

## **Spiritual Intelligence, Emotion Regulation, and Happiness in University vs. Religious Studies Students: A Comparative Study**

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### **Abstract**

The current research aimed to comprehensively examine the differences in spiritual intelligence, emotion regulation, and happiness between university students pursuing secular degrees and those studying religious courses. The sample consisted of 192 students (95 from Religious Studies and 97 from Secular Studies) aged 18-25, selected through purposive sampling from various private colleges in Bangalore, Karnataka. Data was gathered using a personal information form and three standardized questionnaires: the Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SISRI-24), the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ-10), and the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS-4). Descriptive statistics and independent t-tests were used for data analysis. The study found significant differences in spiritual intelligence and happiness between students in religious and secular programs, with secular students reporting lower happiness scores. Additionally, expressive suppression—a strategy for regulating emotions—differed between the groups. The research suggests that incorporating spiritual teachings into the curriculum can enhance spiritual intelligence and happiness among students. These findings highlight the need for support services to improve college students' well-being, though further studies are needed to understand the relationship between spiritual teachings, emotional regulation, and subjective well-being.

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**Keywords:** spiritual intelligence, emotional mastery, pursuit of happiness, wellbeing

## **Introduction**

Happiness is universally regarded as the ultimate goal pursued by individuals of all ages (Pati & Dash, 2022). It encapsulates the journey and the destination within the human pursuit of fulfillment. Happiness can be understood as a sensation of joy, contentment, or a broader sense of well-being, coupled with the perception that one's existence is meaningful, significant, and valuable. Lyubomirsky (2008) her book *The How of Happiness* supports this idea, exploring the science of happiness and offering practical strategies for enhancing well-being. Similarly, Veenhoven (2012) research highlights the complexity of happiness, defining it as a combination of life satisfaction (Cognitiv evaluation) and the experience of positive emotions.

## **Philosophical and Psychological Perspective on Happiness**

Happiness has been widely examined within philosophy and psychology, often through two key perspectives (Pati & Dash, 2022). Hedonism views happiness as to enhance pleasure and decrease pain. In contrast, the eudaimonic approach links happiness to finding purpose and meaning in life, which tends to be more enduring. Fredrickson and Losada (2005) state that happiness is characterised by goodness, peace, and effective functioning, suggesting that happiness can enhance performance. Research also demonstrates that happiness significantly influences academic performance among students (Tabbodi et al., 2015). Numerous factors influencing happiness have been identified, including job satisfaction, health, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, quality of life, and spiritual intelligence (Aliabadi et al., 2019; Argan et al., 2018; Coo & Salanova, 2017; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Diener et al., 1999; Ghahramani et al., 2019; Tay et al., 2015). A substantial body of scholarly work has indicated a discernible association between happiness levels and religious engagement (Argyle, 2013; Koenig & Larson, 2001).

## **The role of spiritual intelligence in happiness.**

Pursuing happiness through modern strategies often leads to short-term pleasure, resulting in widespread dissatisfaction and unhappiness (Warrier et al., 2023). This is mainly due to the focus on hedonistic pleasures, which often lead to unfulfilled expectations. In contrast, individuals who adopt a purpose-driven lifestyle tend to experience joy by engaging in altruistic activities (Pati & Dash, 2022), prioritizing collective well-being over

personal gain. Practices such as expressing gratitude and compassion, recognizing others' contributions, cultivating optimism, and adhering to personal goals have been proven to increase happiness (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006). A comprehensive review of over 100 studies revealed that 80 of these studies confirmed at least one significant positive correlation between religious practices and improved life satisfaction and happiness (Moreira-Almeida et al., 2006). Additionally, Chenarani et al. (2021) found a significant correlation between religious practices and the development of spiritual intelligence. These findings suggest a complex relationship between personal fulfillment and broader spiritual dynamics.

