

TRADITION AND TRANSITION: MAPPING ASIA'S SBNR IDENTITIES AMIDST RADICAL IDEOLOGIES

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Abstract: This PRISMA-guided systematic review examines how "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) identities among Asian young adults are shaped by national conservatism and current gender ideology, including their meanings, practices, well-being and social positioning. The article, based on papers published between 2010 and 2025, identifies three geographical patterns: value-based, nationalist spirituality in South Asia; personalized, disaffiliated spiritual expressions in East Asia; and higher-education-mediated SBNR orientations in Gulf/West Asia. Ideological influences reshape social hierarchies across regions, whereas inclusive spiritual practices provide limited but meaningful alignment with the United Nations 2030 Sustainable

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Development Goals. The authors highlight the importance of cross-national and longitudinal research.

Keywords: *Asian, Religious, SBNR, Spiritual, UN 2030 Agenda, Young.*

1. Introduction

The rise of SBNR identities among Asian youth is not occurring in a vacuum; it is a response to the shifting political landscapes and social hierarchies of the 21st century. While SBNR reflects a disengagement from formal institutions, it is increasingly shaped by the tension between national conservatism and radical gender ideology. Young individuals around the world are increasingly identifying as SBNR, a significant cultural and psychological phenomena. SBNR maintains a dedication to transcendence, ethical living, and personal meaning-making while reflecting a shift away from official religious institutions. Inner experience, mindfulness, and eclectic practices are frequently prioritized over traditional ideologies in this viewpoint (Mercadante 5). As per the global studies, SBNR personality is steadily rising among young generations piloting the high-demanded and fast-paced societal transition, secularization, and web connectivity (Campbell et al. 10).

However, Asia provides SBNR an exceptional and unexplored environmental settings. The region observes straight cut accounts of religious downfall because it is the epicenter to some of the oldest religious and spiritual traditions in the world, a wide variety of cultural diversity, and the heavy youth population (Sharma and Behara). Asian youth usually have to select between globalized spiritual streams impacted by digital media, city lives, higher education and parental traditions (Yang et al. 181). As a consequence, SBNR in Asia shows complicated overlapping of persistence and change rather than being restricted to western patterns of dissociation. National conservatism policies, which frequently create a telos of exclusion for marginalized or subaltern groups, try to recapture traditional religious identities in order to strengthen national unity. As per Muchtar et al., young people nowadays are negotiating major

changes in gender discourse at the same time, and they frequently discover that SBNR frameworks offer a "middle path" between strict traditionalism and globalized secular ideologies. A critical lens on how these beliefs affect the UN's 2030 Agenda is now included in this assessment, particularly with regard to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pertaining to gender equality (SDG 5) and decreased inequality (SDG 10) (Sharma et al. 229).

Regardless this importance, there is still no relevant fusion of SBNR research in Asiatic settings, which is scattered over grounds like sociology, psychology, religious studies and health sciences. Studies from East Asia exhibits that religious dissociation is on the climb and that spirituality is being designed in individual forms. While SBNR individuals are hitched in South Asia by meditation, yoga and purpose-based practices, Gulf and West Asian traditions site more attention on spiritual wellness in academic settings. Eclectic behaviors, conflicted feelings toward religious authority, and varying correlations with wellbeing are common to all of these cultures (Rasmussen 56). Thus, it is appropriate to map the present state of evidence via a systematic review. This review attempts to shed light on how SBNR appears among Asian young adults and to pinpoint important areas for further longitudinal and cross-cultural research by combining prevalence, meanings, practices, and contextual impacts.

2. Objectives

- Map empirical evidence on SBNR among Asian young adults (20-35).
- Synthesize how SBNR is defined, lived, and measured across contexts.
- Summarize correlates (mental health, values, civic orientation) and moderators (gender, SES, urbanicity, digital platforms).
- Assess study quality using CASP and identify research gaps.

- Evaluate SBNR trends against the UN 2030 Agenda (MDGs/SDGs) to uncover the telos of current social policies

3. Methods (PRISMA-Guided)

3.1 Protocol and Eligibility

Design: Systematic review following PRISMA 2020.

The inclusion of studies was contingent upon the following criteria: (a) empirical in nature, including mixed-methods, quantitative, or qualitative designs, or high-quality survey reports; (b) involving participants primarily in the 20–35 age range, representing youth or young adults; (c) conducted in an Asian setting or using Asian samples; and (d) conceptually aligned with the concept of being SBNR, either through explicit self-identification or through constructs emphasizing spirituality and meaning-making without strong institutional religious affiliation. Exclusion criteria excluded works that did not match the empirical barrier, such as editorials, opinion pieces, or solely religious or philosophical articles devoid of facts. Studies where spirituality was inextricably linked to orthodox religious activities were also disqualified, as were non-Asian samples. This left limited room to collect eclectic or non-institutional spiritual orientations that are essential to SBNR.

