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The Role of Spirituality in Young Peoples' Wellness and Travel

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Abstract

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The aim of this paper is to explore young people's perceptions of spirituality as well as analysing the role that spirituality plays in their wellness and travel. The work builds on previous studies that examined young peoples' attitudes to spirituality, as well as research that examined cross-cultural differences in understandings of spirituality. The research draws on questionnaire data (a sample of 227) that was collected in two languages from young people in Generations Y and Z aged 18-39. The questionnaire was designed in English but was also translated into Mandarin Chinese. Both generations and cultural/language groups view spirituality as more connected to the self or nature than to religion or God. Attention to religion and spirituality scored much lower than other lifestyle and wellness domains. When travelling, the desire to engage in religious and spiritual activities were also ranked low compared to other activities. The data shows that young people tend to define spirituality more in relation to their own self and nature than to religion. Spirituality is ranked relatively low compared to other domains of wellness. However, although religious and spiritual motivations and benefits are ranked lower than some other experiences during travel, many young people prioritise trips that involve better connections to nature and the self, which reflects their original definitions of spirituality.

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Background and aim

This paper focuses on the perceptions and attitudes to spirituality of young people from Generations Y and Z as well as analysing the role of spirituality in their wellness and importance in travel. The study builds on the research of previous authors who have explored the relationship between religion, spirituality and secular beliefs among young people (Halafoff et al., 2020). It also considers the work of authors (Brooks et al., 2018) who have argued that spirituality can be a health asset for young people, including connection to self, as well as connections to others, to nature and transcendence. This study focuses on the importance of spirituality compared to different domains of wellness including physical and mental health, social relationships, work, safety and connections to nature. The latter part of the paper examines the extent of young peoples' interest in religious or spiritual activities and experiences when travelling, as well as their preferences for suggested spiritual trips (e.g. pilgrimages, temple stays, retreats, ashrams).

The concept of spirituality is notoriously difficult to define and measure. Some authors have argued that religion and spirituality are contiguous and harmonious but not necessarily separate and contradictory categories (Fedele & Knibbe, 2013). However, (Kujawa, 2017) suggests that spirituality can represent an alienation from the dogmatism of institutionalized religion and that spirituality has been 'de-regulated' from religious institutions and traditions so that individuals have more freedom to choose their own spiritual practices (Kato & Prozano, 2017). This has resulted in the growing identification of being 'spiritual but not religious' (Ammerman, 2013).

It has been argued that compared to religion, spirituality represents a more personal or individual focus rather than a shared system of beliefs (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). It can be connected to the individual's purpose or search for meaning in life, as well as personal growth (Wilson et al., 2013; Tan & Tan, 2016; Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018). Westerlund (2016) states that higher levels of spirituality (with or without religion) in childhood lead to higher levels of self-actualisation and meaning in life. Pedersen et al. (2018) noted that even in apparently secular countries like Denmark, having a religious or spiritual outlook gave individuals a sense of purpose and belonging. In a secular context, it can be linked to lifestyle, vocational choices and political or environmental activism (Taylor, 2010; Watts, 2018). This can include a belief in humanity or other entities greater than the self (Boorman & Handwerker, 2019). Tan and Tan (2016) define spirituality as the capacity of the individual to "make sense of oneself within a wider framework of meaning and see oneself as part of some larger whole". There may still be a belief in a higher being (e.g., God), a higher power or in nature itself (Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018; Wilson et al., 2013; Boorman & Handwerker, 2019). Indeed, the close connection to nature and the environment should be noted, as some authors even suggest that the natural environment has become a spiritual

substitute for religious groups (Taylor, 2010). Spiritual quests can come in many forms including a search for meaning, for peace, for self-awareness or self-knowledge, a desire for salvation or transcendence (Tan & Tan, 2016).

It is also important to note that spirituality may be perceived differently in different cultures and religious and non-religious contexts. Even though, as noted by Mou (2017) there is not one single or pure cultural orientation and "The simple dichotomy of Western versus Eastern cultures is no longer valid". Several authors have focused on different cultural conceptualizations and understandings of spirituality. Cultural differences have already been observed in Australia and Canada (Halafoff et al., 2020; Watts, 2018), Italy (Palmisano & Pannofino, 2017), England, Scotland and Canada (Brooks et al., 2018), Africa (Knoetze, 2018), Sweden (Westerlund, 2016), Denmark (Pedersen et al., 2018). and South Korea [20]. In a Chinese context, spirituality has a greater focus on the relationship with the self, others, nature and Higher Being(s). Spirituality features prominently in Confucianism, which is not usually regarded as a religion, rather a complex, dynamic and evolving cultural system (Tan & Tan, 2016).