Spiritual intelligence involves recognizing and embodying one's true identity, enabling a life guided by profound self-realization. It is a core ability connected to values, motivation, intentions, emotions, and personality (Ronel, 2008). Wolman (2001) characterizes spiritual intelligence as the inherent ability to reflect profoundly on life's purpose while experiencing a sense of interconnectedness with the world and others. Similarly, Vaughan (2002) describes spiritual intelligence as involving the mind and spirit's inner essence in relation to one's existence within the world. This higher form of intelligence transcends the ego, granting access to the mature qualities of the true self, such as wisdom, joy, love, compassion, creativity, integrity, and peace (Soni & Pareek, 2024).

### **Spiritual Intelligence and Emotion Regulation**

King et al. (2012) describe spiritual intelligence as a collection of competencies individuals use to tap into and express spiritual resources, values, and traits, enhancing their everyday functioning and spiritual well-being. Spiritual intelligence integrates information from the physical, rational, and emotional domains to construct meaning in human existence. It is the human capacity to confront and resolve moral and ethical dilemmas of existential importance, helping shape a meaningful life (Zohar et al., 2000). Additionally, Spiritual intelligence fosters deeper and more profound experiences and supports personal and professional life on a daily basis (Samul, 2020). The growth of spirituality contributes to heightened emotional awareness, enhancing one's ability to manage and control emotions, which in turn reinforces spiritual development (Selman et al., 2005). Spiritual knowledge helps individuals understand the balance between reason and emotion (Wong & Law, 2002). Many positive psychologists argue that effective emotion regulation leads to greater resilience and improved coping mechanisms in the face of challenges and

stress (Housman, 2017). The literature suggests that spiritual intelligence is critical in preventing and managing emotional reactivity, leading to emotional balance. By awakening the traits and potential of the soul or higher self, spiritual intelligence fosters serenity and peacefulness (Soni & Pareek, 2024).

Emotion regulation involves altering and managing emotional responses (Deng et al., 2022). This process includes understanding and accepting emotions and adjusting them as necessary for emotional and social well-being (Gross et al., 2003). Individuals with an awareness and understanding of their emotions tend to be more at regulating them. Emotion regulation strategies are diverse, encompassing cognitive reappraisal, which lies on cognitive processes, and expressive suppression, which depends on behavioral responses to emotional stimuli. Cognitive strategies, particularly cognitive reappraisal, are generally associated with better mental health outcomes (Cutuli, 2014). Research among university students shows a positive between frequent cognitive reappraisal and higher psychological well-being, as well as a greater tendency toward positive affect (Vally & Ahmed, 2020).

### **Emotion Regulation, Spiritual Intelligence in Emerging Adulthood**

Emerging adulthood is characterised by demographic diversity and instability (Arnett, 2000). During this phase, individuals encounter numerous challenges and stressors, particularly as they transition into higher education. Pursuing academic goals is often accompanied by financial difficulties, estrangement from familial support, acclimatisation to new surroundings, assuming new responsibilities, and navigating novel life circumstances (Deng et al., 2022; Stockinger et al., 2021). Consequently, students may experience frustration, conflict, and stress, requiring adaptive coping strategies (Anju et al., 2021; Hosseinabadi et al., 2023). Emotions play a pivotal role in how individuals navigate these challenges; studies show that emotion regulation strategies, especially cognitive reappraisal, are positively associated with psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Haga et al., 2009; Nelis et al., 2011).

Research indicates a positive association between religious coping mechanisms and cognitive reappraisal, while expressive suppression negatively correlates with religious coping (Dolcos et al., 2021; Trankle, 2006; Vishkin et al., 2015, 2019). Spiritual intelligence, which helps prevent emotional reactivity, leads to emotional balance and serenity (Soni & Pareek, 2024). These findings suggest that individuals who

extensively utilise religious or spiritual coping often exhibit greater psychological well-being, primarily when deeply engaged with their religious practices. Spirituality has been recognised as a robust, albeit sometimes debated, factor in enhancing stress management capabilities (Rehman et al., 2021). Research exploring the connection between emotion regulation and spiritual intelligence in university students remains limited, with most studies conducted in the Persian cultural context. This study investigates the association between emotion regulation and spiritual intelligence among Indian university students, comparing those engaged in religious studies with those pursuing secular academic disciplines.