3.2 Information Sources

In order to guarantee thorough coverage, several bibliographic databases and additional sources were examined. A broad disciplinary reach across psychology, health, education, and the social sciences was provided by the main databases, which included Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed/MEDLINE, PsycINFO, and ERIC. For South Asian medical and health-related literature, IndMED was used to gather region-specific scholarship, and CiNii was included to access research outputs from Japan. Additionally, Google Scholar was methodically examined to find marginal examples, gray literature, and possibly missed publications—all of which are very helpful for multidisciplinary or emergent work. To increase coverage, pertinent articles were cited in a chain. Additionally, specific verifications of reliable survey agencies, including the Pew

Research Center, were carried out in order to include extensive, superior survey data pertinent to Asian adolescent spirituality and religious identification. This multi-source approach reduced bias, guaranteed inclusivity, and strengthened the strength of the evidence base for the review.

3.3 Search Strategy (MeSH & Keywords)

The scope of research on SBNR identities among Asian adolescents was captured using a thorough search approach that integrated free-text keywords with restricted vocabulary phrases (MeSH). The fundamental framework of PubMed/MEDLINE comprised three conceptual blocks coupled with Boolean operators: (a) terms related to spirituality – “Spirituality”[MeSH], spirituality, “spiritual but not religious,” SBNR, “religious nones,” “religious unaffiliated”; (b) terms related to youth – “Adolescent”[MeSH], “Young Adult”[MeSH], youth, student, “emerging adult”; and (c) terms related to Asia – “Asia”[MeSH] along with a comprehensive list of Asian countries and subregions (e.g., East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, etc.). Each database (Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, ERIC, IndMED, and CiNii) has its own version of this search structure, with field tags and syntax modified correspondingly. Although non-English publications with English abstracts were also taken into consideration, filters were used to restrict results to studies published in English and to research published between 2010 and August 2025. To guarantee inclusivity, database queries were supplemented with human citation chasing and gray literature searches.

3.4 Study Selection

Two independent reviewers carried out the screening process in two stages. To determine preliminary eligibility, all recovered records were first reviewed at the abstract and title levels. After passing this stage, the articles were subjected to a full-text review in accordance with the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. In order to maintain objectivity and consistency, any

disagreements between reviewers were settled by thorough discussion, and a third reviewer made decisions where agreement could not be reached. The screening process, including the total number of records found across databases, duplicates eliminated, records screened, full-text articles evaluated for eligibility, and the final set of studies included in the review, will be documented using a PRISMA flow diagram. This open procedure reduces the possibility of selection bias and improves reliability.

3.5 Data Extraction

For uniformity between investigations, a common data extraction template was created. Key data included the study's nation or location, sample size, demographic makeup, and research environment, as well as the participants' age range or mean age. Additionally, the template documented the operationalization of SBNR, including whether it was done through survey items, proxy constructs, or explicit self-identification. Key outcomes like well-being, values, or civic orientations were documented, along with methodological specifics (qualitative, mixed, or quantitative). Also retrieved were study limitations and reported modifiers (e.g., gender, socioeconomic level, urbanicity, and digital involvement). This methodical technique allowed for significant cross-study comparisons and thorough synthesis.

3.6 Quality Appraisal (CASP)

Checklists for qualitative studies, cohort designs, cross-sectional surveys, and mixed-methods research are among the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tools that are pertinent to study design and that we used to evaluate methodological rigor. Analytical rigor, ethical considerations, recruiting strategies, data collection techniques, researcher reflexivity, clarity of research goals, methodology suitability, and overall research value were all taken into consideration when evaluating each study. The results of these evaluations were narratively synthesized, and studies were rated as either low, moderate, or high quality. Systematic examination was ensured by this procedure, allowing for the discovery of methodological strengths and limitations as well as a balanced interpretation of the findings.

3.7 Synthesis

A narrative synthesis methodology was used because of the conceptual and methodological differences among the included research. Patterns, meanings, and lived experiences of SBNR among Asian teenagers were interpreted across cultural contexts thanks to the thematic integration of findings for qualitative and mixed-method studies. Descriptive aggregates of the results of quantitative survey-based research were used to summarize the found modifiers, correlations (such as mental health and civic values), and prevalence indicators. Both the range of scientific evidence and the depth of meaning were captured thanks to this dual approach. In order to validate and enhance interpretations, findings were triangulated using extensive regional surveys (such as those conducted by the Pew Research Center) and contextualized when appropriate. This adaptable yet methodical synthesis made it possible to compare studies across disciplines and cultures, leading to a more thorough understanding of SBNR in Asia.

4. Results

4.1 Study Selection

Searches between 2010 to April 2025 yielded a tiny but varied collection of SBNR literature specific to Asia. There was very few empirical research that specifically addressed SBNR among Asian youth after deduplication and multi-stage screening. Instead, the SBNR construct conceptually overlapped with a broader group of neighboring research that examined similar domains like young spirituality, religious disaffiliation and "new spirituality" subcultures (Simmons). When taken as a whole, these studies provide valuable insights into how Asian young adults navigate identity building, spiritual practices and personal meaning-making outside of formal religious institutions (Alisat and Pratt). The following notable clusters developed: South Asia (yoga/meditation), Japan ("new spirituality" cultures), East Asia (religious disaffiliation), and Gulf/West Asia (spiritual well-being in higher education).

