



Spiritual but not religious seek unrestricted connection to selves, others, and earth: Formative research on the explosive growth of an ‘inactive public’ beyond the organization

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ABSTRACT

In the last half century, we have observed an explosive growth in individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious. Today, over one in four U.S. adults fall into this category. This phenomenon is an influential component of our modern and changing society, as spiritual beliefs are associated with health, well-being, goals, feelings, and attitudes. In this formative research study, we apply the public relations’ approach of Sense-Making of an ‘inactive public’ beyond the organization to explore how these individuals define themselves, how their beliefs influence their behaviors (such as political, environmental, communal) and how they feel they are perceived by those around them. Amongst others, our main findings reveal that the spiritual but not religious have disparate specific beliefs and often struggle or resist articulating who they are, yet more broadly share a common belief in *connection* to others, the natural environment, and one’s self. The majority emphasize acceptance, tolerance, compassion, and the importance of each individual embracing their own spiritual positions. The participants report feeling misunderstood, misrepresented, or ignored by others and media, and that their behaviors (perspective on the world, actions, political ideologies, etc) are influenced by their spiritual beliefs.

About a quarter of U.S. adults (27%) say they think of themselves as spiritual but not religious, a growth that has been broad-based and occurred among different genders, races and ethnicities, ages and education levels as well as political parties (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017). In the late 1940s and 1950s, only 2–3% of Americans did not report a formal religious identity (Newport, 2016). The change in self-identification as spiritual but not religious across a wide swath of the U.S. adult population has been rapid and substantial.

Religion is often conceptualized as a collective enterprise (Rüpke, 2015) with a collective orientation, obligations and system of orienting symbols (Durkheim, 1947). Members of a religious community are understood based on the group’s shared dogma. Yet with individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious, there is no clearly articulated central or collective orientation to which one may refer. Recent research often studies the growth in self-identification as “spiritual but not religious” without considering its unprecedented nature (Willard & Norzayan, 2017). There remains ambiguity about these individuals and what this shift is and means.

Spirituality is associated with health and well-being (Van Dierendock & Mohan, 2006) and a resource for development (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Spiritual change is a unique, multidimensional and complex form of individual change (Russo-Netzer & Mayseless, 2014) that may transform a person’s goals, feelings, attitudes, behaviors and the views on the meaning of life (Paloutzian et al., 1999). Spirituality is a critical component of human life, and as such understanding the rapidly increasing demographic group of individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious is essential for understanding the transformation of our modern society. Given the centrality of spirituality in human life, there have been calls for an increase in general scholarship on the role of spirituality and religion in organizations across various disciplines, including public relations (Smudde, 2021). As religious identification is considered a demographic characteristic, we refer to those who think of themselves as spiritual but not religious as a demographic, which is a common practice in research and reporting (Pew Research Center, 2020).

The profession of public relations has moved from looking at large

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groups of people, or publics, to “more targeted groups with specialized human characteristics, such as specified demographics, psychographics, lifestyles” (Stacks, 2016, p. 4). This societal shift offers a unique opportunity for public relations researchers to not only respond to the call for increased attention to the specialized demographic of the spiritual and religious (Smudde, 2021; Spaulding, 2021; Tilson, 2021), but to also respond to the call for public relations practices to be proactive and to develop a larger and more comprehensive body of knowledge through short- and long-term research dealing with change in social and economic environments (Stacks, 2016). As such, we apply a Sense-Making approach (Dervin, 1999) to a public beyond the perspective of the organization (Karlberg, 1996), initially conceptualizing these individuals as an ‘inactive public’ about whom we strive to make no assumptions, allowing them to tell us who they are (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006). To this end, we conducted an in-depth qualitative, formative study with 28 participants who identify as spiritual but not religious through intensive one-on-one interviews. This research explores the nature of their beliefs, how they define themselves, how their beliefs influence their behaviors and lives and how they feel they are perceived by those around them.

1. Public relations, religion and the spiritual but not religious

Early research in public relations scholarship (Tilson & Chao, 2002; Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2006) began to explore the importance and nature of relationships with religious and spiritual audiences, and current scholars are starting to build in this area. However, compared to other fields such as sociology and marketing, religion and spirituality have been largely unexplored territory for public relations research, with the discipline failing to recognize the power of faith in society and the marketplace (Tilson, 2021). Not understanding the role faith and spirituality play in people’s lives can block organization-public relations (Spaulding, 2021). And despite the helpful implications of understanding religious and spiritual stakeholders for corporate, nonprofit and religious communicators alike, “the intersection of faith, religion, spirituality and public relations is an under-researched area of scholarship when compared to research in public relations in corporate contexts” (Spaulding, 2021, p. 205).

