

The Mental Health Crisis Among Teens

We are witnessing a massive shift globally and nationally in how teens and young adults think about and engage in religion and spirituality, their mental health, and their engagement with others in real life and virtually. Several recent studies document all of these trends. For example:

- The majority of teens report daily use of YouTube (77%), TikTok (58%), Snapchat (51%) and/or Instagram. About one out of five describe their use of YouTube, TikTok or Snapchat as “almost constant” (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, & Massarat, 2022).
- Thirty-six percent of teens feel their social media use is “too much”. While one-third recognize that social media has a negative effect on youth, only 9% believe they personally experience these negative effects (Vogelis, et al., 2022).
- According to the Centers for Disease Control, 42% of middle and high school students felt persistently hopelessness and 29% reported poor mental health in 2021. That same year 1 out of 5 seriously considered suicide and 1 in 10 attempted to take their life. These continue a 10 year trend of worsening mental health among U.S. teens (CDC, 2022).
- Teen girls have been hit particularly hard by the current mental health crisis. In 2021, 57% of high school girls reported “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the past year”, compared with 29% of males (CDC, 2022). Three out of ten girls seriously considered suicide and 13% have attempted (CDC, 2022).
- One out of four teens see religion as “very important” in their life and one-third do not identify with any religion. (Pew Research Center, 2020).
- Teens generally express significant religious and spiritual uncertainty. For example, 45% believe that “Many religions may be true”, while 23% see no or little truth in religion (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Despite the fact that all three of these trends – increasing social media use, increasing mental health concerns, and decreasing engagement in religion and spirituality – are occurring simultaneously, few have investigated scientifically the relationships among them. A handful of recent studies have documented the protective effects of religion and spirituality on teens’ mental health. Data from Springtide Research Institute (2023) suggest that when youth see religion or spirituality as a resource to help with coping, it can have a positive effect on their mental health. Jacobi, Cowden, & Vaidyanathan (2022) found that decreases in religiosity (important of religion frequency of prayer, frequency of religious service attendance, and connection to one’s faith community) were associated with lower overall levels of mental health.

A separate body of research documents that excessive social media and internet usage correlates with loneliness and depression among youth. In fact, one global study found a tipping

point where loneliness began to rise when half of the population’s youth gained smart phone access (Twenge, et al., 2021).

No published studies have yet addressed religion & spirituality, social media use and mental health among youth in one study. Important questions remain such as: To what extent are these trends correlated? Are some causes and others effects, or do they all stem from a separate, as yet unidentified cause? What do these trends mean for the future?

The Center for Bible Engagement at Back to the Bible set out to examine these questions. In this study we asked a random sample of 4,744 teens (ages 14-17) from nine countries about their beliefs, levels of motivation and attitudes towards religion and spirituality. We also asked about their emotional well-being, struggles, and social media engagement. The goal was to explore these topics from the full spectrum of the teen population, from those who do not hold any religious affiliation or spiritual beliefs to those who do. In this paper, we outline our descriptive findings for each domain. We also present multivariate analyses predicting teens’ experience of “destructive thoughts”, a risk factor for suicidality.

Methods

The samples were drawn from Dynata© survey panels from 1/25/23 to 3/7/23. A total of 4,744 teens responded with a 91% completion rate. The sample was stratified based on gender and country (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample counts by gender and country.

What country do you live in? * With which gender do you identify most? Crosstabulation											
		Female		With which gender do you identify most?				Prefer not to answer		Total	
		N	%	N	%	Gender-nonconforming/Other	N	%	N	%	
What country do you live in?	Australia	174	7.6%	201	8.7%	1	1.0%	1	2.7%	377	8.0%
	Brazil	175	7.6%	238	10.3%	1	1.0%	0	0.0%	414	8.7%
	Canada	198	8.6%	193	8.3%	4	4.1%	1	2.7%	396	8.4%
	India	153	6.7%	156	6.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	309	6.5%
	Indonesia	190	8.3%	167	7.2%	1	1.0%	2	5.4%	360	7.6%
	Japan	229	10.0%	217	9.4%	2	2.0%	0	0.0%	448	9.4%
	Singapore	168	7.3%	178	7.7%	5	5.1%	2	5.4%	353	7.4%
	United Kingdom	173	7.5%	154	6.7%	8	8.2%	2	5.4%	337	7.1%
	United States	833	36.3%	810	35.0%	76	77.6%	29	78.4%	1748	36.9%
Total	2293	100.0%	2314	100.0%	98	100.0%	37	100.0%	4742	100.0%	

Once their parents gave consent, participants completed a 15-minute survey that included questions related to their religious and spiritual beliefs, well-being, and social media use. They were given points which they can accumulate and trade in for gift cards and discount codes for their participation.