### **Rationale of Present Research**

Spirituality, often considered an intrinsic human trait, manifests through spiritual intelligence, where individuals embody values and virtues daily. This wisdom fosters a harmonious existence, helping individuals find meaning and purpose in life. When examining the role of religion, it is plausible that variances may emerge between individuals who strongly oppose religious doctrines and those who do not. Research has shown that spiritual teachings bolster student resilience (Bagheri Nia, 2015). Additionally, the literature suggests that holding some form of religious belief or affiliation, even without active participation in religious rites, is related to higher levels of spiritual intelligence (Pinto et al., 2024). However, each student views spirituality uniquely. For many, traditional religious beliefs and practices form the foundation of their spirituality, while for others, such beliefs may play little or no role (Astin et al., 2011).

This study seeks to explore how spiritual intelligence develops differently among students in religious and secular studies. Religious students are typically immersed in spiritual learning, while secular students may cultivate spiritual intelligence through alternative pathways. As young adults navigate the emotional challenges of identity formation, emotion regulation becomes critical to maintaining well-being. Simultaneously, happiness—an essential indicator of personal and societal growth—emerges as a critical outcome of interest.

The study examines whether students engaged in religious studies, driven by a more profound sense of meaning, community, and spiritual purpose, experience higher happiness levels than their secular peers. By comparing these groups, this research seeks to uncover the impact of religious education on spiritual intelligence, emotion regulation, and overall happiness. In doing so, it addresses a gap in the literature, offering insights

into how educational environments—whether spiritually or secularly focused—can be structured to enhance student well-being and contribute to the broader goals of higher education.

### **Objectives**

1. To compare the differences of Spiritual Intelligence (SI), Emotion Regulation (ER), and Subjective Happiness (SH) between students in religious and secular studies.
2. To explore the potential variances in emotion regulation strategies between religious and secular students and their impact on happiness.
3. To determine the role of the educational environment (religious vs. secular) in shaping students' emotion regulation and spiritual intelligence

### **Hypotheses**

There would be a noticeable difference between students pursuing religious studies and those pursuing secular degrees when comparing levels of spiritual intelligence, emotion regulation abilities, and happiness.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The study comprised 192 university students, with a nearly equal distribution of 95 women (49.47%) and 97 men (50.52%). The participants, aged between 18 and 25 years, were selected using purposive sampling. Among them, 95 students studied religious subjects such as philosophy, theology, and spirituality, while the remaining 97 pursued secular degrees in fields like English, History, Biology, Computer Science, and Chemistry at private colleges in Bangalore, Karnataka. The students were mostly enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs and represented diverse religious and regional backgrounds.

#### **Measures**

##### **Personal Information Form**

Personal information was collected to clarify the inclusion criteria, including participants' age, gender, educational background, religious affiliation, and state of residence.

##### **The Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SISRI-24 (King, 2008))**

The Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SISRI) comprises 24 items designed to evaluate aspects of spiritual intelligence. This inventory encompasses four critical dimensions: existential thinking, the production

of personal meaning, awareness of transcendental dimensions, and the expansion of consciousness. The aggregate scores from these items can range from 0 to 96, with higher scores indicating greater spiritual intelligence. Research by (King, 2008) has verified the SISRI's satisfactory reliability, evidenced by a coefficient of 0.89. In the context of the current investigation, the instrument demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92, signifying high internal consistency. The reliability coefficients for its subdimensions were as follows: Critical Existential Thinking at 0.73, Personal Meaning Production at 0.65, Transcendental Awareness at 0.65, and Conscious State Expansion at 0.75.

### **Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ); (Gross & John, 2003)**

The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) is designed to consistently elucidate individual variances in applying cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression techniques. The subscale dedicated to cognitive reappraisal encompasses six items: "I manage my emotional states by altering my perception of the context in which I find myself." Conversely, the subscale for expressive suppression includes four items, such as "I tend to withhold my emotions." Responses to these items are gauged on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 7 indicating strong agreement. The ERQ is validated by its robust internal consistency and test-retest reliability across both dimensions of emotion regulation (Gross & John, 2003). In a specific investigation, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were reported as .83 for the cognitive reappraisal subscale and .78 for the expressive suppression subscale, indicating considerable reliability.

