissertation on applying Buddhist principles in the context of social media and digital media. Until 2017, she was a researcher and lecturer at the University of Hong Kong. Once again, I would like to express my gratitude to Marissa for assisting me through my ISP. I could not have done it without her guidance.

Appendix II– Average number of followers according to monastic category

![Monastics' Social Media Follower Average](image.png)
### Appendix III – Monastic Profile Followers

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<td>officially_dorjee_thaye</td>
<td>very young</td>
<td>9800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Its_me_lhamo (nun)</td>
<td>very young</td>
<td>1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jetsundawa (nun)</td>
<td>very young</td>
<td>12200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jangchub_Sherab</td>
<td>young</td>
<td>2300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tering Lama</td>
<td>very young</td>
<td>920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>11817.143</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Bright Yellow: Influencers
- Red: Celebrity Monastics
- Pink: The Inbetweeners
- Orange: Young Influencers
Appendix IV – Locations