Spiritual Beliefs & Practices

At the Center for Bible Engagement, we believe that asking someone what they believe will happen to them when they die provides a key insight to their spiritual beliefs. Table 2 displays this data for our 9-country teen sample.

A significant minority of youth in Australia, Canada, Japan and the United Kingdom don't believe in an afterlife, choosing the response "I'm dead. That's it." Belief that they will experience heavens because they've been a good person and lived a good life is particular popular in India and Indonesia, accounting for about one-third of youth in those countries. A significant portion of Indonesian teens also believe they will go to heaven because they've followed their religion. Brazil and the United States have the highest percentages espousing the Christian belief that they will go to heaven because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Uncertainty over what happens after death is common across all countries ranging from 19% (India & Indonesia) to 33% (Australia) of responses.

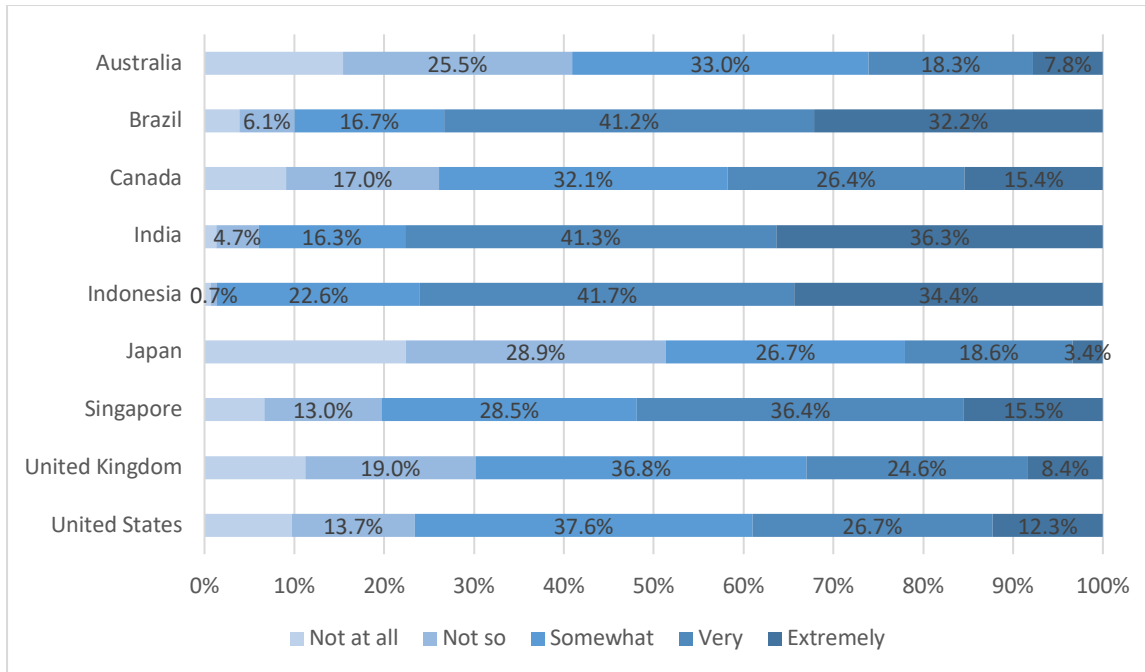
Table 2. Beliefs about life after death.