Research about spirituality has often focused on different age groups or generations. For example, Shen (2018) compared lifestyles of Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation and noted that Baby Boomers were less religious and also less inclined to follow a healthy lifestyle. James and Fine (2015) studied adolescents aged 10-18 and concluded that youth experience more positive development when they see spirituality as an asset in their lives. Brooks et al. (2018) also concluded that positive spiritual health is important for adolescents. Spirituality was seen as a source of finding meaning or transcendence; as a pathway to virtue and generosity toward others, as well as an essential or guiding force in life. Westerlund (2016) undertook research with children in Sweden, one of the world's most individualistic and secular countries, concluding that a lack of spiritual awareness and belief can be detrimental to young peoples' mental health.

A recent study by the Pew research centre (2018) concluded that young adults are less likely to be affiliated with a religious group than older groups. This is especially true in North America and Canada, but even in the Asia-Pacific region, which is a more religiously diverse area, there were few significant contrasts. Worldwide, the share of younger adults in the average country who claim a religion is 85% compared with 90% among people aged 40 or above. Young Christians in particular are significantly less likely than older adults to say that religion is important to them. However, Green et al. (2013) suggested that Gen Y are likely to be more 'extrinsically religious' than Generation X or Baby Boomers, which is connected to personal benefits and social reward.

The relationship between spirituality and wellbeing has been well documented. Ghiya (2019) argues that spiritual health is as important as physical health. Indeed, spiritual wellbeing is viewed as a

significant indicator of positive health outcomes and perceived quality of life (Bai & Lazenby, 2015) as well as reducing the risk of depression and high-risk behaviour in young people (Miller, 2015). Lack of spirituality can also lead to mental health problems in children and youth (Westerlund, 2016). Medical practitioners and researchers have long recognized the significance of spiritual factors, including the benefits of yoga and meditation (Ghiya, 2019). In Chinese culture, spirituality is often connected to mental illness when one's inner energy force is out of balance (Niu et al., 2020).

A whole wellness industry has developed around spiritual or body-mind-spirit balancing experiences with a focus on individuality and self-development. This can be viewed cynically as part of the commodification process that represents a 'take over' or 're-branding' of religion by spirituality (Carrette & King, 2004) or what Modise and Johannes (2016) describe as a "superficial balancing of the components of spirit, soul and body". Kim (2016) describes how Buddhist temples in Seoul are seen less as religious spaces and more as sanctuaries where young people can rest and recover from their stressful, materialistic and often lonely lives. They may encounter an 'authentic self' for the first time. Spiritual wellness practices like meditation often take place in temples. Even if the original motivation is non-religious, the outcome can be spiritual or sacred (Jiang et al., 2018). In India, Pandya (2018) even describes some of the guru-led yoga and meditation practices as being New Religious Movements (NRM), which can have important benefits for mental health.

Spiritual tourism has been defined in various ways as being a form of travel that is not confined to one religion and can be religious or non-religious (Kujawa, 2017; Norman & Pokorny, 2017). It often takes place in communal settings with like-minded people in retreats, ashrams, monasteries or temples, sometimes lead by famous gurus or yoga teachers (Smith, 2021). It is also described as a personal or individual quest for meaning and identity which enhances subjective wellbeing. This includes solving personal problems or healing (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). It can even include adventurous activities which challenge the individual and lead to greater fulfilment (Cheer et al., 2017).

Spiritual retreats can be religious or non-religious and are often considered as being part of wellness tourism (Heintzman, 2013; Ashton, 2018). They are often located in natural landscapes, a connection that is important to spiritual tourists (Jiang et al., 2018; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Spiritual tourism tends to take place in spaces that are quieter, slower or more rural than home (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). In addition to retreats and natural landscapes, traditional ceremonies, festivals and pilgrimages can also form part of spiritual tourism (Cheer et al., 2017). Pilgrimages can be viewed as a form of slow tourism that combines the healing benefits of nature with spiritual engagement (Kato & Prozano, 2017). Like retreat tourism, pilgrimage tends to be a eudaimonic form of tourism that contributes to long term wellbeing and existential authenticity (Smith & Diekmann, 2017).