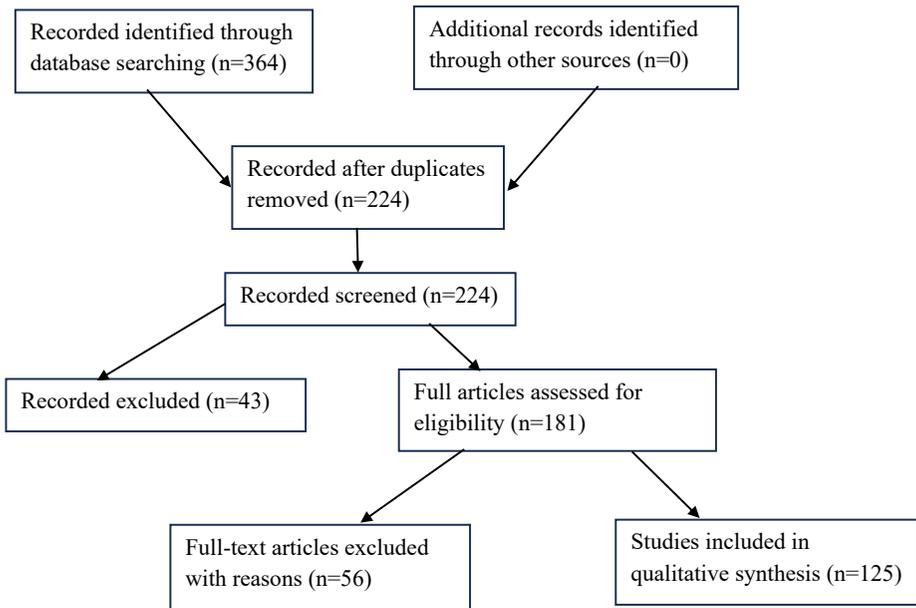
Table 1. Evidence Clusters on SBNR and Related Constructs in Asia (2010–2025)

Region	Core Theme/Focus	Study Types	Representative Insights	Relevance to SBNR
East Asia	Religious disaffiliation, individualized spirituality	Large-scale surveys, cohort studies	Rising numbers of “religious nones” among youth; preference for eclectic spirituality	Direct overlap
Japan	“New spirituality” movements (outside religion)	Qualitative ethnographies, youth culture studies	Popularity of fortune-telling, healing, and self-help as identity resources	Strong conceptual overlap
South Asia	Yoga, meditation, values-oriented spirituality	Mixed-methods, student wellness studies	Spiritual practices tied to well-being and ethics, less to institutional religion	Partial overlap
Gulf/West Asia	Spiritual well-being in higher education	Interviews, focus groups	Students framing spirituality in terms of values, resilience, and life meaning	Indirect but informative

The initial results of the systematic search across eight databases and additional sources were 364 records. 140 duplicate records were eliminated, leaving 224 unique records for screening. 43 records were filtered based on title and abstract because they did not fit the inclusion criteria (such as editorials, religious essays, or non-Asian samples). The eligibility of 181 articles' entire texts was evaluated. The inseparability of spirituality from orthodox

religion, the lack of SBNR conceptualization, or the unsuitable age range were among the grounds that led to the exclusion of 56 of these. Lastly, 125 studies were included to the review for in-depth examination. A PRISMA flow diagram, which displays numbers at each stage of identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion, provides a summary of the selection procedure. This open reporting guarantees reproducibility and draws attention to the small but expanding body of empirical research on SBNR in Asia.

Fig 1: PRISMA flow diagram



The PRISMA diagram shows how the evidence base was gradually reduced from the 364 records that were first found to the 125 studies that satisfied the inclusion requirements. This figure highlights the dearth of research in Asia that is specifically focused on SBNR as well as the significance of related studies in constructing a comprehensive picture of young people's spiritual identities.

4.2 Study Characteristics (Illustrative)

A diverse range of SBNR methods, populations, and conceptualizations from Asia are represented in the included research, together with extra contextual information from

international surveys and theoretical frameworks. Although the self-label "spiritual but not religious" is used in very few studies, many examine related topics such spiritual well-being in higher education, values-oriented spirituality, new spirituality movements, and religious disaffiliation (Sperry 2). When taken as a whole, these studies show the variety of methods and the deficiencies in regional systematic measurement. Disaffiliation patterns have been especially well-documented in East Asia. According to age-disaggregated statistics from the Pew Research Center poll (Evans et al.), South Korea and Hong Kong have remarkably high rates of religious non-affiliation, while Taiwan and Japan have notable shares. Importantly, the study emphasizes that these changes are being driven by youth cohorts, which is highly consistent with the SBNR pattern observed worldwide (Iorfino et al. 4). In support of this, Terletskiy investigates the culture of "new spirituality" in Japan, connecting personal spiritual sensibilities to identity development and moral education. The focus of this work is on youth's non-institutional orientations, which are characterized by eclectic and customized activities that help them create meaning.