We focus on individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious as this is a unique group that exists outside of religion, as the religious context has received more attention within communication. For instance, the devotional-promotion model proposed by Tilson and Chao (2002) suggested a close relationship between public relations and religion as a way to examine religious communication. Several studies have even applied the model to examine secular contexts as well, such as how fan culture and communities can be created by brands (Spaulding, 2016) and the football fan culture (Xifra, 2008). Citing the case of the video game industry, Spaulding (2016) applied the aspects of the devotional-promotional model to explain that players treat video games as an object of devotion due to the varied reasons they play the games. While their emotions range from excitement to emotional coping, the players also create sub-cultures around video games, much like religion. And recently, public relations studies on religious communities have surged, such as an examination of social media conversion with faith-based social media influencers (Smith & Hallows, Vail, et al., 2021), church communicators’ perceptions of social media influencers (Golan et al., 2021), religion’s role in corporate social advocacy (Waymer & VanSlette, 2021) as well as a case study of a religious institution’s approach to developing and fostering relationships with stakeholders (Morehouse, 2021).

We have also focused on individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious not only due to the dearth of attention cited above, but also as across disciplines there is no consensus about these individuals. For instance, within communication, in examining the spiritual but not religious population, Sanchez et al. (2017) concluded that young individuals who identified as spiritual but not religious are less committed

to community, thus “failing to engage in a more pluralistic and social practice of religion” (p. 86). They noted that young adults practice spiritual but not religious ideas as “individualistic and unguided attempts encompassed in believing without believing and sharing.” (p. 87). The effect of what Sanchez et al. (2017) described as this unguided or misguided spiritual path was linked to acts of delinquency such as substance abuse among the youth by Seto (2021).

However, sociologists have noted that this generalization of individuals who value spirituality over religion as ‘individualistic’ is a very narrow approach to understanding spirituality’s cultural movement (Ammerman, 2013; Hastings, 2016; Smith & Halligan, 2021). Hastings (2016) challenged the assumptions that non-religious people lack the social connectedness that religious congregations offer by conducting in-depth interviews with people who identified as spiritual but not religious and found that they fostered a sense of community. Smith and Halligan (2021) studied how non-religious people find meaning in life’s existential questions. They discussed that by sharing personal narratives in social spaces, the non-religious community found purpose in everyday lived experiences and important events, challenging notions that identifying as spiritual but not religious bears adverse effects.

This vague understanding of a growing global population provides a fertile ground for public relations researchers to offer the strengths inherent in this discipline, and to support understanding and analyzing this cultural movement and its implications on society and the lived experiences of the public.

2. Sense-making of an ‘inactive public’ beyond the organization

Public relations scholars have sought to focus on lived experiences of publics in different contexts by advocating to focus on the public beyond the perspective of organizations (Karlberg, 1996). Understanding the public continues to be a primary focus of the public relations practice and research as the public’s attributes influence goals and effective communication strategies (Werder, 2005). In examining the notions of identity and its implications on public relations, Curtin and Gaither (2005) noted that the “public could not be neatly segmented into discrete boxes concerning the organization’s goals and objectives” because their identities are constituted and reconstituted by changing cultural discourse (p. 83).

Sense-Making/sensemaking arose in communication-field literature in the late 1970s and has gained increased attention, with multiple uses now in play that tend to share the intent of applying a more humanistic way of understanding human behavior to help systems communicate more effectively (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). “Sense-Making” with a hyphen, referring to Brenda Dervin’s Sense-Making Methodology, is an approach that focuses on the individual as they move through time and space, encountering gaps and striving to make sense of the situation to move across it (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003). Karl Weick conceptualizes sensemaking as a fluid process by which individuals in an organization comprehend, construct meaning, search for patterns and interact in the pursuit of common understandings (Weick, 1995). These two approaches are common within public relations scholarship, and in this study, we refer to Dervin’s approach of Sense-Making, which approaches research as “an applied communication situation involving attempts to understand how others have designed their senses of their worlds” (1999, p. 47) and does not prescribe set procedures or an organizational focus as Weick does, but rather philosophical guidance for approaching research. Sense-Making challenges the belief that a person’s actions are easily predictable and fits with a process worldview rather than the static assumptions that may exist with audience segmentation (Walker, 2006).