Materials and Methods

This study uses a questionnaire that was designed and distributed to young people aged 39 and under (Generations Y and Z) in July 2020. The questionnaire design took into consideration other studies that had been undertaken to assess young peoples' perceptions, understandings and definitions of spirituality as well as the relationship between spirituality, health and wellbeing (James & Fine, 2015; Green et al., 2013) (Halafoff et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2018). The questionnaire also aimed to examine the relationship between wellness, spirituality and travel following Smith's (Smith, 2021) recommendation to conduct primary research on this topic.

A pilot study was undertaken of the questionnaire in English with five mature Masters students (aged 23+) of mixed nationalities and religious backgrounds from Hungary, China, Turkey, Pakistan and India. As well as checking the questions for clarity and comprehensiveness, they suggested that the subject of spirituality was rather challenging and required considerable thought even for older respondents. The questionnaire was therefore distributed to Masters and PhD students and researchers as well as some young teachers (aged 40 and under). Carefully controlled snowball sampling was used, which also resulted in responses from those in employment too (around half of respondents - 116 out of 227). This resulted in 122 from Generation Y (aged 27-39) and 105 from Generation Z (aged 18-26).

The questionnaire was also translated into Mandarin Chinese in order to compare responses from Chinese-speaking young people. The background of the authors (one of whom is from Hong Kong and the other who is working in Taiwan) facilitated the process of translation and distribution. Non-representative sampling was undertaken in a Central European University (the institution in which one author is based), as well as Chinese speaking students in China and Taiwan (where the second author is working) and Hong Kong (the home country of the third author). It was intended that the comparison would be an interesting one given that spirituality may be viewed differently in Europe and Asia. However, it should be noted that the students in Europe came from a broad range of countries (37) and different cultural and religious backgrounds. The response rate was biased towards females compared to males (156:71) but this is not surprising given that the questionnaires were distributed mainly in Tourism Departments where the number of female students is higher.

It is acknowledged that the sample sizes are small and that the English-speaking sample is too diverse to make statistically meaningful cultural comparisons. The sample is also biased towards females and non-religious or Christian respondents. In future studies, the sample should be increased and include respondents especially from the Muslim, Hindu or Jewish faiths.

Results

The respondents were asked about their preferred definition of spirituality. Both generations emphasized their strong connection to themselves as the most important understanding of spirituality (Figure 1). Many also believed that spirituality is connected to nature and the natural world. A high number of respondents considered body-mind-spirit activities like yoga and meditation to be connected to spirituality, practices that are important for holistic wellness (Ghiya, 2019). The sample was too female-dominated for meaningful cross-tabulations, but it should be noted that far more men did not believe in spirituality than women. Some cultural differences in responses can be noted, for example, English-speaking respondents marked 'Being a humanist and helping others' much more than Chinese-speaking respondents (Figure 2). Chinese-speaking respondents had a much stronger belief in the 'supernatural', which can be connected to ghosts and spirits (whose bad influence can be prayed away in temples).

