

Students' Spiritual Well-Being in the Context of Digitalization

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Abstract: *The aim of the research* is to explore the dimensions of students' spirituality in post-pandemic in the digital learning environment. The authors analyse a spiritual well-being of students during the post-pandemic by suggesting coping strategies and sources of resilience. *The topicality of the spiritual dimension* in students' life during and after the pandemic is one of the discussed issues in the contemporary research. Every educational institution is trying to do their best in addressing such challenges of increased workloads that threatens spiritual and emotional well-being of teachers and students. The research question relates to the study of spiritual well-being in the context of digitalization. Which factors foster students' spiritual well-being? *The methodology applied* in this study was Fisher's scale of life orientations called SHALOM (SWBQ) that reflects five dimensions of person's life: personal, communal, environmental and transcendental and global domains. The participants were two hundred university students from all higher institutions of Latvia. For the purpose of this study the authors have applied a factor analyses, by identifying five factor structure of students' spiritual well-being, such as personal relationships with God / Divine (transcendental dimension); relationship towards oneself (personal dimension); relationships with others (communal dimension), relationships with nature (environmental dimension), and the dimension of personal integrity. The authors have outlined the potential solutions that help students to maintain their emotional and spiritual well-being. *It was concluded* that while being emersed in the digital environment, spiritual well-being plays important role in overcoming students' anxiety and stress and helps them to find peace and resilience in nature, in the community with their family members and in search for the transcendental. The authors of this article evaluate critically how to maintain spiritual well-being by accepting new conditions and rules of a remote learning by overcoming stress in maintaining their spiritual well-being.

Keywords: information and communication technologies, spiritual well-being, digital learning environment, school learners

Introduction

During the global pandemic, digital communication platforms and tools became an integral part of students' communication. Online communication have effectively dissolved the borders and distances. Media and internet developed fast and replaced physical relationships to a large degree. Different types of online communication provide an opportunity to keep in touch with one's circle of friends and acquaintances. Still, communication in the online learning environment is causing stress and anxiety for many learners and cannot replace real physical relationships (UNICEF, 2020). Post-pandemic allowed people to resume full-time responsibilities at work and education. Still, online communication continue to be applied widely in everyday life and education (OECD, 2010; OECD, 2020). This article explores several aspects how to ensure students' mental and spiritual well-being during the process of digitization. The authors propose to view learners via holistic perspective by paying attention to cognitive, physical, socio-emotional and spiritual needs of learners that were neglected during the pandemic to a great extent (OECD, 2020). Human beings are not only psycho-physical and socio-cultural but also spiritual being who are striving for meaning and fulfilment in their lives (Iliško, 2021). The number the studies on spirituality have been growing intensely. In this study particular attention is paid to a spiritual well-being of learners during the process of excessive digitalization of a learning process.

Spirituality Defined

Spiritual well-being was an issue of interest for the researchers for a long time. The term 'spirituality' remains fluid and undefined term. Its definitions vary from non-religious to a deeply religious experience. The term has a strong relation with one's mental health. For a long time, spirituality has

been studied from a religious perspective but only lately spirituality has become popular among various scientists and become the topic of research in the international discourse. Spirituality is seen as the main indicator of mental health and spiritual maturity of an individual (Davis, Kerr & Robinson, 2003; Unterrainer et al. 2010; Fisher, 2010, Fisher, 2021; Dreyer & Dreyer, 2000; Moreira, et al, 2023; Schwalm et al, 2022; Aggarwal et al 2023; Zhou, et al 2024).

Spirituality is multifaceted and multidimensional term that describes one's closeness and connectedness with oneself, nature, others and a higher purpose of life. The term is also related to one's search for meaning in the surrounding world and refers to a state of transcendence. Great number of studies underline the connectedness of spirituality to a subjective well-being and requires coping strategies in difficult circumstances. Spirituality also refers to everyday religious experiences, ethical sensitivity and harmony in one's own life and in the world. Spiritual orientation is seen as the determinant factor of a healthy life.