### **Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS); (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999)**

The SHS constitutes a four-item measure designed to assess overall subjective well-being. It inquires, for instance, to what degree respondents align with the characterisation of individuals who experience high levels of joy and satisfaction in their lives, irrespective of external circumstances, thereby maximising every aspect of life. Responses are solicited using a 7-point Likert scale, with options ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 7 ("a great deal"). This instrument has robust psychometric validity (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The SHS appears to have high internal consistency, and the alpha's ranged from 0.79 to 0.94. Test-retest and self-peer correlations suggest good to excellent reliability.

## Procedure

Before commencing the data collection process, we obtained authorisation from the relevant institutional authorities and departments. Once this authorisation was secured, we engaged students in their classrooms during designated time slots. We clearly communicated the study's purpose and the students' roles and rights as research participants. To confirm their voluntary participation, students must complete an informed consent form before participating in the study. Additionally, to ensure they fully understood the procedural and evaluative aspects of the research, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire. Completing the questionnaire took approximately 15-20 minutes. After receiving the completed questionnaires, the researcher provided the participants with a debriefing about the true nature of the study.

## Data Analysis

All participants were required to answer all questions, ensuring that the dataset had no missing values. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 23.0 to examine the variables across different groups. These analyses included descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alpha), t-tests, and the calculation of Cohen's d to assess effect size.

## Results

The obtained results from the sample data are presented below. An overview of the descriptive statistics is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Psychometric Properties of Studies Variables (N=192)*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b><math>\alpha</math></b>
Spiritual Intelligence (SI)	66.26	7.10	.72
Critical Existential Thinking (CET)	19.34	2.67	.69
Personal Meaning Production (PMP)	14.08	2.59	.69
Transcendental Awareness (TA)	19.64	2.32	.66
Conscious State Expansion (CSE)	13.19	2.89	.74
Subjective Happiness (SH)	5.30	.53	.59
Cognitive Reappraisal (CR)	30.21	4.36	.74
Expressive Suppression (ES)	19.01	3.15	.77



The summary of Table 1 data shows that participants generally perceive themselves as having moderately high levels of spiritual intelligence, with an average score of ( $M= 66.26$ ;  $SD=7.10$ ). This suggests a moderate range of spiritual intelligence across the group. Most participants engage in critical thinking, with varying degrees of existential contemplation ( $M= 19.34$ ;  $SD=2.67$ ). They moderately derive personal meaning from experiences ( $M=14.08$ ;  $SD= 2.59$ ), showing consistent responses. Conscious State Expansion is also moderately high on average, with some variability in experiences of higher states of consciousness ( $M =13.19$ ;  $SD =2.89$ ). Subjective happiness scores are relatively high, with minimal variation ( $M= 5.30$ ;  $SD=.53$ ), indicating a consensus on happiness levels. Participants frequently use cognitive reappraisal as an emotion regulation strategy ( $M=30.21$ ;  $SD=4.36$ ), with considerable variability. In contrast, expressive suppression is moderately employed ( $M =19.01$ ;  $SD=3.15$ ), also showing some variation, which reflects diverse emotional management strategies among participants.

The Cronbach's Alpha values serve as indicators of internal consistency within the scales, with values exceeding .70 are generally deemed acceptable. In this study, all scales demonstrated acceptable Cronbach's alpha reliability values. However, some values fell below the established threshold, suggesting that certain items within the scales exhibit moderate internal consistency. It is important to note that lower values may still be considered acceptable in specific contexts-particularly for scales with four to five items. This suggests that while the scale's reliability could be improved, they are sufficiently robust for application in research contexts.