Grunig and Hunt sought to address part of the challenges inherent in static audience segmentation through the situational theory of publics, which explains specific publics’ active or passive communication behaviors based on three situational variables: problem recognition,

constraint recognition and level of involvement (Grunig & Hung, 1984). According to this theory, publics are “groups of diffused people who communicate similarly about a set of related issues actively, passively or not at all” (1983, p. 604). In this theory, every person is part of one of four publics in regard to a situation or topic (Major, 1998). Non-publics/apathetic publics are the most passive of the groups, made up of people who are unaware or do not acknowledge certain situations. Latent publics are aware of a topic or issue but do not recognize it as a problem. Aware publics see a situation but do not participate in finding a solution. Active publics see a situation as a problem and are involved in finding the solution to it. While individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious may, at a precursory glance, be perceived as a ‘non-public/apathetic public’ in line with this typology, we argue that this presumes that these individuals have low to no problem recognition, low to no involvement and no constraint recognition without first understanding who these individuals communicate who they are.

In both Weick’s and Grunig and Hunt’s research, the audience is viewed from an organization’s lens. In explaining the Sense-Making approach, Foreman-Wernet and Dervin (2006) critiqued that “there remains an understandable tendency for both researchers and practitioners to regard any given situation from the organization’s viewpoint and to, thus, make inaccurate assumptions about publics, especially ‘inactive’ publics” (p. 287). The Sense-Making approach deviates from this lens and proposes a methodology of allowing participants to share their own interpretations of the world in a way that is presumed valid by researcher and organization (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006).

Focusing on art institutions, Foreman-Wernet and Dervin (2006) discussed a Sense-Making Methodology to interview and analyze the public so that “they can name their worlds on their terms” (p. 289). They found that relationship-building strategies by art institutions sometimes hinder rather than help to build organizational public relations with inactive publics. The inactive public was defined as people who do not actively seek membership in art institutions but appreciate art. Foreman-Wernet and Dervin (2006) found that participants reported feeling inferior or “not cool” if they expressed less knowledge of art forms due to a pejorative discourse of elitism advanced by art institutions. Participants said that art helped them feel better and find beauty and peace in the world, which are some of the goals of art institutions. Therefore, Foreman-Wernet and Dervin (2006) suggested that art institutions can reach the inactive public by welcoming and sharing knowledge and information with non-art followers. Their application of this approach to an ‘inactive public’ that portrays interest in something, but does not actively engage, is not dissimilar on its face from individuals who are spiritual but do not actively engage in religion. It offers a helpful starting point to approaching these individuals.

Dervin’s Sense-Making methodology views human information seeking behavior from a constructivist lens (Agarwal, 2012). Specifically, Dervin’s approach with Sense-Making methodology is to center the dialogue between publics and organizations as open-ended, reciprocal and where the institution has the capability to approach its receivers by learning to listen and address their differences and understandings of the world as human beings (Agarwal, 2012). As such, building on the scholarly idea of Sense-Making a public segment that is understudied and the lack of a clear understanding of the spiritual but not religious phenomenon, this article has a two-fold goal. Drawing upon data from our qualitative, formative research study, we explore our spiritual but not religious participants’ beliefs, understanding of what the terms religious, spiritual and spiritual but not religious mean, how their beliefs impact their lives and behaviors and how they believe they are perceived by society. Second, we explore the value of applying the public relations Sense-Making approach to the ‘inactive public’ of the spiritual but not religious beyond the organization, and the implications this holds for public relations researchers and practitioners.

3. Methodology

Sense-Making does not propose methods but is an approach to research (Walker, 2006) that emphasizes the importance of creating an environment where the participant may present their experience with “the freedom and power of self-description and explanation” (Shields & Dervin, 1993, p. 74). As such, the protocol was developed to allow as much space as possible for the participant to define and explain their beliefs and worldviews, based on a similar open-ended format used by the authors in past formative, exploratory research that was adapted to this context (Lambert & Eise, 2020; Eise, Lambert, & Wiemer, 2021).

Data for this study was collected in two midwestern cities in the United States. Participants in the study were individuals who self-identified as “spiritual but not religious.” This study was IRB-approved and participants were recruited by flyers placed throughout the communities in restaurants, community centers, local businesses and other organizations. Participants were not compensated for their participation in the research and reached out to the team through their own initiative through contact information provided on the flyers. Later, some interviewees contacted the research team as they had heard of the research via word-of-mouth from interview participants. In total, 28 individuals participated in the research, representing a spectrum of age, education, self-identified gender and race as described in Table 1:

Interview participants came from a range of religious upbringings before identifying as spiritual but not religious, although primarily Christian. Participants identified in response to the question, “What was the nature of your spiritual or religious environment when you grew up?” The responses are as follows in Table 2:

Interviews were conducted one-on-one by three CITI-certified interviewers; the first author and two additional team members. The interviews were recorded and lasted approximately 45–90 min. They were transcribed by a research assistant trained in transcription protocol. For this study, we selected for analysis a total of 20 questions, excluding the demographic questions captured in Table 1 and Table 2. The questions from the interview protocol included in this analysis can be found in the Appendix. Interviewers were trained to ask follow-up and probing questions to elucidate richer data.