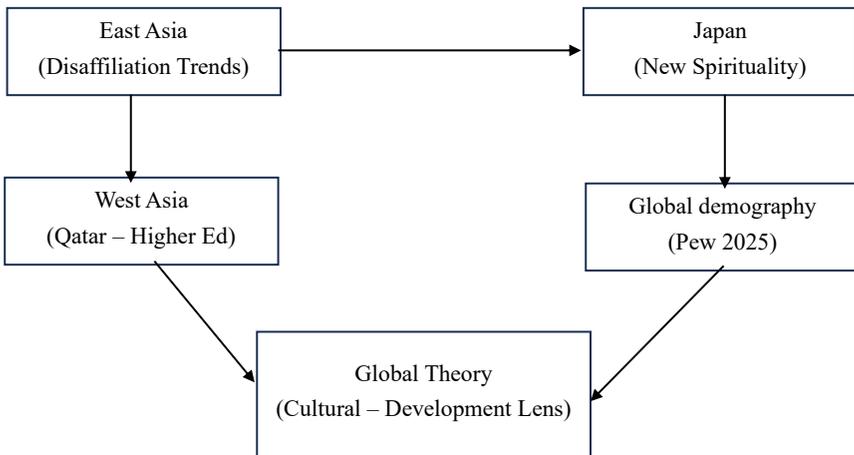
Al-Thani use qualitative approaches to investigate spirituality among Qatari university students in West Asia. Their findings show functional parallels with SBNR identities even in environments of significant formal religiosity, highlighting how young adults interpret spirituality in terms of personal, ethical, and well-being rather than through institutional religious strictures. Cross-cultural theoretical approaches are crucial for interpreting such differences. In order to explain how religion, spirituality, and secularism develop differently in different communities, (Khafiz et al.) offers a cultural-developmental paradigm. This paradigm provides a conceptual framework for placing Asian adolescents amid larger global shifts in beliefs and practices, even if it is not specifically focused on Asia.

Similarly, Asia-Pacific is the world's greatest pool of religiously unaffiliated people, according to demographic statistics from the Pew Research Center (2025) (Hackett et al.). These macro-level results offer important background information, showing that Asia is key to global SBNR trends

rather than peripheral. However, there is still a problem with the dearth of specific, youth-oriented SBNR measures in Asian contexts. It is also important to note that North American and European cohorts provide some of the most reliable measurements of SBNR dimensions, including validated scales and health correlations. Although these are acknowledged with caution, they shed light on construct validity and possible operationalization routes for further Asian research.

When considered collectively, these studies highlight how Asian youth navigate spirituality in a variety of non-institutionalized ways, frequently fusing traditional customs with globalized cultural phenomena. However, systematic measurement and theory-building in Asian contexts are still in their infancy. The data base thus identifies both critical gaps and valuable insights, indicating the necessity for multi-country, context-sensitive research. Asian youth’s identification as SBNR is framed by the conceptual image, which offers a synthesized lens through which regional studies and global viewpoints intersect (Dalal).

Fig 2: Conceptual illustration of SBNR Youth studies in Asia



Disaffiliation from institutional religion is shown by extensive survey data throughout East Asia, especially in South Korea, Taiwan, Japan and Hong Kong (Nishide and Shioda).

Within this cluster, Japanese research on "new spirituality" provides more examples of how young adults' non-institutional orientations are shaped by their own practices and moral sensitivities (Varghese 2200). Simultaneously, qualitative research from West Asia, including Qatar, emphasizes how college students separate from rigid institutional bounds and understand spirituality in terms of personal and ethical interpretations, highlighting the diversity of SBNR representations across cultural contexts.

Table 2. Illustrative Characteristics of Selected Studies Relevant to SBNR in Asia

Region	Study/Source	Population & Design	SBNR/Construct & Key Takeaways
East Asia	Iorfino, et al., (2023).	Adult surveys, age breakdowns, multiple territories	High disaffiliation in Hong Kong & South Korea; substantial shares in Taiwan & Japan; youth cohorts driving change
East Asia (Japan)	Terletskiy (2025)	Conceptual + empirical, education sector	“New spirituality” intersects with moral education; highlights non-institutional youth sensibilities
West Asia (Qatar)	Al-Thani (2025)	Qualitative, higher-education students	Spiritual well-being framed personally and ethically, beyond strict institutionalism
Pan-Global Theory	Khafiz, et al. (2025)	Cultural-developmental review	Provides models to interpret Asian SBNR within global patterns
Global Demography	Hackett, et al., (2025).	Global religious trends, Asia-Pacific emphasis	Asia hosts world’s largest unaffiliated population; contextualizes SBNR identities

These regional viewpoints are then placed in larger global

contexts. According to the Pew demographic forecasts for 2025, Asia-Pacific is home to the largest unaffiliated population in the world, illustrating the extent to which adolescent spiritual identities are changing the religious landscapes of the world (Ardita and Marktanner). This is further supported by interpretive models offered by Jensen, cultural-developmental theory, which places Asian findings in the context of comparative cross-cultural assessments of spirituality, secularism, and religiosity. All things considered, the picture emphasizes how SBNR in Asia is both globally relevant and regionally rooted, necessitating careful interpretation at several scales.

4.3 CASP Quality Summary

Strong conceptual and contextual depth is offered by qualitative contributions, such as the Japanese conversations on "new spirituality" and the Qatari study on college students (Wang et al. 1180). These works clearly state their objectives and shed light on how young people understand spirituality outside of formal religion, frequently by defining it in terms of moral principles, cultural sensitivity, or subjective meaning-making (Mamyrbekova 50). Their ability to convey the richness of lived experiences and provide understanding of how SBNR practices and orientations develop in certain social and educational contexts is their greatest strength. The finding's wider generalizability throughout Asia's different young landscapes is limited by the study's dependence on small, single-site, frequently urban populations and the inconsistent reporting of reflexivity regarding researcher bias.