Individual's spiritual orientation in many studies has been defined as an essential element in sustaining diverse situations in crises, anxiety and distress. The pandemic made people to pay more attention to their inner lives and search for a spiritual nourishment as well to reflect on meaning in their life thus helping them to gain deeper awareness. Spiritual well-being describes one's life as meaningful and as having a sense of purpose in comparison to a religion that refers mainly to meaningful relation with God. Spirituality can also be examined from the point of view of both, religious and existential well-being. Spiritual well-being does not refer to a certain religious tradition or praxis but can be referred to a human need for a purpose, meaning and connection to a higher purpose. During the pandemic, one has questioned more the meaning of life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). People have paid attention to larger questions of life, and meditative practices by trying new and more sustainable approaches of living and thinking. Coping approaches with the anxiety during the pandemic or other difficulties in life can serve as powerful means by providing a sense of purpose in one's life. It provides answers to life's existential questions and serve as a means to cope with stressful events in one's life.

Measurement of a Spiritual Well-Being

A number of scientists have studied various dimensions of well-being. H.G. Koenig (2008) report about the changing discourse in regards to the study of a spirituality. Traditional definitions of spirituality refer mainly to a religious person, while contemporary studies refer to a well-being and a happiness of a secular person. The measures are related to assessing positive traits of one's character, such as optimism, forgiveness, meaning, purpose in life, harmony and a general well-being. D.O. Moberg, (2011) asserts that in the context of Christian values, spirituality is immeasurable and was excluded from the scientific research as too mystical, theological or transcendent to be a researchable subject. Still, a huge interest in spirituality indicates a centrality of spirituality in human society in its wider understanding. Since 60's, a number of scales have been designed to measure religiousness of a person that includes components of spirituality. Soon, a great number of scales were designed to measure spirituality as a part of a holistic well-being in the framework of physical or mental health.

Among all those studies, the most well-known researchers C.D. Ryff and C.L.M. Keyes (1995) has designed a model of a psychological well-being that includes such dimensions as positive relations with others, autonomy, and the environmental mastery. R.F. Paloutzian and C.W. Ellison (1982) have developed a Spiritual Well-Being Scale which measures religious and existential well-being. C.W. Ellison has designed a Spiritual Well-Being Scale that consists of two subscales that measure Existential Well-Being (EWB) and Religious Well-Being (RWB). D.O. Moberg (2011) focuses on aspects of subjective spiritual well-being while L. Dreyer, & S. Dreyer (2001) assert that subjective well-being relates not only to religiosity but also to a psycho-social component of a personality. There are a number of studies that focus on interrelatedness of psychological well-being and a spiritual well-being (Unterrainer et al., 2010). Davis with his colleagues have studied spirituality among the youth at risk (Davis, Kerr, & Robinson, 2003).

Life 'Together Alone' in a Digital World

Digitalization of a learning process is gradually breaking the boundaries between real and a virtual world of millions of students in the world. One can observe a typical reality of adolescents of being "Alone Together" (Turkle, 2011), each interacting from his or her mobile devise or PC, thus missing out a

development of key social and relationship skills. The report “Teenage Loneliness and Technology” carried out in the UK indicates that among the main reasons of loneliness among teens are not excessive use of technologies but a lack of social contacts so necessary for this group of pupils. Today we can talk about youth as ‘digital natives’ growing up with their smart phones and fearing the risk and disappointment in relations with peers and expecting more from technology. Technologies have changed patterns of relatedness among teens. A virtual life allows one to feel richer and younger by designing a personal avatar according to one’s preferences. Digital connections offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship and ties. The pandemic and a digitalization of a learning process has increased students feeling of isolation in front of their devices. Most of the research show that time spent in front of devices displace time spent with their peers; some research point to the increasing quality of existing relationships in the digital environment (Davis, 2021). While mobile devices are causing disruptions, but, if used correctly, digital devices provide new opportunities for the students to assess information, to explore sensitive topics and develop their digital identity. By bringing students together in online community, technologies could be a solution to loneliness challenge. The use of technologies will increase and will continue impacting human relationships. Some learners withdraw themselves from the real world to the false virtual world where they feel safe. Digital environment allows to create multiple identities, practice a complex mix of autonomy, self-promotion and a role play.

At the same time, students lose their ability to socialize and communicate with friends in a real-life situation. They live in the world of fantasy and communicate with their cyber friends who are the prisoners of virtual space themselves where they can play the role of a projected perfect self, still missing real life communication and human contacts.