We analyzed the data using thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns of meaning, or themes, within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2014). The data was coded independently by the authors of this paper. Each author coded half (14) responses for each of the 20 questions included in the analysis. The authors carefully read each response and noted the primary theme or themes in each participant’s response in a separate document. Each of these were then re-read and examined as a whole, seeking to observe where prominent themes emerged or where responses diverged. Then, both authors met to compare the themes they had uncovered for each of the 20 questions. Each author coded half of the dataset for each question to ensure that there was a balanced interpretation of the data, so when they met each author was representing 14 of the 28 responses to each question. They compared their thematic findings for each question to reach consensus and selected illustrative quotes that best highlighted agreed-upon themes from within the data.

Question 3 “What are the five words you associate the most with your “spiritual but not religious” beliefs?” is analyzed and represented through a word cloud. A word cloud is a straightforward and visually appealing method for creating visualizations of text (Heimerl et al., 2014). Word clouds generated for a body of text can serve as a starting point for a deeper analysis (Burch et al., 2013; Sinclair & Cardew-Hall, 2008; Viegas et al., 2007). The pretext is simple; the more often a word appears, the larger it becomes in the “cloud” of words. Therefore, in this context, the more often a word is used by participants to associate with their “spiritual but not religious” beliefs, the larger it appears in the graphic. This is to provide a clear, straightforward and visually appealing image to serve as a starting point for understanding the beliefs of those who identify as spiritual but not religious.

Table 1
Demographic data for the 28 interview participants.

Education	Age	Race	Gender	Location					
High School	18%	18–24	21%	Asian	14%	Female	57%	City 1	54%
Bachelor's	14%	25–34	39%	Black	11%	Male	43%	City 2	46%
Master's	50%	35–44	7%	Hispanic	7%				
PhD	18%	45–54	4%	White	68%				
		55–64	22%						
		64 +	7%						

Table 2
Religious or spiritual upbringing of the 28 participants.

Religious/Spiritual Upbringing	Number of participants
Unidentified Christian	8
Catholic	8
Preferred not to respond	3
Atheist	1
Baptist	1
Disciples of Christ	1
Episcopalian	1
Hindu	1
Methodist	1
Muslim	1
Jewish	1
Jehovah's Witness	1

4. Findings

The findings are broken down into four sections, which cover (1) the self-reported beliefs of those who identify as spiritual but not religious, (2) their conceptualizations of the terms “spiritual” and “religious” as well as the label “spiritual but not religious,” (3) the self-reported influence of their beliefs on their selves and behavior as well as (4) how they believe others and the media perceive those who identify as spiritual but not religious.

4.1. Beliefs of the spiritual but not religious

Four major trends emerged from this data. First, many participants *struggled with or resisted articulating set or exact beliefs*. In many cases, they felt they were either (1) unable to express what they believed because words failed to capture their beliefs, or their beliefs were too expansive or ambiguous for words, or (2) they resisted a dogmatic approach of stating that “this is truth.” One participant captured this when they said,

Man’s traditions come from man. They’re man’s rules, you could say. I think a person is different from people’s ideas. I’m talking about a person’s identity, their soul, their heart, so to speak, which I think goes way beyond a code, which is what religion a lot of times becomes.

A second trend was the *general lack of any consistency between the specific beliefs* of those who are spiritual but not religious. Answers ranged from belief in a higher power to no belief in a higher power, belief in the golden rule and good/kind acts, the ability to think critically, the need to follow moral values, amongst others. For instance, one respondent noted,

I believe that good works are just as important as beliefs. It’s what you do just as much as what you say whether or not you sit in a pew on a Sunday morning. I do believe in a higher power and the power of prayer.

Whereas another stated, “If there’s a God, I should live my life with love, compassion, understanding, tolerance. And if there isn’t a God, I should live my life with love, compassion, tolerance. So, it just doesn’t matter.”