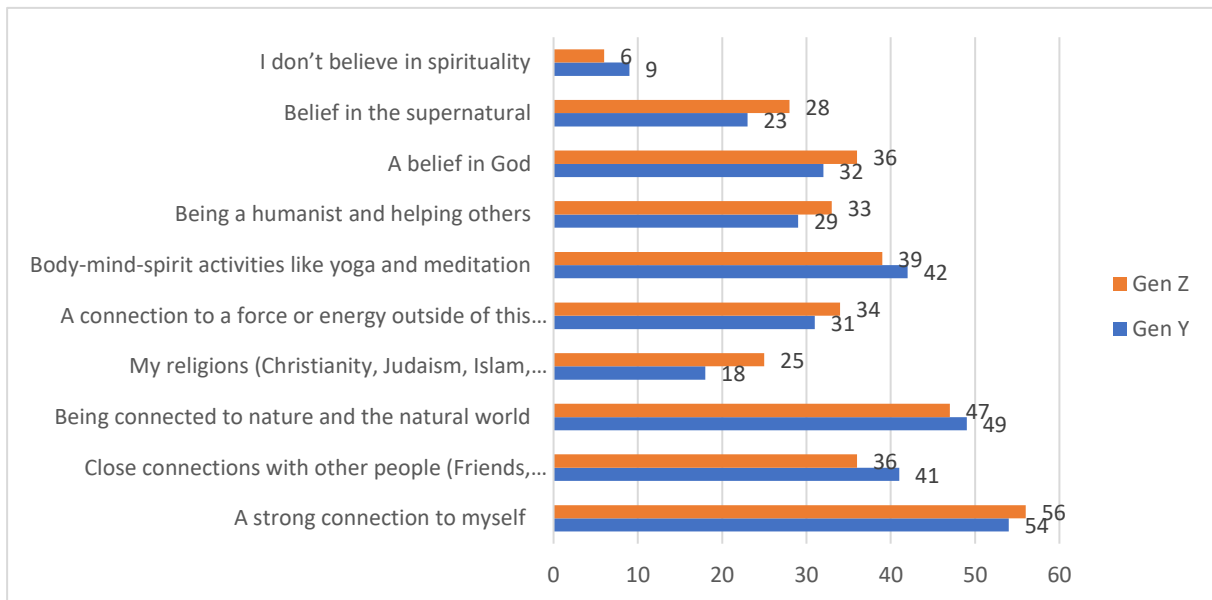


Figure 1: Which of the following comes closest to your own personal definition of 'spirituality'? (By generation)

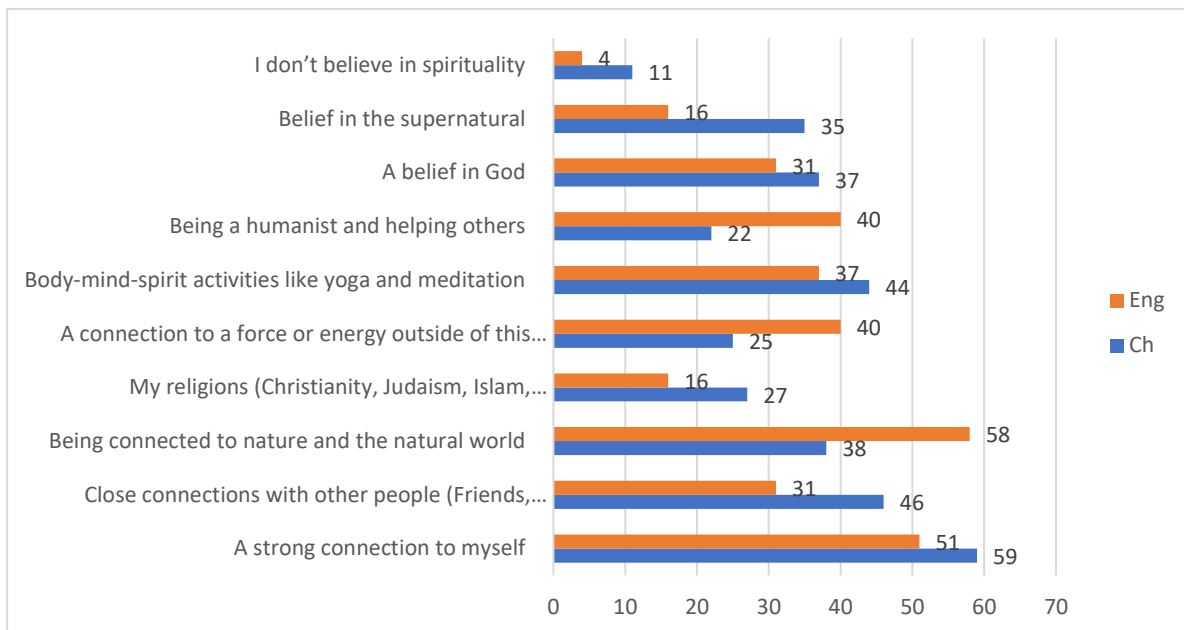


Figure 2: Which of the following comes closest to your own personal definition of 'spirituality'? (By language and cultural group)

A second question was asked about how respondents would best describe themselves in relation to spirituality. Generation Y and Chinese-speaking respondents (as well as those working rather than studying) were more likely to describe themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’ but very few of the overall sample were religious. The respondents most strongly identified themselves as humanists who care about people and the planet. This finding was even stronger for Generation Y and English-speaking respondents. Body-mind-spirit connections (e.g. through yoga and meditation) were also relatively important (slightly more for Generation Y and Chinese-speakers).