Spiritual Well-Being in Post Pandemic

Spirituality is multifaceted and multidimensional term that describes one’s closeness and connectedness with oneself, nature, others and a higher purpose of life. The term is also related to one’s search for meaning in the surrounding world and refers to a state of transcendence. There are number of studies that underline the connectedness of spirituality to a subjective well-being and coping skills in difficult circumstances. Several studies refer to three aspects of spirituality, such as everyday religious experiences, ethical sensitivity and harmony in one’s own life and the world (Božek, Nowak, & Blukacz, 2021; Heszen-Niejodek, & Gruszyńska, 2004). Spiritual orientation is seen as the determinant factor of a healthy lifestyle and good health.

Individual’s spiritual orientation in many studies has been defined as an essential element in sustaining diverse situations in crises, anxiety and distress. The pandemic has caused people to pay more attention to their inner lives and search for a spiritual nourishment. The pandemic has made many people to stop and to reflect on meaning in their life by gaining deeper awareness. Spirituality can also be examined from the point of view of both, religious and existential well-being. Spiritual well-being does not refer to a certain religious tradition or praxis but can be referred to a human need for a purpose, meaning and connection to a higher purpose. During the pandemic every individual question more often the meaning of life. Spiritual coping approaches with the anxiety during the pandemic or other difficulties in life include powerful means by providing a sense of purpose in one’s life. It provides answers to life’s existential questions and serves as a means to cope with stressful events in one’s life.

As a result of pandemic, youth experienced a lack of social interaction that caused a feeling of isolation. Online communication does not replace a real-life interaction, and does not support a possibility to express oneself and reduces self-efficiency. The lack of routine is causing emotional and physical fatigue and hopelessness among young people about the future that influenced their emotional well-being to a large degree. Among typical reactions of young people are a fatigue, loss of energy and poor concentration. As it is stated in the OECD (2020, 2022), the pandemic influenced most of all vulnerable groups of young people and their access to education. Despite the flexibility that schools adapted in organizing the educational process during closure, not all young people received quality education and did not have an access to education and technologies. A digital divide in connectivity and access to devices is widening the gap even more. Students from the less advantaged families receive less emotional support from their families and the resources for the survival. A lack of physical learning opportunities is increasing the risk of disengagement. According to the OECD (2021; 2022) the

pandemic influenced the situation of youth with special needs most of all since they needed more of emotional and social support from adults than others (UNICEF, 2020).

The extensive study carried out in Latvia with the participation of 1.667 young people in the age group from 18 -25 on their well-being indicates that 35% of the participants felt lonely on a regular bases, 75% of them have received emotional support from their families and 70% from their friends. 53% of them reported that this took more time for them to complete the homework, 35% of participants reported that their emotional well-being has declined significantly during the pandemic. To improve their emotional and spiritual well-being, only 20% of them went for a walk on a regularly. Another study carried out by the UNICEF indicates that 27% of students, feel anxiety, and 15% feel depression, but one out of two felt less motivated to do activities they really enjoy. 43% of young women feel pessimistic about the future (UNICEF, 2020). Only 1/3 of participants asked for the help from their closes circle of friends.

Factors of Resilience and Coping Mechanisms for Students in the Digital World

Digital connectivity may lead to a number of risks related to social, physical, spiritual and emotional well-being of students that is not recognized by the young people themselves. Educators need to foster students' 'digital resilience' – their emotional and digital literacy to deal with risk that they might be exposed. Teachers need to make students aware of social, ethical and emotional aspects that they might encounter in the digital environment. By building online community of support, educators can foster support, raise students' self-esteem by impacting their resilience both in an online and offline environment. Educators need to pay close attention to any signs of mental disturbances and crises in digital environment so that they can provide hints for building digital resilience. S. Livingstone and T. Palmer (2012) identified strategies can help students to survive in the digital world, such as understanding learners in the broader context of their lives by a holistic view in addressing issue of vulnerabilities of learners who have limited access to technologies, lack of space of quality learning at home.