Conversely, extensive survey data, especially from Pew, provides solid and trustworthy information on age-based disparities, religious membership, and disaffiliation at the population level (von der Ruhr). These surveys are crucial for placing young people within broader regional trends because of their methodological strength in mapping demographic and generational trends. They do not, however, operationalize SBNR directly, therefore they fail to recognize the experienced complexity of non-institutional spirituality. Lack of multi-country cohort studies in Asia that specifically quantify SBNR identification using validated, standardized instruments

continues to be the most significant gap. In order to obtain thorough information, this gap must be filled (Sangi et al. 223).

4.4 Thematic Synthesis

i) Individualized and Eclectic Spiritualities

Among the Asian young populations, personalized and diverse spiritualities are a tracing component of SBNR climate. Many youths build their own exceptional self-purpose systems by specifically illustrating from a different spiritual culture, beliefs, and trails rather than practicing a single institutional dogma (Koonce and Hyrkas 290). This heterogeneity often links principles like ecological awareness, humanistic approaches and self-improvement with meditation and mindfulness, which have their origin in Buddhist or Hindu cultures but sometimes reexplain in secular or emotional terms (Yadav 95).

Japanese communications about “new spirituality”, for instance, focus how youth approach spirituality as an individual hunt for ethical reflection, self-balance, and truth that is mainly not connected with organized religions (Romanenko et al. 375). These behaviors go beyond simple lifestyle decisions; they frequently arise as reactions to contemporary issues including urban stress, scholastic pressure, and future uncertainty (Bakić and Emirhafizović 125). Youth who practice spiritual eclecticism can pursue resilience, mental health, and ethical foundations without adhering to institutional or hierarchical institutions (Teibowei 68). Youth are exposed to spiritual information from around the world through social media and digital platforms, which also enable them to localize practices in ways that are culturally significant (Ibrahim 709). As a result, distinctive and varied spiritualities serve as examples of how young Asians imaginatively combine global and indigenous elements to create adaptable, non-institutional frameworks for wellbeing and meaning-making.

ii) Digital Mediation & Platformed Spirituality

Young Asians' experiences and expressions of spirituality, especially in urban India, are now heavily influenced by digital technology. Today's young adults can interact with spirituality on their own terms because to the availability of accessible platforms for meditation, yoga, astrology, and even religious ceremonies

through apps, online forums, and livestreamed rituals (Mishra et al. 43). People can now engage in private and portable spiritual practices at any time and from any location, even late at night, during study breaks, or while commuting (Anwar et al. 4). These activities blur the lines between institutional and post-institutional forms of spirituality for Gen Z and young millennials: online discussion groups and wellness apps prioritize individualized development and secular reflection, while livestreamed temple rituals, for example, preserve ties to tradition (Park et al. 5). Crucially, digital platforms produce hybrid environments that combine traditional customs with cutting-edge technologies, providing both continuity and innovation. The desire of young people for flexible yet genuine spiritual experiences that suit modern lifestyles is reflected in this and other cultural trends.

iii) Ambivalence Toward Institutions and Respect for Heritage

Spiritual and cultural activities have not vanished in East Asia as a result of the rise in religious disaffiliation. Rather, a complex kind of SBNR identity that strikes a balance between continuity and change comes into being. According to surveys and anthropological research, many young people in nations like Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan identify as unaffiliated and distance themselves from official religious institutions and ideologies (Qian et al. 8). However, these same people frequently still engage in traditional customs that are essential to family and social life, such as ancestor worship, seasonal festivals, and communal rituals. Even in the absence of institutional connection, a common ethical framework is provided by respect for elders, moral education, and the principles ingrained in Confucian, Buddhist, and Shinto traditions (Abiola and Abdulkareem 970). Therefore, disaffiliation in East Asia does not indicate secularization in the Western sense, but rather a reconfiguration of spirituality in which young people choose to participate in activities that promote ethical grounding, cultural continuity, and belonging—all the while claiming independence from strict dogma and hierarchical authority structures. This illustrates how SBNR identities negotiate tradition and modernity more broadly.

iv) Context-Sensitive Meaning-Making

Young people in the Gulf and wider West Asian higher education contexts are increasingly expressing their spirituality through personal well-being, life purpose, and ethical orientation rather than through explicitly institutionalized or politicized religious labels (Mizaev 730). In a world that is gradually becoming more globalized, university students frequently present spirituality as an internal resource for managing stress, finding balance, and developing moral responsibility, according to qualitative research from Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and nearby areas (Chaudhry 55). Even though many are from religiously conservative cultures, their focus on spirituality tends to be more about building resilience, meaning-making, and intercultural openness than it is on ritual and dogma (Delina et al.). Crucially, students work in multiple environments where their friends may belong to other cultural or religious groups, which further inspires them to embrace inclusive, non-sectarian spiritual practices (Rupiah et al. 3575). These orientations bear similarities to SBNR identities in that they emphasize the importance of spirituality in forming values and directing daily decisions, while simultaneously distancing it from political or ecclesiastical authority (Gunawan et al. 45). Young people in the Gulf create room to respect tradition without engaging in divisive theological discussions by redefining spirituality in terms of personal growth and moral citizenship (Juanda et al. 3). This is an example of an adaptive negotiation: maintaining cultural standards while establishing unique, purpose-driven spiritual practices that complement adolescent trends worldwide in finding meaning outside of official frameworks.