	I'm dead. That's it.	I will experience heaven because I tried my best to be a good person and live a good life.	I will experience heaven because I am devoted to my religion and its practices.	I will experience heaven because I am saved by grace through faith in Jesus.	I will be reincarnated.	I will go to hell.	I am not sure what will happen.
Australia	23.5%	21.8%	4.6%	7.2%	7.8%	1.0%	33.2%
Brazil	10.3%	10.6%	5.2%	33.5%	11.6%	1.0%	24.5%
Canada	17.0%	24.8%	6.3%	12.9%	6.3%	3.1%	28.9%
India	11.3%	31.1%	14.6%	7.9%	15.2%	0.7%	18.9%
Indonesia	2.4%	33.0%	28.5%	9.0%	2.4%		19.1%
Japan	38.5%	10.2%	2.2%	2.2%	14.0%	0.9%	31.4%
Singapore	12.8%	20.4%	16.1%	15.2%	7.9%	0.9%	25.8%
United Kingdom	23.8%	13.1%	10.0%	8.8%	11.6%	1.9%	26.3%
United States	11.5%	18.7%	5.4%	20.5%	11.0%	1.8%	28.5%
Total	15.2%	19.7%	8.6%	15.5%	10.2%	1.5%	27.1%

To understand more about their spiritual beliefs we asked participants to choose from a list of statements the ones that best describe them. As Table 3 shows, small minorities chose statements indicating a complete lack of spiritual belief. That is, very few youth, definitely say that there is no afterlife, we have no soul, or God does not exist. Uncertainty or doubt appears to be a more common theme in most countries, with about 1 out of 5 teens indicating that while God may exist, they can't be sure. Exceptions to this are Indonesian and Brazilian teens who express little doubt.

	There is no afterlife after we die.	I believe we have no soul.	God does not exist.	I have no need for God.	I'm spiritual but don't believe in God.	God may exist but I can't be sure.
Australia	8.8%	2.9%	10.1%	9.8%	9.3%	20.2%
Brazil	5.1%	3.4%	3.1%	2.2%	2.4%	5.8%
Canada	8.1%	3.0%	6.8%	7.3%	6.1%	16.7%
India	9.4%	4.5%	2.6%	4.2%	5.2%	16.5%
Indonesia	1.4%	2.2%	0.0%	0.3%	0.6%	0.6%
Japan	9.6%	0.9%	11.4%	10.9%	2.7%	17.2%
Singapore	5.1%	2.5%	6.2%	3.1%	4.0%	14.7%
United Kingdom	12.2%	5.3%	13.6%	14.5%	11.3%	26.7%
United States	6.8%	3.1%	6.9%	7.8%	9.5%	22.2%
Total	7.2%	3.1%	6.9%	7.0%	6.7%	17.4%

We were also interested in how youth feel about their own spiritual well-being. The following graph illustrates that most teens, regardless of country, say their spiritual well-being is somewhat to extremely important to them. Japanese youth give the least emphasis to their spiritual well-being, with more than half indicating it's "not at all" or "not so" important.



If we consider the mean rating for each country, with 1 being not at all and 5 being extremely, Indonesian, Indian, and Brazilian youth place the most importance on their spiritual well-being.

1 = not at all; 5 extremely

Indonesia	4.08
India	4.07
Brazil	3.92
Singapore	3.41
Canada	3.22
United States	3.18
United Kingdom	3.00
Australia	2.78
Japan	2.52

Our final spiritual question focuses on how youth characterize their faith or belief in God. As the following table illustrates, responses vary widely across countries. Indian and Indonesian teens nearly universally feel they are growing towards God and stronger faith. The majority in Brazil, Canada, Singapore and the United States also report growing. Australian, Japanese, and UK teens indicate higher rates of feeling their spiritual growth is stagnant.

Table 3. How would you characterize your spiritual well-being?

	Growing towards God and a stronger faith	Not Growing	Moving away from God
Australia	29.4%	62.1%	8.5%
Brazil	79.7%	16.8%	3.5%
Canada	51.4%	42.2%	6.4%
India	91.1%	6.6%	2.3%
Indonesia	90.4%	8.2%	1.4%
Japan	21.8%	43.7%	34.5%
Singapore	58.3%	37.3%	4.5%
United Kingdom	38.7%	47.0%	14.3%
United States	53.7%	33.9%	12.4%

Struggles

Adolescent mental health has arisen as a public health crisis in the United States particularly. Our survey approached the question of youths' emotional well-being by asking about what they struggle with. Specifically, we presented a list of common struggles revealed in our previous research and asked them to indicate their top two.