Among the vulnerabilities to be mentioned are high need of affection and attention, difficult relations with their parents at home environment, and parent lacking skills to help their children in online environment. Among the factor of building digital resilience are networks of peers, supportive parents, accessible sources with appropriate information. This also requires multiple stakeholder cooperation and networking, particularly, responding to the needs of vulnerable teens and their social, economic, emotional and spiritual needs. Betton & Woolard (2019) suggest that asset-oriented approach by identifying students' strengths and enhancing them. The authors suggest not to fall in a moral panic but rather to use creativity and imaginative ways how to manage their mental and spiritual well-being. This out be useful also to see a positive side of digitalization. Since digitalization offers numerous opportunities to enrich knowledge, allows networking, creates new opportunities of growth.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, Fisher's scale was applied to measure various dimensions of students' spiritual well-being as reflected in relations to others, nature, oneself and the Ultimate being and was applied by the authors during the pandemic. The research question was to evaluate students' spiritual well being in post pandemic in relation to five dimensions of person's life: personal, communal, environmental and transcendental and global domain. For this purpose that authors have carried a factor analyses and have identified five factor structure of a spiritual well-being.

Participants: Invitation to participate in a web-based study was send to 400 students from all regions of Latvia. Completed resurvey responses were received from two hundred respondents.

Measures and procedure: Methodology employed for the purpose of this study was Fisher's scale of life orientations called SHALOM (SWBQ) that reflects five dimensions of person's life: personal, communal, environmental and transcendental and global domains. According to Fisher, personal aspect of spiritual well-being includes sense of identity, self-awareness, inner peace and meaning in life, while communal/relationship dimension includes forgiveness towards others, respect towards each other, and kindness. Environmental aspect includes connectedness with nature, a sense of magic in the environment that one can experience, while the transcendental aspect includes oneness with God, peace with God,

and a prayerful life. The number of participants who took part in this study were two hundred students. The tool provides a balanced selection of items across four domains of a questionnaire.

The validity of the tool was ensured by pretesting the instrument after it had been adapted from the context of Latvia. Fisher, the author of the scale provided the guidance in the process of back translation on certain questions with the purpose of to ensure the correctness of meaning and the applicability to the context of Latvia. The data was processed by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 20 with the aim to conduct the descriptive data analysis. The demographic characteristics of the research participants include two hundred students from all areas of Latvia who took part in an online survey with the consent agreement to participate in this study.

Results and Discussion

The study has revealed that the participants relate spirituality with peace of mind, harmony, good relations with others, ability to express one's emotions and feelings. 60% of all the inquired participants pointed out that religion also plays a significant place in their everyday life. Among the main factors that have influenced their spirituality was family, while 21% of respondents reported that their spirituality was influenced by a special event in their life. 90% of all the respondents claimed that they do not belong to any religious denomination and defined themselves as non-believers. Overall situation in Latvia can be described as "believing without belonging." One can evidence a strong tendency of secularization among the youth. More often their identity can be described as 'fluid' or non-religious. For the nonreligious youth spirituality plays important role in their lives. There is a move to a new kind of spirituality that differs from a traditional spirituality. Still, as the main source of influence on their spiritual well-being, they name their families (60%), followed by some significant person in their life (21%) and event (8%). Among the most important values they see forgiving and love for other people. Majority of young people see search for their spiritual nourishment in nature.

Table 1

Indicators, factors and factorial loads of a spiritual well-being

Descriptors (How do you evaluate):	Factors				
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5
oneness with God	0.906				
worship of the Creator	0.871				
personal relationship with the Divine/God	0.827				
peace with God	0.756				
prayer life	0.626				0.494
self-awareness		0.719			
a sense of identity		0.647			
inner peace		0.572		0.558	
trust between individuals			0.714		
respect for others		0.417	0.682		
kindness towards other people		0.423	0.608		
a love of other people			0.572		
harmony with the environment				0.679	
awe at a breath-taking view				0.615	
forgiveness toward others			0.484	0.611	
joy in life				0.574	

Descriptors (How do you evaluate):	Factors				
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5
connection with nature					0.798
meaning in life		0.445			0.625
oneness with nature				0.507	0.563
a sense of 'magic' in the environment		0.465			0.550

For the purpose of the study the authors have carried out the survey of two hundred respondents in the age group from 15 to 18.62% of the respondents were women. The authors have applied an exploratory factor analysis by identifying factors of a spiritual well-being. The authors have used the Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis and the Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization and have identified the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy that was equal to = 0.832, Sig. of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity < 0.001, which indicates to the feasibility to use a factor analysis.

Factor analysis allowed to identify a five-factor structure of a spiritual well-being:

F1 - personal relationships with God / Divine (Transcendental dimension);

F2 - relationship towards oneself (Personal dimension);

F3 - relationships with others (Communal dimension);

F4 - relationships with nature (Environmental dimension);

F5 - personal integrity.