The findings presented in Table 2 reveal a significant disparity in the spiritual intelligence (SI) levels between students pursuing religious studies and those enrolled in secular degree programs. Students majoring in religious studies exhibited higher levels of SI across all areas except for one. However, no discernible variances were observed in one of the domains of spiritual intelligence (TA) and one of the components of emotion regulation (CR). Additionally, students in religious studies scored higher on the subjective happiness scale than their secular counterparts.

**Table 2**

*Independent Sample t-test used for Comparison between Religious Studies and Secular Studies for all variables (N= 192)*

Variables	Secular Studies <sup>a</sup>		Religious Studies <sup>b</sup>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	M	SD	M	SD			
SI	64.25	7.78	68.31	5.68	4.11	.002	.57
CET	18.89	2.89	19.80	2.36	2.36	.035	.33
PMP	13.59	2.96	14.57	2.04	2.66	.001	.37
TA	19.03	2.28	20.26	2.20	3.80	.746	.53
CSE	12.38	3.54	13.67	2.00	2.27	.000	.32
SH	5.11	.55	5.48	.44	5.06	.036	.68
CR	32.04	3.95	28.34	3.97	-6.45	.623	-.84
ES	17.32	2.90	20.74	2.37	8.94	0.01	1.08

*Note:* <sup>a</sup>n=97, <sup>b</sup>n= 95, SI= Spiritual Intelligence, CET=Critical Existential Thinking, PMP= Personal Meaning Production, TA=Transcendental Awareness, CSE= Conscious State Expansion, SH= Subjective Happiness, CR= Cognitive Reappraisal, ES= Expressive Suppression.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Discussion

This study aimed to examine the distinctions between students engaged in religious studies and those pursuing secular education, focusing on spiritual intelligence, emotion regulation, and happiness. The results revealed significant differences in spiritual intelligence and happiness but no notable differences between the groups regarding Transcendental Awareness and Cognitive reappraisal.

The findings indicate that students in religious studies exhibit significantly higher levels of spiritual intelligence. Specifically, religious students scored higher on spiritual intelligence, personal meaning production, Conscious state Expansion, and subjective happiness, with significant differences at  $p < .001$  and  $p < .01$ , critical existential thinking and expressive suppression with  $p < .05$ . The investigation reveals that students pursuing religious studies demonstrate enhanced capabilities in addressing existential questions, finding personal meaning, and consciousness on the transcendent elements, attributed to their consistent engagement with religious doctrines and literature. The findings of Hussain et al. (2023), support

the observation that students majoring in Islamic studies exhibited higher levels of spiritual intelligence and mental health. The current study emphasises the importance of incorporating spirituality into the curriculum to improve students' overall health and well-being. Additionally, students' academic focus shapes their cognitive framework, enabling them to apply these concepts daily.

The concept of Spiritual Intelligence integrates critical existential thinking and expansion of the state of consciousness, suggesting that engaging in religious practices can facilitate personal awareness. However, it is not necessary for its cultivation (Pinto et al., 2024). Agrawal and Khan (2015) also found that students from arts disciplines, frequently engaged with religious contexts, exhibited higher levels of spiritual intelligence than science students. This evidence lends credence to the notion that education enriched with religious studies provides a fertile ground for developing personal awareness and critical thinking about existence. Similarly, Singh and Yadav (2021) identified notable differences in spiritual intelligence between general and professional students, highlighting the influence of academic specialisation in shaping spiritual capacities.

Existing research substantiates the psychological and social advantages of spirituality, indicating that individuals motivated by spiritual beliefs exhibit distinct traits (Pargament et al., 1990; Welch & Barrish, 1982). Although measuring spiritual encounters is challenging, examining the physical, psychological, and social impacts observed in individuals engaged in spiritual endeavours can offer valuable insights (Zinnbaue et al., 1999). In research conducted by Amirian and Fazilat-Pour (2016), the various components of spiritual intelligence were found to be significant predictors of happiness ( $p < .05$ ). This implies that increased Spiritual Intelligence correlates with enhanced happiness. This aligns with (Diener, 1984), who posited that belief in a transcendent purpose and higher power is crucial in enhancing happiness, indicating that spiritual intelligence may prioritise non-material aspects of life over material pursuits (Tak & Sharma, 2022).