Table 4 shows significant variations across countries, though anger and laziness were fairly common. Brazilian youth had a notably higher percentage identifying discouragement as a struggle. In the United States and the United Kingdom, destructive thoughts, self-forgiveness and loneliness were noticeably more common compared to rates in other countries.

Table 4. Percent of youth identifying this as a top struggle.

	Australia	Brazil	Canada	India	Indonesia	Japan	Singapore	United Kingdom	United States
Anger	26.8%	30.7%	22.7%	40.1%	22.8%	10.7%	24.1%	39.2%	43.0%
Criticizing or thinking bad about others	11.1%	21.5%	17.2%	16.2%	17.5%	6.9%	16.1%	20.5%	23.6%
Destructive thoughts	9.5%	11.8%	9.6%	15.5%	9.7%	1.1%	7.4%	26.1%	24.2%
Forgiving others	6.9%	8.7%	12.1%	14.6%	19.7%	6.3%	11.0%	13.1%	15.4%
Self-forgiveness	6.9%	5.6%	10.1%	15.9%	8.3%	3.1%	11.0%	17.5%	20.5%
Discontentment	4.5%	9.7%	6.8%	18.1%	15.0%	15.6%	11.3%	7.4%	10.0%
Discouragement	6.9%	24.2%	10.1%	18.8%	6.9%	7.6%	6.2%	11.9%	17.3%
Jealousy	8.2%	6.5%	5.3%	12.0%	3.9%	2.5%	7.9%	22.3%	22.5%
Fear	9.5%	11.4%	7.3%	13.6%	6.9%	2.2%	5.1%	19.6%	20.7%
Not growing spiritually	1.6%	4.3%	4.8%	8.1%	16.4%	1.8%	7.1%	8.3%	7.5%
Pride	4.2%	5.8%	4.0%	15.5%	5.0%	2.2%	7.6%	6.2%	8.6%
Laziness	29.2%	23.7%	22.2%	25.2%	14.4%	10.5%	23.2%	36.5%	33.5%
Loneliness	11.7%	7.0%	10.9%	9.7%	4.4%	3.8%	9.6%	23.1%	26.7%
Lust	4.2%	4.1%	3.3%	6.1%	7.8%	7.6%	5.9%	16.6%	17.7%
Dishonesty	4.0%	1.4%	7.3%	5.5%	3.6%	0.9%	3.4%	9.5%	12.6%
Greed	2.4%	3.4%	3.8%	5.8%	2.2%	1.6%	4.0%	8.3%	8.1%

Social Media Involvement & Consequences

We asked participants how often they use 8 common social media platforms: TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, LinkedIn and Reddit. For each they could respond None, 1-2 hours, 3-4 hours, 5-6 hours, or All Day. We calculated a social media index by converting these values to hours (0, 1.5, 3.5, 5.5, or 8) and summing them. The resulting scores could range from 0 (no use of any of these platforms) to 64 (8 hours per day on each platform). As the following figure illustrates, the lowest average social media use found among Japanese teens, at about 5 hours per day. Indian and Indonesian youth report the highest social media involvement.

Table 5. Mean hours utilizing social media daily.

Indonesia	16.10
India	14.32
Brazil	12.02
Singapore	11.82
Canada	9.60
United States	9.47
United Kingdom	8.56
Australia	6.94
Japan	5.08

The following figure looks in more detail at the three most common platforms among our participants. Except for those in India and Japan, most youth spend at least 1 hour a day on Tik Tok. In the United States, one out of five is on Tik Tok for more than 4 hours a day.

Table 6. Social Media Use by Country.