As the third primary trend, the one area in which all participants

agreed in their belief set was that *all human beings, living beings or Earth are connected in some intangible way*. This theme of *connection* between living beings and the environment was the major uniting point between those who identified as spiritual but not religious. While participants explained this interconnection with nature, the Earth, other humans and self in different terms and with different language, there was a consistent and pervasive emphasis and certainty in their belief in the interconnection of living things and nature. For instance, regarding nature and the environment, participants stated, “We are full-stop connected to nature,” “We’re connected to a tree, a rock, a bird, sand, so I think. I think that everything is connected,” “When I’m in nature, I feel an energy, a joy, a richness,” “Earth is one organism, we are part of the organism” or “I think there is some sort of energy out there. I don’t have a name for it. It could be nature.”

Regarding the fourth trend that emerged, in terms of proselytizing or the conviction that others should adopt one’s beliefs, the majority of participants *do not think others should adopt their belief system*. In general, they do not believe it is appropriate or right to push one’s beliefs on another and each individual should choose their own path using their judgment, discernment and what they feel to be true. Participants made statements such as, “People should adopt whatever they want to adopt, I don’t like forcing religion on people,” “I think a lot of progress and innovation comes from differing viewpoints” and “My discomfort doesn’t mean that the value that you find in what you believe isn’t a good thing... be whatever you want to be, as long as it doesn’t affect me.” Fig. 1.

When asked what five words the participants most associated with their spiritual but not religious beliefs, the top four words were: *compassion, love, connection and peace*. All responses are captured in Fig. 1, which is a word cloud that creates a visualization of text whereby the more often a word was cited by a respondent, the larger it becomes in the image.

4.2. Conceptions of “spiritual,” “religious” and “spiritual but not religious”

Participants were asked how they define the word “spiritual.” Across participants, while definitions varied, general themes emerged; *connection to self, interconnectedness, tolerance, balance, belief in something beyond our understanding/intangible/larger than ourselves, a quest for improvement*. Interviewees made statements such as, “I feel like the act of spirituality is having an open heart and having love and kindness toward other people” and “The nexus between thought and feeling” or “A connection between the mind and the body.”

When asked to define the word “religious,” participants had very different responses. About half of participants used strongly-toned adjectives to describe it such as “restrictive,” “confining” and “potentially dangerous,” while the other half used more neutral language to describe it as “organizational,” “structural” and “dogmatic.” Responses ranged from “Adherence to guidelines set out for you by someone else. A box” and “I’ve seen religion harm people. I’ve seen religion harm the self and the other... It doesn’t work” to others that offer a more neutral perspective such as,

People tap into that [religion] and it helps them, and they can lead good lives and it gives them some sense of direction on how to lead a

constantly in a state of reflection.” When asked again later in the interview protocol more broadly about if or how their beliefs influence how they live, over 90% affirmed this and listed similar examples such as trying to live a thoughtful, ethical life, focusing on others, being helpful, being open-minded and respectful.

Regarding how their beliefs influence how they see the world, participants expressed that their spirituality influences how they see the world and listed a variety of ways. Many reported seeing/accepting the good/bad and positives/negatives as all a part of life and a part of our process of living. Others reemphasized seeing interconnectedness and attempts to be ethical/moral. Empathy was commonly mentioned and, once more, the importance of being accepting of diversity and different ideas as well as respecting and caring for nature and the environment. Statements encompassing these major themes included, “I see nature with much more respect. I think it’s not just something that is there and that we need to pave over or something like that” and “Everyone is kind of connected and if we all do our parts it’ll improve everyone’s world a little” as well as “I believe in acceptance and love and reaching out and helping other people.”

When asked about their beliefs and their political ideology and influences on political candidates they choose to support, over 85% affirmed that their beliefs play a role in both cases. Regarding political ideology, one representative statement reflects the general attitude of most, although many cited more specific examples such as the environment or ways of treating other people; “Yeah. The idea of being kind, respectful, honoring other people and honoring their beliefs, trying to understand complex issues and respect them.” In terms of their beliefs influencing the political candidates they choose to support, participants reported selecting candidates on both sides of the political spectrum, but in ways influenced by their spiritual beliefs. A notable minority complained that the US two-party political system does not allow them to select candidates that truly represent their beliefs. Participants made statements such as, “I choose to support candidates who are more accepting... which I think is tied to my actions,” and “I tend to support people who create policy based on this weighing of the goods and the bads... as opposed to their cut-and-dry interpretation of what their religious writings dictate.”