A major discovery of this study was identifying a significant difference in expressive suppression ( $p < .05$  level), where religious students exhibited higher tendencies to suppress emotions. This phenomenon is potentially attributable to the imperative of sustaining communal harmony and the adherence to collectivist cultural norms that advocate for regulating emotions through suppression mechanisms. The research

by (Mahdavi Neysiani et al., 2019; Miri et al., 2021) articulates that Individuals possessing religious convictions often report an augmented perception of control and acceptance facilitated through the act of prayer. This practice contributes to an indirect perception of influence over situations that appear immutable and adverse, enhancing their confidence in their capacity to govern and navigate their emotional responses. Furthermore, the conclusion drawn by the study result of Mahdavi Neysiani et al. (2019) underscores the pivotal role of spirituality and emotional management in equipping individuals to contend with stress-inducing situations effectively.

Interestingly, the study found no significant differences between the two groups regarding the Transcendental Awareness component of spiritual intelligence. This is consistent with previous research that emphasises spiritual intelligence's role in general health and happiness (Amirian & Fazilat-Pour, 2016). Both groups also demonstrated similar scores in cognitive reappraisal, suggesting that students may not frequently employ healthy cognitive rethinking strategies in challenging situations, leading to lower scores on these items.

Cohen's  $d$  was used to quantify the effect sizes, revealing a substantial, moderate difference in spiritual intelligence ( $d = .57$ ) favouring religious students. Effect sizes were also notable for critical existential thinking ( $d = -.33$ ), personal meaning production ( $d = .37$ ), and conscious state expansion ( $d = .32$ ), suggesting that religious students benefit more from environments that encourage spiritual reflection and meaning-making, which positively influence happiness and existential thought processes. The subjective happiness scale reported a medium to substantial effect size ( $d = -.68$ ), indicating that religious students experience higher levels of happiness. This suggests a potential association between spiritual or religious frameworks and increased happiness. In the domain of emotion regulation, expressive suppression showed a maximum effect size, with religious students displaying a higher tendency toward suppression, possibly reflecting the communal nature of religious life where individual emotions may be subdued for collective well-being.

Conversely, the transcendental awareness ( $d = .53$ ) and cognitive reappraisal ( $d = -.84$ ) domains showed negligible differences between the groups, indicating that both secular and religious students engage similarly in transcendental awareness and cognitive reframing states. The absence of significant differences in these areas suggests that

students may share comparable approaches to these cognitive and emotional processes regardless of their educational context.

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

The findings derived from the investigation cannot be generalised extensively due to the constrained scope of its sample, which consisted exclusively of individuals from a singular religious orientation and students enrolled in a limited selection of private institutions. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings is significantly restricted. The potential for divergent outcomes is considerable if the research incorporates a broader and more heterogeneous cohort of participants from both religious studies and assorted academic disciplines. Furthermore, integrating qualitative research methodologies would likely yield profound insights into how students interpret and incorporate religious and spiritual practices within their daily lives. Such an approach promises to elucidate the intricate dynamics in spiritual intelligence, emotion regulation, and subjective well-being among a diverse student demographic, thereby contributing to a more nuanced comprehension of these phenomena.

### **Conclusions**

The current research findings indicate that students who engage in religious studies demonstrate higher levels of spiritual intelligence and a greater sense of happiness than their peers involved in secular studies. Notably, these students are more skilled at expressing emotions through expressive suppression. This compelling evidence highlights the profound impact of religious studies on an individual's spiritual and psychological well-being. It is evident that the comprehensive approach of religious education deepens an individual's appreciation for the sanctity of life, broadens their intellectual horizons, and fosters peaceful coexistence with others. Beyond enhancing personal happiness, spiritual intelligence and effective emotion regulation are crucial for achieving the overarching goal of higher education. This underscores the invaluable role of religious studies in shaping well-rounded, fulfilled individuals who are prepared to make positive contributions to our world.

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