Four questions were asked about the respondents’ background, influences and lifestyle. The most significant finding from these questions was that religious activities were the least important followed by spiritual practices like yoga and meditation. Socialising with friends, eating healthily, exercising, visiting natural landscapes and travelling were marked far more frequently. Religious and spiritual leaders exerted far less influence on all groups than parents, friends, community and society and teachers (with minimal generational and cultural differences).

In terms of religious background, more Generation Y respondents than Generation Z grew up in religious households or had religious friends and 5% grew up in a religious household but did not practise now. However, within the generations, the results are rather varied in terms of whether people had religious parents or studied religion in school. This can be due to the diverse nationalities within the

English-speaking sample. Nevertheless, it is significant that far more English-speaking respondents grew up with parents who were spiritual but not religious and studied only one religion at school. Far fewer Chinese-speakers talked about religion at home or studied religion in school, perhaps due to the influence of wider political, social and cultural issues. Those who are no longer students do more spiritual activities, such as yoga, meditation, and also believe in a higher power, force and energy.

In terms of wellness, its relative importance compared to other life(style) domains can be seen in Figure 3. Overall, Generation Y evaluated each variable slightly higher than Generation Z, perhaps due to their more extensive life experience. This was especially true of environmental and sustainability concerns.

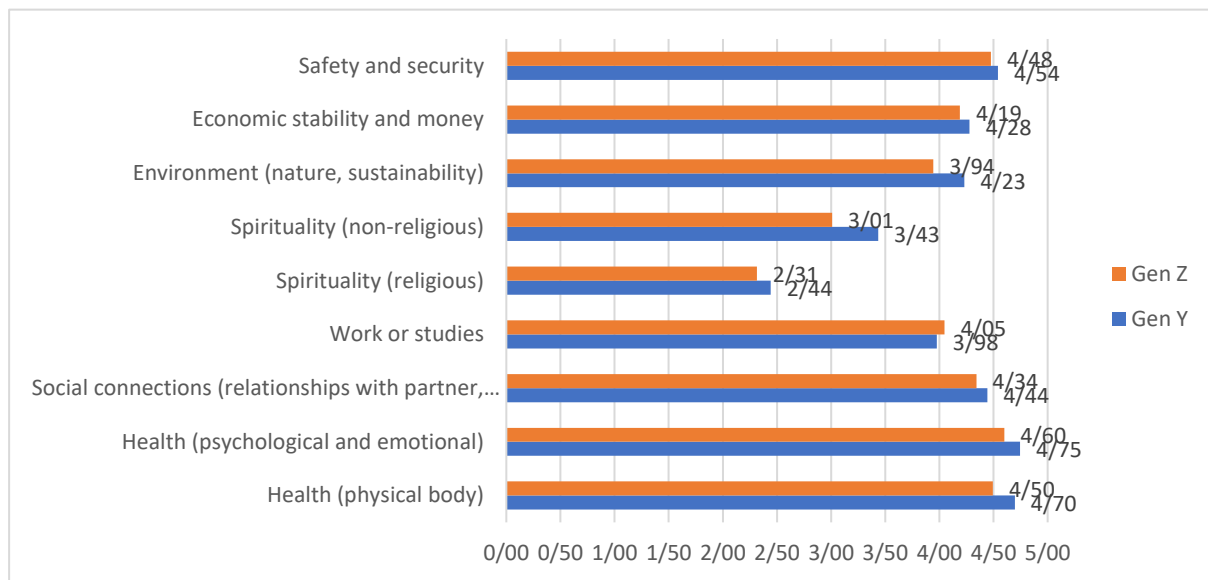


Figure 3: How important are the following aspects of life for your personal wellness? (By generation)

The most important cultural difference in this question was that Chinese respondents valued both religious and non-religious spirituality higher than their English counterparts, but otherwise, the differences were minimal.