4.4. Perceptions of spiritual but not religious

When asked how others perceive them, those who identify as spiritual but not religious responded in largely one of two ways; *they are perceived by others either negatively or in a misunderstood or ignorant way*. Approximately half said they believe they are perceived negatively by others, using words such as crazy, weird, woo-woo, without rules, flaky, wacky, lame, confused, strange or hippie. Participants explained, “I think they’re perceived by religious people as being lame or confused or missing the boat or they’re going to burn in hell,” or “There’s a type of stigma, and it’s considered strange and hippie.” Approximately the other half responded that they believe people in general simply don’t know very much and are ignorant about it, and therefore may perceive them as confused or unclear, or simply not know. For instance, two representative responses for this perspective were, “I don’t think people have a great knowledge about such people. I think most classify people as either religious or nonreligious. I think they lack information and, accordingly, they also lack understanding for appropriate behavior and practices” or “Skeptically [how others perceive spiritual but not religious]. I think that people don’t understand that designation, and I don’t blame them. Because it has such a wide girth of what it might mean. So, I think skeptically, I guess.” A significant minority did also note that it likely also depends on where you are geographically and what that region’s general attitude toward those who are spiritual but not religious is.

When asked how people who are spiritual but not religious are portrayed by the media, respondents largely answered that they were either not represented at all (were ignored or invisible), or were represented poorly or using simplistic, pejorative stereotypes. As such,

responses were largely either in the vein of one participant’s answer, “I don’t think the media does much to address people in that sense or acknowledge their legitimacy.” Or they explained that “We’re all kind of clumped into one generic stereotype” and some stereotypes listed by other participants included, “I think you have everything from your witches to your environmentalists to your hippies,” “Kind of seen as hippy-dippy chick,” “Weird. Walking around with crystals. Flighty. Irresponsible” or “As sort of impractical people who are out of touch with the darkness of reality or something like that.”

When asked if others they know who identify as spiritual but not religious share the same beliefs, over half reported that they hadn’t spoken about it with others and the remaining stated a mix of “yes” or “no.” Those who reported “yes” did generally qualify that beliefs are on a spectrum and there is some overlap but never total. One participant’s response was particularly representative, stating, “It’s also interesting how I’ve never really talked about this topic with my friends. But I don’t think I’ve talked with many people about how they feel about their spirituality, for instance.” Another explained, “I don’t know anybody who shares all of this with me except little bits,” and another captured some of the challenges faced in trying to discuss it at all, “I don’t even know how well I’m articulating what I believe because it’s hard to articulate.”

5. Discussion

This preliminary analysis of the “spiritual but not religious” publics, interpreted through the Sense-Making methodology of Brenda Dervin, reveals their growing sense of a need for belonging and carving their own spiritualistic, political and moral identity. This section elaborates upon the findings about the spiritual but not religious publics, along with discussing the application of Sense-Making methodology to further understand the concept ‘inactive publics’ in the public relations field.

5.1. Making sense of the spiritual but not religious beyond the organization

Sense-Making emerged as both a philosophical and practical approach to communication and understanding how people seek information and gain knowledge. For over three decades, Dervin and other scholars have used this approach to challenge conventional scholarship around communication and information seeking by assuming that human beings make sense of the information available to them from their own experiences through “time-space, coming out of situations with history and partial instruction, arriving at new situations, facing gaps, building bridges across those gaps, evaluating outcomes and moving on” (Dervin, 1998, p.39). The lens of Sense-Making assumes equity and encourages consideration of “humans in all their aspects, not just intellectual but also emotional, physical, and spiritual” (Walker, 2006, p. 349). It critiques categorizing publics in “traditional user categories, which can lead to constructing communication systems that make haves and have-not inevitable” (Walker, 2006, p. 352).

Overall, the Sense-Making approach encourages researchers and practitioners to look for the “gap” in human experience by talking to them, listening to them and then designing systems to support them through their Sense-Making process. Sense-Making aligns with the situational theory of identifying publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) insofar as it takes the emphasis away from outside characteristics of a public toward attempting to understand how individuals act in particular situations. However, at its core, Sense-Making sees a difference between how publics are described by others and how the publics actually behave (Dervin, 1998). The participants of this study often resisted or struggled to articulate specific beliefs, as alluded to in more detail further in the discussion, and this “gap” is fertile ground for researchers and practitioners to create space and support for this budding demographic to more comfortably define themselves either through understanding and acceptance or through support for building a lexicon or vocabulary.