		Australia	Brazil	Canada	India	Indonesia	Japan	Singapore	United Kingdom	United States
Tik Tok	None	27.4%	29.8%	29.9%	63.9%	10.9%	60.0%	26.5%	25.0%	26.3%
	1-2 hours	45.2%	48.0%	51.3%	26.0%	54.3%	36.0%	49.3%	30.4%	33.0%
	3-4 hours	21.1%	12.9%	9.4%	5.1%	15.2%	1.3%	14.9%	29.8%	20.8%
	5-6 hours	5.3%	4.3%	7.8%	2.4%	9.4%	2.0%	5.3%	11.2%	9.9%
	All day	1.0%	5.0%	1.6%	2.7%	10.1%	0.7%	4.0%	3.5%	10.0%
Instagram	None	33.2%	8.2%	29.5%	10.3%	5.8%	53.5%	26.1%	26.0%	31.8%
	1-2 hours	57.5%	61.8%	54.9%	60.0%	63.8%	41.5%	47.9%	57.5%	44.5%
	3-4 hours	6.3%	19.1%	8.4%	13.0%	10.9%	2.3%	16.8%	10.1%	13.3%
	5-6 hours	2.3%	5.9%	5.5%	7.7%	10.1%	1.3%	4.3%	4.2%	4.9%
	All day	0.7%	4.9%	1.6%	9.0%	9.4%	1.3%	5.0%	2.3%	5.6%
YouTube	None	17.5%	5.6%	13.4%	1.0%	1.5%	11.3%	11.8%	17.6%	16.1%
	1-2 hours	58.9%	49.0%	58.2%	48.0%	42.5%	66.3%	55.3%	42.8%	37.4%
	3-4 hours	17.2%	26.3%	16.7%	29.2%	30.9%	17.0%	22.0%	23.6%	23.6%
	5-6 hours	5.3%	14.1%	9.5%	12.8%	9.1%	4.0%	5.9%	11.5%	13.1%
	All day	1.0%	4.9%	2.3%	9.1%	16.0%	1.3%	4.9%	4.5%	9.8%

How youth engage with social media is another important consideration in addition to the amount of time spent. Table 6 shows that in most countries, teens are typically focused on scrolling or viewing content. The percentage that divides their time between scrolling and posting/sharing their own content varies from a low of 12% in Japan to 38% in India.

Table 7. How do you engage with social media?

	Mostly scrolling or viewing content	Equally scrolling/viewing and posting or sharing my own content	Mostly posting or sharing my own content
Australia	83.0%	16.0%	1.0%
Brazil	63.8%	32.6%	3.6%
Canada	73.8%	24.8%	1.3%
India	54.9%	38.3%	6.8%
Indonesia	77.7%	17.2%	5.1%
Japan	82.4%	12.1%	5.5%
Singapore	62.1%	34.2%	3.7%
United Kingdom	81.2%	17.6%	1.3%
United States	77.3%	21.0%	1.7%

We asked participants to respond to a series of statements about how they use social media and how it affects them. They rated each statement from 1 = never to 5 = daily. Table 8 shows the mean responses for each statement by country. In general, youth indicated experiencing both positive negative effects. For negative effects, value above 3 are particularly concerning, corresponding to at least “monthly”.

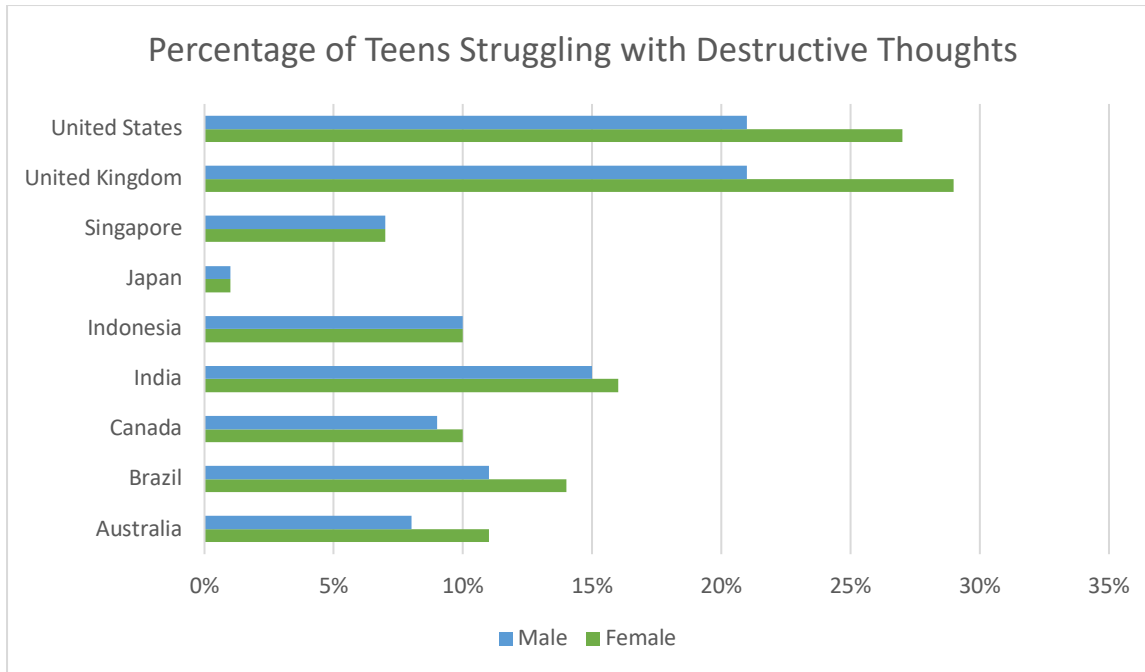
Table 8. Mean Media Effects.