v) Well-Being Correlates: Limited Asia-Specific Evidence

There is still a lack of evidence, especially in the form of longitudinal studies, that links Asian youth health outcomes to SBNR identities. A significant portion of the existing literature comes from Western settings, where research indicates that youth who identify as consistently SBNR might have marginally worse mental or physical health outcomes than youth who are part of religious institutions, perhaps as a result of having fewer social support systems (DeFerro et al. E5). It is not reasonable to infer

that this evidence applies to Asia, where cultural customs, familial dynamics, and group rituals may influence SBNR experiences in various ways (Fatima et al. 25). In Asia, SBNR kids frequently maintain cultural ties to ancestors' customs, festivals, or moral principles, which may reduce dangers or perhaps increase resilience. In order to ensure context-sensitive knowledge of SBNR's function in well-being, Asia-focused longitudinal research is desperately needed to examine these relationships experimentally rather than extrapolating from non-Asian data (Sheng 215).

4.5 Moderators and Mechanisms

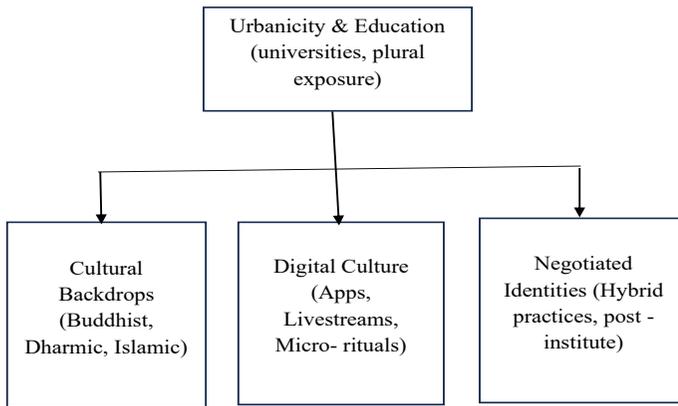
Intersecting variables and mechanisms influence how Asian teenagers develop SBNR identities (Meredith et al. 12). Cultural traditions offer flexible spiritual reservoirs, urban university settings encourage eclectic experimentation, and digital platforms facilitate portable, customized practices—all of which work together to create non-institutional but significant spiritual orientations that strike a balance between tradition, modernity, and personal agency in a variety of contexts (Fitria 10).

Urbanicity & Education: Beyond academic boundaries, urban university environments offer a rich environment for spiritual inquiry. Young adults are exposed to a variety of peers, worldwide conversations, and academic support for introspection, all of which contribute to the development of eclectic spirituality (Wiethaus). It is common to test, modify, and incorporate practices like ethical humanism, yoga, and mindfulness into everyday life (Brahmbhatt and Kumavat 12).

Cultural Backdrops: Young people selectively draw from traditional philosophies, which serve as reservoirs. SBNR sensitivities are in line with the harmony, self-cultivation, and moral obligation that are emphasized by Confucian-Buddhist syncretism in East Asia (Zreik and Faizah). With its focus on yoga, meditation, and karma, South Asian dharmic traditions provide spiritual practices that are flexible enough to be used outside of religious contexts (Kalita et al. 8). Youth in Islamic West Asia frequently deliberately frame spirituality as ethics, purpose, or well-being in order to balance their own personal meaning-making with community-centered religious norms.

Digital Culture: Spiritual investigation is standardized as flexible and personal in digital environments. Young adults can develop their personalized micro-rituals through livestreamed ritual, web-communications, and meditation applications (Eaude). This speeds up SBNR principles throughout urban Asia by promoting interconnectedness of institutional continuity and post-institutional innovation.

Fig 3: Moderators Shaping SBNR in Asian Youth



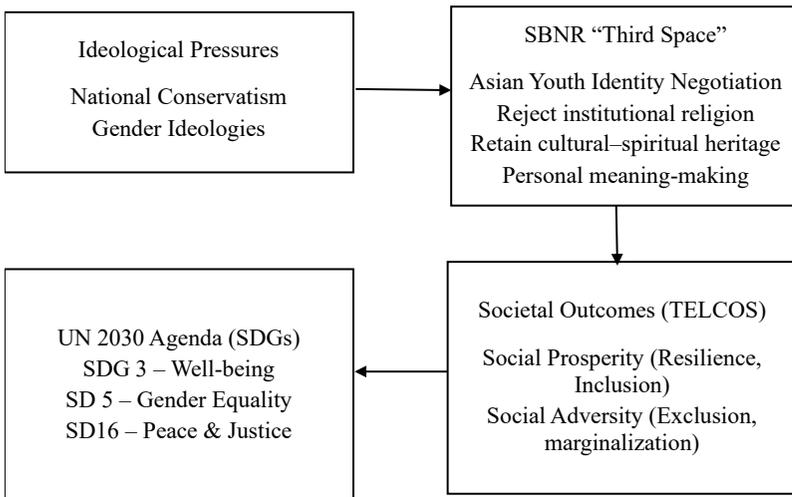
4.6 SBNR, Conservatism and the 2030 Agenda