This study on Sense-Making of the world of the spiritual but not religious is consistent with Grunig and Repper's (1992) reminder that a "public, a market, or any other segment of a population exists only because a researcher or practitioner uses a particular theoretical concept to identify it" (p. 129). For some time, public relations has fostered the idea of the public beyond the perspective of the organization (Karlberg, 1996). The spiritual but not religious prove an opportunity for public relations scholars to study a rapidly growing body of individuals who resist organization, but affirm a strong set of beliefs that influence their socio-cultural choices. This was revealed most notably through our participants' definition of "spiritual" and "religious." In part, our participants' ideas of spirituality aligned with past representations, whereby spirituality is viewed as a more personal and experiential connection to the sacred or transcendent (Elkins, 1990; Van Dierendonck & Mohan, 2006) and the argument that most conceptions of spirituality incorporate an aspect of transcendence that reflects a realization that "there exists a broader paradigm for understanding existence that transcends the immediacy of our own individual consciousness and that binds all things into a more unitive harmony" (Piedmont, 1999, p. 988).

However, our participants reinforced that the terms "spiritual" and "religious" mean different things to different people (Marler & Hadaway, 2002). In defining spirituality, our participants tended to emphasize a connection to self, an interconnectedness with nature and other living beings, tolerance, balance and a quest for improvement, in addition to themes of connection to something greater beyond themselves. They seem to have built and grown conceptualizations of spirituality and perceive and believe in connection - an interconnectivity of living things - that exists beyond the 'organization.' Their definitions of religious, which they have rejected as a part of their identity, are either a negative confining organizational practice or simply an organizational practice. They appear to perceive connection as an intangible force of life that supersedes organizational structures and the structure and rules that necessarily emerge from organizations. In this sense, they are beyond the perspective of the organization; yet due to their size and growth, are an important part of our society.

5.2. *Challenging the description of the spiritual but not religious as an 'inactive public'*

From the perspective of the organization, individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious are inactive as they do not participate in religious organizations nor other formal organizations. They do not readily fit into one of Grunig's four publics in the situational theory of publics. Assigning them the category of 'non-public/apathetic public' assumes they have low problem recognition and low involvement. The data does not support this, as the spiritual but not religious recognize challenges - such as the challenges of being perceived negatively or ignorantly by others, or the challenges they find in religious organizations - in addition to reporting that their beliefs influence their behaviors (such as perspective on the world, actions, political ideologies), which ultimately will influence organizations, both religious and otherwise.

This unique demographic emphasizes the need to let "publics speak on their own terms" in order to understand their concerns and issues (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006). There are, as Foreman-Wernet and Dervin (2006) described in their research on the art world, those who appreciate art but do not actively seek membership in art institutions. This example can be loosely extended to this demographic. The spiritual but not religious actively appreciate spirituality, but they do not actively seek membership in a religion. Individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious actively resist attempts to be constrained by dogma, while acceptance, tolerance and an unwillingness to force their beliefs on others is a strong defining characteristic of this body of individuals that emerged from our data. In the concluding section of the discussion, we discuss the implications this carries for practitioners and researchers.

What individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious show us

through this data is that they are an 'inactive public' from the perspective of an organization; but they are very 'active' within their own individual worlds. In this sense, their emergence provides an opportunity to examine Grunig's four typologies, and challenges us to consider how a public can be 'inactive' or a 'non-public' from the perspective of an organization, yet be very active within their individual worlds, and to continue to understand what the implications of this are.

For example, participants in this study expressed that their spirituality influences how they see the world and listed a variety of ways such as respecting nature and building specific political ideologies by weighing situations within their unique context, rather than basing their decisions on religious text interpretations. This reveals that the spiritual but not religious hold and explore their principles, but perhaps due to their belief in a person's right to determine their own perspectives or the "gap" as described by Dervin in their own sense-making process, they may be reluctant to impose it. Follow-up studies seeking to understand this demographic's approach to moral relativism vs. universalism, and their relationship and definition of these terms, could be beneficial in better understanding this. Spirituality, in this context, is unique in challenging us to review typologies or assumptions, as it is a particularly personal, inner-world experience. Additionally, as the emergence of this budding demographic is relatively new, it is likely that as it progresses and emerges over time, it may shift and change in its nature, reinforcing the need for a process worldview.

5.3. *Beliefs of the spiritual but not religious: connection to nature and others and impact on behaviors, politics and perspectives*

While our findings reveal that specific beliefs are disparate, the common theme of connection to the natural environment and other living things was a strong thread between our participants. The implications of this may be extended into environmental communication and public relations related to climate-related or environment-related issues. Spiritual beliefs within this demographic tend to emphasize the connection between person and environment, individual and nature, living beings with Earth. There is a spiritual value placed on connection to nature and other living beings. For decades, communication and public relations practitioners have struggled to motivate sufficient action around climate change and the environment, and this may be a space with potential to promote and encourage change and action.