	Australia	Brazil	Canada	India	Indonesia	Japan	Singapore	United Kingdom	United States
Personally discouraged or makes me feel bad about myself.	2.1561	2.1353	2.3137	3.0000	2.3467	1.8372	2.1967	2.5032	2.3442
Feel emotionally close to someone	2.2980	2.9737	2.4968	3.8267	3.4743	2.4868	2.5377	2.2834	2.3325
Felt lonely or disconnected from others	2.0530	2.4934	2.5162	2.9529	2.2930	1.6093	2.0656	2.7668	2.7855
Turned to social media for encouragement	2.2649	2.4836	2.5798	3.3490	3.1550	1.7914	2.4572	2.7331	2.6096
Accidentally come across sexually explicit content online	2.1258	2.2434	2.5131	2.9233	2.6519	1.7285	2.2673	2.6314	2.5891
Feel guilty about things I say or do online	1.6093	2.0367	1.9674	2.6933	2.4424	1.3367	1.9835	1.9389	1.9924
My online activities help make me a better person	2.3123	3.1329	2.4026	3.8667	3.4275	1.6711	2.5658	2.4437	2.3830

Predicting Destructive Thoughts

Suicidal ideation and attempts have increased significantly among teens, particularly among teens and pre-teens in the United States. Given this crisis, we aimed to identify factors that may put youth at increased risk.

Our main predictive analyses focus on teens' experiences with "destructive thoughts", a risk factor for suicidality. Notably, we find that destructive thoughts are a struggle for a significant proportion of teens in the United States and United Kingdom.



Bi-variate analyses examining the correlation between destructive thoughts and spiritual beliefs indicates that destructive thoughts more common among teens endorsing these beliefs:

- I have no need for God
- I'm spiritual, but don't believe in God
- God may exist but I can't be sure
- God does not exist
- I'm not motivated to grow spiritually
- There is no afterlife when we die
- If God exists, I'd like to know him
- If there is an afterlife, I'd like to know what it is and how to experience
- I am curious about spiritual things
- If Jesus existed, I want to know more about him
- I want to know more about the Bible
- I am a sinner, I need help
- I need help in dealing with my issues
- I want to understand God's plan for my life.

We hypothesize that spiritual uncertainty or the lack of belief in a spiritual existence, combined with strong social media influence, may leave teens more vulnerable to destructive thoughts. To test this hypothesis, we conducted binary logistic regression analysis predicting odds of identifying destructive thoughts as a struggle. The analyses revealed several spiritual beliefs and social media practices that effect the odds of experiencing destructive thoughts. Higher odds are associated with:

- Living in the US +210%
- Living in the UK +214%
- Being female +29%
- Identifying as a non-conforming gender +46%
- Believing there is no God or afterlife +32%
- Being uncertain that there is a God or afterlife +51%
- Believing in God but not having a saving relationship with Jesus +32%
- Being susceptible to the negative effect of social media +16%

Protective factors associated with lower odds of destructive thoughts include:

- Living in Japan -85%
- Bible engagement -20%
- Engaging with social media -2%

Table 9. Binary Logistic Results Predicting Struggling with Destructive Thoughts.