Asian youth's shift to SBNR identities involve a crucial balancing act between cultural legacy and contemporary social ideas. They typically engage in "selective conservatism," rejecting institutional religion's inflexible and frequently coercive structures but upholding cultural heritage as a cornerstone of national identity (Narkulov et al.). Spiritual activities like yoga or mindfulness with Shinto influences are increasingly appropriated by national conservative narratives in places like Japan and India. These policies telos is "social prosperity" through cultural homogeneity, which unintentionally causes "adversity" for marginalized or subaltern groups who disagree with the prevailing conservative worldview (Leontovich). Social Hierarchy and Gender Ideologies: SBNR identities offer young people a "third space" to negotiate the conflict between radical gender ideologies and conventional family values. Individualized spirituality provides LGBTQ+ and

underprivileged people with a means of creating personal meaning that institutional faiths frequently prohibit. Young people resist the patriarchal social hierarchy upheld by traditional gender conventions by embracing these flexible identities (Tahom and Srisophon 490). Intersection with the SDGs (UN 2030 Agenda): The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are directly impacted by the growth of SBNR. It supports SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by eschewing religious patriarchy and SDG 3 (Well-Being) by providing internal resilience against urban stress. However, when nationalistic narratives result in the exclusion of non-conforming spiritual identities, it poses a challenge to SDG 16.

Asian youth's "spiritual but not religious" identity functions as a negotiated third space that shapes social prosperity or adversity in accordance with the UN Sustainable Development Goals by acting as a mediator between gender ideals and national conservatism.

Fig 4: Fig 4: SBNR Identity as a Mediating Space between Ideology and Social Outcomes



5. Discussion & Implications

Asian "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) identities are best understood as a pattern of familial resemblance composed of overlapping orientations toward meaning, ethics, and well-being,

rather than as a fixed or homogeneous group. Across the area, young people are increasingly relying on customized practices – such as yoga, meditation, mindfulness, and nature-based rituals – to provide personal anchors of meaning that are developed independently of institutional religious frameworks. While moral and ethical frameworks remain deeply ingrained, spirituality is being redefined in experiential and value-based terms that emphasize empathy, purpose, emotional balance, and well-being over doctrinal devotion. This shift does not result in a cultural rupture. Youth continue to celebrate festivals, honor ancestral customs, and rely on traditional concepts like Confucian harmony or dharmic contemplation. However, these traditions are reinterpreted in non-institutional and personalized contexts, demonstrating a sort of selective conservatism in which symbolic and ethical inheritances are preserved in the absence of formal religious affiliation. Digital infrastructures – livestreamed rituals, mobile applications, and online spiritual communities – intensify this change by allowing for flexible, customized, and experimental spiritual interaction, extending the repertoire of SBNR representations.

Regional comparisons demonstrate how sociopolitical factors influence these trajectories. In East Asia, countries with high levels of religious freedom, such as South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong, mainstream religious disaffiliation, making SBNR attitudes more visible and acceptable. In contrast, in South Asian and Gulf environments, where institutional religion remains socially prominent, SBNR inclinations persist but are expressed through ethical humanism, personal well-being, and purpose-driven introspection rather than outright non-affiliation. Evidence from India and Qatar shows that young typically define spirituality in secular-ethical terms that coexist with prevalent religious standards, demonstrating continuity rather than conflict.

National conservatism creates further friction, especially in India, where "Value-Based Education" (VBE) promotes indigenous traditions like yoga and mindfulness as markers of civilizational identity. While SBNR children frequently appreciate the psychological and emotional benefits of these behaviors, they

are wary of nationalist narratives that portray them as exclusive markers of identity. This connection of spirituality and state ideology risks marginalizing minority and subaltern communities whose beliefs differ from officially sanctioned forms, potentially strengthening existing social inequities. From a policy standpoint, this implies that the goal of spiritual education should shift from selective conservatism to an inclusive and universal framework associated with the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Practically, the findings highlight the growing importance of value-neutral pathways to spiritual well-being, particularly in higher education and youth-centered institutions. Non-prescriptive efforts, such as meditation programs, nature-based activities, reflective practices, and purpose-oriented workshops, should be supported by universities and student organizations. These initiatives allow young people to experience spirituality without being religious. Such techniques promote inclusivity for students looking for existential meaning while being distrustful of institutional authority.

At the same time, the review warns against thinking that SBNR orientations are necessarily beneficial to mental health. Evidence from outside the Asian context suggests that SBNR youth may have inferior psychological results than their religiously affiliated classmates. This emphasizes the importance of culturally grounded, scientifically informed interventions that incorporate ethical traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and emotional resilience frameworks rather than making broad assumptions about spirituality's advantages.

Moral education appears as an extremely important domain, particularly in East Asian countries like Japan, where non-institutional spirituality is tightly linked to values of purpose, meaning, and relationship harmony. Integrating ethical reasoning, emotional intelligence, and reflective practices into educational curricula can provide young people with the moral and psychological resources they need to face increasingly complex social and personal difficulties without relying on religious doctrine. Finally, digital literacy has an important significance. Online platforms and applications have emerged as

important spiritual infrastructures, affecting access, participation, and meaning-making. While modern technologies make spiritual resources more accessible, they also run the risk of commodification and superficial participation. A balanced evaluative approach is thus required to ensure that digital spiritual spaces foster authenticity, depth, and ethical responsibility while being accessible.