Table 2 reflects the percentage of the total variance as described by the selected factors. The total percentage of variance reflected by the selected factors is 67.89%. At the same time, the largest percentage (13.34%) of variance is reflected by the factor F1 - *Personal relationships with God/ Divine* (Transcendental dimension). The quantitative values of the factors are calculated as the average values of the corresponding indicators (indicators, the factor loadings of which the factor is not less than 0.4).

Table 2

Total variance of factors

Factors	Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumu-lative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumula-tive %
F1	7.454	37.271	37.271	3.668	18.339	18.339
F2	2.320	11.601	48.872	2.513	12.565	30.904
F3	1.584	7.922	56.794	2.504	12.519	43.423
F4	1.188	5.942	62.736	2.470	12.350	55.774
F5	1.032	5.158	67.893	2.424	12.120	67.893

Tables 3 provides descriptive statistics for factors related to a spiritual well-being of students. According to the factors of students' subjective self-evaluation of their spiritual well-being, the most important factor is *relationships with others* (communal dimension), since this group of respondents represent students for whom the relationships with others are of the particular importance as compared with other criteria. Students are team oriented; they value team work and affirmation that they gain from others is of particular significance for them. They have a strong sense of community and they believe in a value of civic and political engagement. They consider themselves as global citizens who can make the world a better place.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics of a subjective spiritual well-being

	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Personal relationships with God/Divine (Transcendental dimension)	3.80	1.00	4.80	2.57	1.05
Relationship towards oneself (Personal dimension)	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.14	0.88
Relationships with others (Communal dimension)	3.50	1.50	5.00	3.25	0.82
Relationships with nature (Environmental dimension)	3.75	1.25	5.00	3.09	0.84
Personal integrity	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.22	0.85

Table 4 reflects data about the factor: *Relationship towards oneself* (personal dimension) (Mean = 3.78) as the most significant for students that they are eager to develop in their life. This is a very characteristic feature for a contemporary generation x that put their personal Ego at the forefront. They are known as “me” generation. They are open minded, liberal, self-expressive and at the same time can be described as “self-obsessed narcissists.”

Table 4

Descriptive statistics of a subjective spiritual well-being (the ideal state desired for the spiritual health)

	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Personal relationships with God/Divine (Transcendental dimension)	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.01	1.27
Relationship towards oneself (Personal dimension)	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.78	0.85
Relationships with others (Communal dimension)	3.75	1.25	5.00	3.73	0.91
Relationships with nature (Environmental dimension)	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.59	0.98
Personal integrity	4.00	1.00	5.00	3.71	0.90

In terms of gender differences, all factors, except for *Relationships with Nature* (environmental dimension), are rated higher by girls than by boys. However, the differences are statistically significant only in the assessment of the factor “*personal Relationships with God/Divine*” (Transcendental dimension) (Fig. 1).

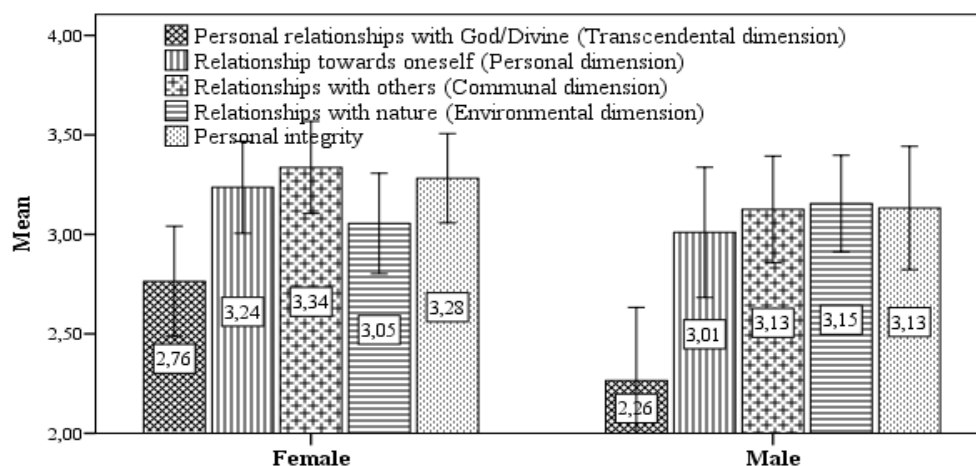


Figure 1. Mean values of Spiritual well-being factors in different gender groups

The differences are more distinct in students' evaluation of their relationships with God, that is much higher among girls (see Fig. 2).