Predictors	B	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Male			9.044	2	.011	
Female	.254	.091	7.850	1	.005	1.290
Transgender/non-conforming	.382	.225	2.883	1	.090	1.465
Australia			97.934	8	<.001	
Brazil	.350	.249	1.975	1	.160	1.420
Canada	-.059	.256	.053	1	.818	.943
India	-.161	.257	.390	1	.532	.852
Indonesia	-.003	.275	.000	1	.990	.997
Japan	-1.858	.489	14.459	1	<.001	.156
Singapore	-.512	.292	3.083	1	.079	.599
United Kingdom	.760	.227	11.183	1	<.001	2.138
United States	.742	.194	14.640	1	<.001	2.100
No Bible engagement			2.219	2	.330	
Engage the Bible 1-3 days a week	-.021	.104	.041	1	.839	.979
Engage the Bible 4-7 days a week	-.214	.146	2.130	1	.144	.808
Total hours on social media	-.021	.006	14.040	1	<.001	.979
Experience negative effects of social media	.150	.014	115.015	1	<.001	1.161

Experience positive effects of social media	.002	.014	.028	1	.866	1.002
Feel you are a sinner and need help, but don't believe in Jesus	.277	.103	.233	1	.007	1.319
Feel there is no such thing as a spiritual life	.274	.120	.163	1	.023	1.315
Feel uncertain about what you believe	.412	.090	.209	1	<.001	1.510
Constant	-3.576	.231	239.857	1	<.001	.028

Conclusions

In this study we've explored the convergence of three trends among youth:

- Increasing disengagement from religion and spirituality
- Increasing use of social media
- Increasing mental health concerns, particularly suicidality

Data from 9 countries indicate that while youth in most areas say their spiritual well-being is important to them, a significant percentage also express a lack of belief or at least uncertainty about key spiritual concepts. These concepts include: what will happen to them when they die, if there's an afterlife, if we have a soul, and if God exists.

When asked to indicate what they are struggling with, anger and laziness rated high across all countries. Brazilian youth had a notably higher percentage identifying discouragement as a struggle. In the United States and the United Kingdom, destructive thoughts, self-forgiveness and loneliness were noticeably more common compared to rates in other countries.

Nearly all youth indicated a strong connection to social media. The estimated total number of daily hours varies from 5 hours per day in Japan to 16 in Indonesia. Youth predominantly spend their social media time scrolling through content rather than commenting on or posting their own. They report experiencing both negative and positive effects of this activity, from feeling encouraged to experiencing loneliness.

To examine the convergence of mental health concerns, social media use, and spirituality, we focused specifically on youth's reports of "destructive thoughts". Rates of this risk factor for suicidality are particularly high in the United Kingdom and the United States, affecting 1 out of 5 males and more than 1 out of 4 females. Among youth identifying as transgender or gender non-conforming, rates are even higher at 31%.

Destructive thoughts also correlate with many spiritual beliefs. Rates of destructive thoughts are more common among teens who express that they don't believe in anything spiritual, are uncertain about their beliefs, or believe they sin, but don't believe in Jesus.

Our multivariate analysis predicting risk of destructive thoughts revealed increased risk associated with location (US or UK), gender (female or transgender/non-conforming), a lack of spiritual beliefs, uncertainty about spiritual beliefs, believing in God but without a relationship with Jesus, and experiencing negative effects of social media. We also find several protective factors: living in Japan, engaging with the Bible four or more days a week, and social media use (when we control for how often you experience negative effects). Taken together, these findings suggest that spiritual uncertainty or the lack of belief in a spiritual existence, combined with strong social media influence that generates negative feelings, may leave teens more vulnerable to destructive thoughts.

It's important to note several limitations of our study. Our samples represent only 9 countries and only teens between the ages of 14 and 17 who were willing and able to complete an online survey. It's possible that to some extent our participants are outliers in their social media use in particular, given that they were participating in an online survey.

Another limitation is that spiritual and religious beliefs and practices are vast and complex. While we attempted to get a broad understanding of youth's beliefs, practices, and what they personally mean to them, there are certainly aspects of their spiritual lives that we did not examine.

These limitations notwithstanding, we believe these data are an important contribution to the literature. As one of the first studies to consider the relationships among spirituality, social media, and mental health, the data presented here deepen our understanding of the inner world of today's teens. We also provide some beginning evidence of factors that increase or lower their risk of destructive thoughts. Future studies, particularly those in other localities, should further explore these issues.

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