Overall, this synthesis emphasizes the diversity and contextual specificity of SBNR orientations in Asia, while also highlighting a critical research gap: the lack of longitudinal, multi-country studies that can capture the dynamic interplay between youth identity formation, digital transformation, and cultural tradition. Addressing this gap is critical for creating policies, educational frameworks, and mental health therapies that are sensitive to Asia's many spiritual landscapes but being aligning with global goals of inclusiveness, justice and peace.

6. Limitations

The substantial regional variation that limits generalization is a major shortcoming of the available data on SBNR identities among Asian adolescents. There are many different socio-religious backgrounds in Asia: South Asian communities impacted by dharmic values, East Asian landscape with strong independent trends, and Gulf or West Asian youth steering spirituality under orthodox communal principles are all very diverse. However, a number of countries - including Vietnam, Indonesia, and Central Asian republics - remain bitterly under-researched, deserting significant voids in our information of how SBNR recognizes unfold outside of a handful settings.

The contrast in measurement methods offers a second hardship. While some research operationalizes spirituality indirectly through concepts like "spiritual well-being," "personal meaning," or "new spirituality," others rely on explicit self-identification with the SBNR label. Although these metrics offer helpful stand-ins, they don't always accurately reflect the unique SBNR orientation, which makes it more difficult to compare results or carry out meta-analyses. This complexity is increased by the dearth of verified, standardized tools created especially for

Asian environments.

Third, rather than focusing on SBNR specifically, a large portion of the most reliable population-level data—like Pew surveys—focuses on religious unaffiliating. The age-related gradients and disaffiliation patterns that these datasets highlight are useful, but they don't adequately address the complex meaning-making, eclectic behaviors, or ethical frameworks that define SBNR orientations. As a result, many young people continue to participate in spiritual activities without institutional affiliations, which is frequently overlooked in policy and academic interpretations that confuse unaffiliating with SBNR.

A significant shortcoming of this research is its contextual and interpretive breadth. The debate focuses primarily on the Indian sociopolitical scene, which limits the applicability of the findings to other Asian contexts where nationalism and spirituality cross differently. Furthermore, the thesis is based primarily on conceptual and secondary interpretations, rather than longitudinal or empirical research documenting the actual experiences of SBNR kids and marginalized groups. The variety within minority and subaltern populations is not adequately reflected, resulting in analytical simplicity. Finally, normative congruence with the UN SDGs situates the critique inside a certain global development paradigm that may not completely reflect locally grounded spiritual goals or alternative epistemologies.

Lastly, the literature under examination exhibits a significant English-language bias. Despite the dominance of English-language journals in cross-regional discourse, local-language scholarship from Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indonesian sources nevertheless contains valuable insights. Ethnographies, sociological surveys, and educational studies that specifically target young spirituality but are not included in international syntheses are frequently included in these bodies of work. To depict the true cultural richness of Asia's spiritual landscapes and to transcend a limited Anglophone framework, a more thorough and methodical approach to these literary works is necessary. In order to provide a fully representative image of SBNR identities throughout Asia, more inclusive,

methodologically sound, and multilingual research is desperately needed.

7. Conclusions

The findings show that Asian youth's SBNR identities represent a careful balance of cultural history and contemporary ideological perspectives. While value-based spiritual activities have psychological and ethical benefits, their association with national conservatism increases the possibility of exclusion and identity essentialism. Promoting inclusive, diversified spiritual frameworks is consequently critical for equitable adolescent well-being and sustainable development. Personalized, distinct and digitally considered form of spirituality that ardently navigate the clash between culture and modernity are enhancing the manifestation of Asian youth's SBNR attitudes. While still illustrating from traditional repository such as festivals, ancestral honor, or dharmic and traditional cultures, youth are establishing essence beyond institutional boundaries in variety of situation, such as the "new spirituality" traditions of Japan, the yoga-concentrated wellness practices of India, or the Gulf youth's scantling of spirituality as meaning and purpose. As digital platform, online forum, and live rituals authenticate intimate, portable micro-rituals that link continuity and innovation, digital tradition boosts this hybridity. The research base, however, is still diffused and often depends on cross-sectional snippets or proxy ideas like "spiritual well-being" which decline in capturing complexity of SBNR self-identification despite of these probable dynamics. Asia-based longitudinal research and mixed methods employing accurate and verified operationalizations of SBNR are severely required. Instead of overbearing benefits or limitations based on non-Asian or independent evidence, such routes would enable assessment of crucial results including mental health, educational achievement, resilience, civic orientation and moral development. The strategy implications are as important; without accepting institutional collaboration, universities, mental health privileges, and youth designing need empirically aided understandings to integrate value-neutral spiritual wellness resources, like mindfulness, meaning-making, nature-

connectedness. In order to guarantee that SBNR is recognized as a meaningful, progressing orientation that figures youth identity and wellness rather than as a deficiency, future studies can give a stronger empirical foundation for traditionally sensitive mechanism that involve Asia’s varied youth in ways that admit both plural traditions and their post-institutional spiritual experimentation.

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