Estimated Marginal Means of Personal relationships with God/Divine (Transcendental dimension)

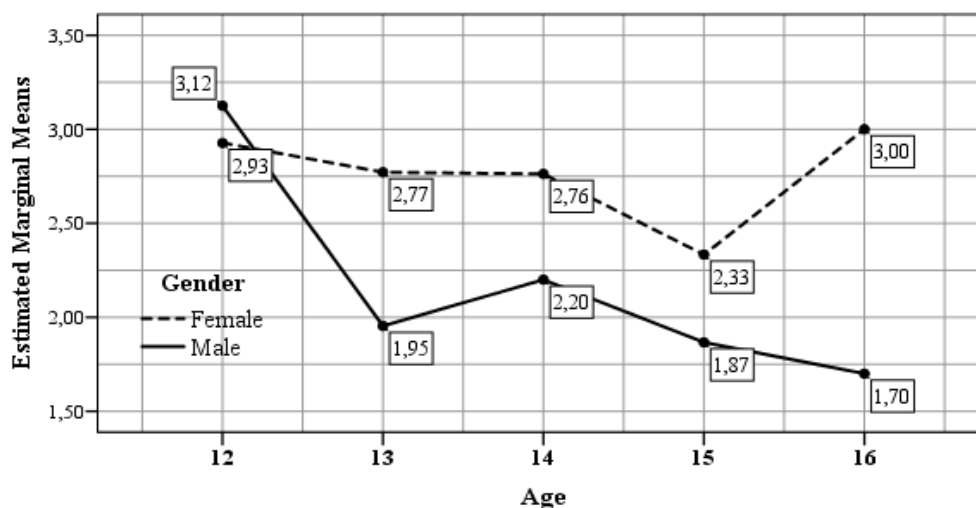


Figure 2. Average values of the factor personal relationships with God / Divine (transcendental dimension) among respondents of different age and gender

Conclusions

COVID-19 has disrupted a well-being of youth to a great extent. From the psychological perspective, a lived spirituality is a significant means that helps students to deal with stress and anxiety in everyday lives. Spirituality can be defined as connectedness to oneself, connectedness to social environment and nature, as well as one's relatedness to higher spiritual being/God, one's experience of transcendence.

In post-pandemic pandemic this is particularly important to pay attention to a spiritual well-being that is closely related to one's subjective well-being, mental health and life orientations. The authors view spirituality as a broader category that relates how one forms relations towards self, others, nature and the Ultimate reality. Spirituality is not linked to religion but it viewed in a broader holistic framework. This was concluded that for young people spirituality helps to develop a resilience to deal with anxiety and stress caused by the pandemic. Spiritual well-being described one's search for meaning and connectedness with self, God, others, and the environment.

The term "spirituality has reached high attention among the researchers in psychology and sociology of religion. The notion of spirituality was associated with an organized religious belief and the experience of transcendence, while contemporary studies relate spirituality to a search for meaning, spiritual well-

being and mental health resulting in inner peace. In Western societies when people do not associate themselves with the organized religion while define themselves as spiritual human beings.

For the purpose of this study, the authors' chose Fisher's scale of Spiritual Well-being that serves as a valuable tool for conceptualization of students' spiritual orientation. The analyses of research data allows to identify a five-factor structure of spiritual wellbeing: F1 - Personal relationships with God/Divine (Transcendental dimension), F2 - *Relationship towards oneself* (Personal dimension), F3 - *Relationships with others* (Communal dimension), F4 - *Relationships with nature* (Environmental dimension) and F5 - *Personal integrity*. The biggest SD is for one's personal relationships with God/Divine and higher for females as compared with male participants.

The descriptive statistics of a *Subjective Spiritual well-being* indicates that the highest value has gained the factor 3 - *Relations with others* (communal dimension) (Mean=3,25) but as desired value of subjection well-being is *Relatedness to oneself* (Mean =3,78), and the ability of express oneself as one of the typical features of millennials. The relatedness with others is being evaluated higher among girls as compared to boys.

This was concluded that during the pandemic while being totally emersed in the digital environment, spiritual well-being plays important role in overcoming students' anxiety and stress and helps them to find peace and resilience in nature, in the community with their family members.

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