Four questions were asked about the connections between spirituality and travel. The questionnaire was distributed in July 2020, therefore COVID-19 may have had some influence on the findings. An open question revealed that India is the most popular spiritual destination for the sample overall. Chinese-speaking respondents were more likely to mention other Asian destinations like Tibet or Japan, whereas English-speaking students more often mentioned Israel or Spain (e.g. Santiago).

Table 1 shows the results of a question where respondents were given a list of suggested spiritual holiday types based on some of the existing literature on typical spiritual tourism activities (Kujawa,

2017; Kato & Prozano, 2017; Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018; Jiang et al., 2018; Cheer et al., 2017; Heintzman, 2013; Ashton, 2018; Bandyopadhyaya & Nairb, 2019; Norman & Pokorny, 2017).

Table 1: Which of the following spiritual holidays would you find interesting in the next year or two if you had enough time and money?

Types of spiritual holidays	Total
A 2-week Thai massage course in Thailand including daily yoga.	85
A 2-4-week pilgrimage along the Santiago de Compostela route in Spain walking or cycling and staying in simple local accommodation or camping.	79
A 3-7-day stay in a European monastery. Quiet time for meditation or prayer, local food (non-vegetarian) combined with hiking in the local mountains.	64
A 2-4-week ashram stay in India doing meditation every morning, yoga twice a day, eating vegetarian food, helping to keep the ashram clean and tidy.	54
A 2-3-day temple stay in South Korea in a Buddhist temple undertaking meditation twice a day with Monks, eating vegetarian food, helping in the temple garden.	49
A 7-day Tai Chi or Chi Gong retreat in China learning also about Chinese medicine.	45
2-3 weeks in an Ayurvedic centre learning how to live an holistic lifestyle.	43
A 3-4 day meditation and yoga retreat in the Sahara desert (camping).	42
A 10-day silent meditation retreat in Thailand where no talking, reading or technology is allowed.	38
None of the above.	52
Total number of responses	551

Respondents were asked about which activities they find most interesting when they travel. The most attractive environment was being close to nature, followed by relaxing at the seaside and visiting heritage sites. The least popular activities were doing body-mind-spirit activities or visiting religious sites. Gen Y were slightly more interested in being in nature, relaxing in a spa and doing spiritual activities. Gen Z was more interested in festivals, having fun at the seaside or going skiing or hiking. Chinese-speaking respondents were keener on relaxing in a spa and doing body-mind-spirit activities.

Figure 4 shows the results of the final question that relates to motivations and benefits of travel. Again, religious and spiritual benefits are ranked much lower than others. Generation Y rank most benefits marginally higher, but this might be due to the larger number of workers in this sample who feel the benefits of holidays more when they can take them. Cultural and gastronomic experiences are ranked higher than wellness motivations like stress relief, relaxation or escapism.

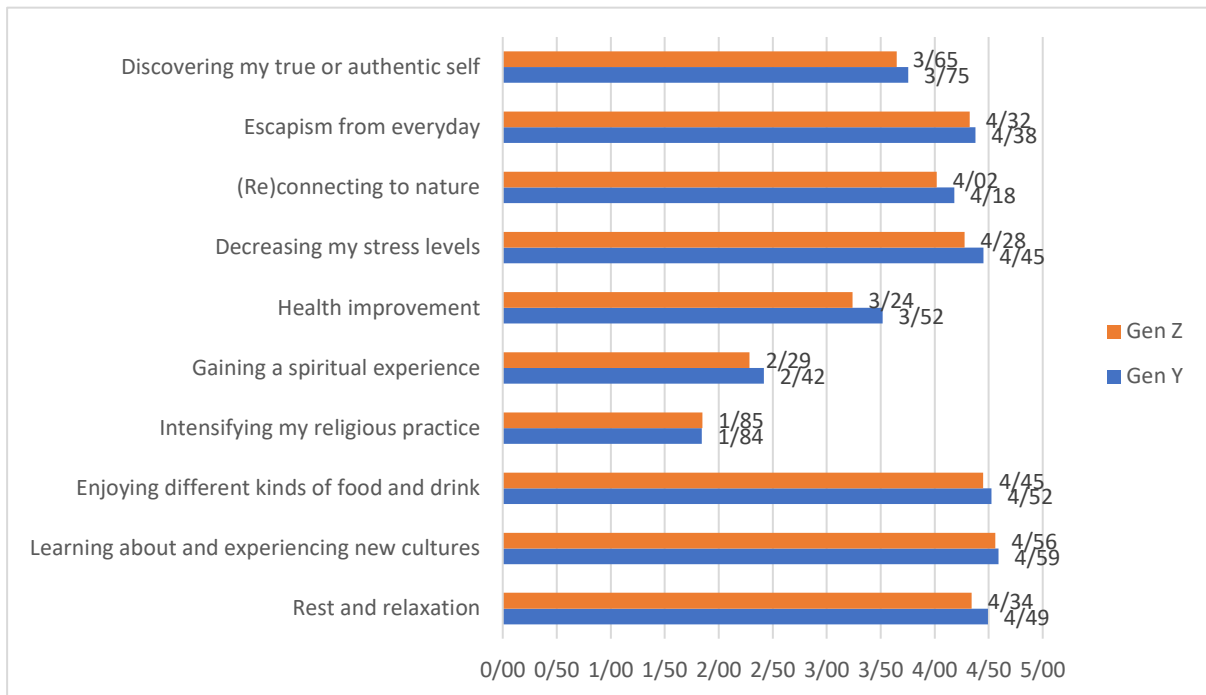


Figure 4: Which of the following motivations and benefits are the most important for you when you travel? (By generation)

Discussion

The fact that both Generations Y and Z emphasized their strong connection to themselves as the most important understanding of spirituality echoes previous studies (Tan & Tan, 2016). Many also believed that spirituality is connected to nature and the natural world, as emphasised by other authors (Wilson et al., 2013; Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018; Wilson et al., 2013; Boorman & Handwerker, 2019). This finding might also connect to environmental activist theories (Taylor, 2010; Watts, 2018), especially when it is combined with ‘humanist’ beliefs.

One of the most significant findings was that religious followed by non-religious spirituality were much less important than other domains of wellness like health, social connections, safety and security, work, economic stability and connections to nature. This is perhaps not surprising if we consider Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

In terms of undertaking holistic wellness activities like yoga and meditation, slightly more Generation Y respondents marked body-mind-spirit activities as being important. Some research has shown that yoga practice tends to be undertaken by more 30–39-year-olds than by other age groups (Smith & Sziva, 2017). Chinese-speaking respondents are also more interested in body-mind-spirit activities. These interests have deeper roots in their culture and are more accessible.

Despite the apparent lack of any religion stated in the first part of the questionnaire, more Chinese-speakers view spirituality as connected to religion or God. Their collectivist culture also seemed to influence the more common marking of 'close connections with other people'. Despite this, they also (surprisingly) marked a strong connection to themselves more frequently than English-speakers, which might be explained by the growing influence of competitiveness in their society and the increasing focus on the self (Boorman & Handwerker, 2019). Chinese-speaking respondents rank wellness and spiritual motivations for travel higher than English-speaking respondents. The largest margins were in the categories of rest and relaxation, (re)connecting to nature, discovering their true or authentic self and health improvement.

Conclusion

In terms of definitions, both generations and cultural/language groups view spirituality as more connected to the self or nature than to religion or God. Overall, it seems that Generation Z are less religious (corresponding to the PEW, 2018 study (Pew Research Centre, 2020)). but were also more 'curious about spirituality but unsure what it is'. Very few respondents were not spiritual at all, however, only a small number of respondents were actively practising spirituality (8.1%). It is therefore not surprising that religion and spirituality scored much lower than other lifestyle and wellness domains like health, social connections, safety and security, work and economic stability.

In the questions about travel and tourism, many respondents were attracted to Asian countries like India. However, overall, the desire to engage in religious and spiritual activities were ranked low compared to others and cultural motivations seemed to be much stronger than wellness ones. Having said this, being close to nature was ranked as very important and it should be noted that a large number of respondents defined spirituality as being close to nature. The religious and spiritual benefits of tourism were also ranked very low but '(re)connecting to nature' was again ranked quite high alongside 'discovering my true or authentic self'. Again, it should be remembered that these two factors were ranked the highest in definitions of spirituality. This raises questions about how young people perceive spiritual motivations and benefits and how they might express them. Future marketing strategies for destinations wanting to attract young tourists to religious or spiritual attractions might re-consider how they label and promote them.

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