With all participants reporting that their beliefs influence their identities and actions in some ways, and with a large majority reporting that their political ideologies and choice of candidates are influenced by their beliefs, this could signal a potential area of research for political communication scholars, political scientists or public relations' experts in politics to explore how this emerging phenomenon may shape the future of our political world. To date, it appears as though this identity group feels largely ignored or misunderstood by media and others, but this could change and understanding and recognizing the legitimacy and complexity of this growing demographic will likely not only become unavoidable but desirable.

5.4. *Challenges of expression for the spiritual but not religious*

While beliefs are disparate and individuals often struggle to explain themselves and their spirituality, there are common themes that emerge and the reasons for their challenges in self-expression appear to be, in fact, a characteristic of this demographic; a desire to tread softly, carefully explore and assiduously challenge their own beliefs. Russo-Netzer and Maysless (2014) conclusion is adept; for individuals identifying as spiritual but not religious, the spiritual path is an autonomous, subjective and experimental process that often involves active search and openness to change. This may well allude to the "gap" that Sense-Making can assist in identifying, and may also contribute to today's vague or conflicting understanding of this demographic group, and why qualitative Sense-Making is particularly crucial during the early stages of this

phenomenon's emergence.

While our findings do echo [Sanchez et al. \(2017\)](#) conclusions that there is less participation in pluralistic and social practices of religion, we found no evidence that this is due to a lack of commitment to practice communally. Uncertainty and difficulties in comfortably articulating their beliefs appear to also be a possible factor inhibiting communal practice, which now identified as a gap, could be supported by researchers or practitioners. Additionally, believing that they are perceived negatively or in a misunderstood way by others and the media likely adds to a reticence to reach out and attempt to connect, fostering an unwillingness to speak with others about their beliefs. What is more, the emergence of the spiritual but not religious is relatively new, and communal processes take time to emerge. We are only on the cusp of this changing face of spirituality and religious practice. As such, our findings are more in keeping with scholars who have noted that this generalization of individuals who value spirituality over religion as 'individualistic' as a narrow approach to understanding spirituality's cultural movement ([Ammerman, 2013](#); [Hastings, 2016](#); [Smith & Halligan, 2021](#)).

Regarding what [Sanchez et al. \(2017\)](#) asserted, which is that young adults who practice spiritual but not religious ideas are engaging in "individualistic and unguided attempts encompassed in believing without believing and sharing" (p. 87), our data represents a different finding. It is important to note that we did not focus exclusively on youth, however our findings demonstrate that individuals who identify in this way report having strong beliefs and commitments to a set of ethics/morals, such as connection, compassion, acceptance and tolerance, even if they are not able to articulate their beliefs as easily or comfortably as those who participate in formalized religion. Additionally, there was no evidence that their beliefs were 'misguided,' and we question the ability to measure what is and is not a 'misguided' spiritual position.

5.5. Implications for practitioners and researchers

These findings carry implications for both practitioners and researchers within public relations. This study suggests that public relations practitioners in religious institutions consider the concerns of these individuals; the importance of acceptance, tolerance, compassion and being allowed to embrace one's own spiritual position without feeling judged or pressured to conform when it does not feel natural. The majority of these individuals do not believe in proselytizing and express that they do not want to be forced to articulate or argue about beliefs that they find cannot be articulated in words or that they are still struggling to form. From a wider standpoint, public relations practitioners in government and organizations may consider that this explosive growth marks a change in society towards feelings of 'connectedness' with the environment, other humans and themselves; and that individuals may respond to campaigns and outreach efforts that reflect their values, underscoring the value of the growth of pro-social efforts. And for individuals who do identify as spiritual but not religious, while there is no organizational structure, many indicated a desire to connect or share, but the inability to find the space or people with whom to do so. However, before drawing final conclusions, we wish to emphasize the importance of more research in this space.

Over 25 years since [Karlberg \(1996\)](#) published his piece on putting the public back in public relations research, scholars have responded to this call to action to study several cultural phenomena, such as the evolution of national identities ([Macnamara & Crawford, 2013](#)), influence of social media mediators on public relations ([Himmelboim et al., 2014](#)) and advocacy by citizen groups, such as the Slow Food Movement ([Stokes, 2013](#)). In this study, we further demonstrate that the starting point to bringing the public to the center in public relations research is to understand ideas of emerging citizen groups and how public relations research can be instrumental in providing lexicon and support for their Sense-Making as meaningful citizen groups in a rapidly changing

cultural landscape. As [Tilson \(2011\)](#) suggested, public relations practitioners and communicators can foster community and inclusivity, including religious dialogue and mutual understanding. By analyzing a rapidly emerging group that identifies as spiritual but not religious, we further support examining public relations scholarship with a critical lens aligning with current socio-cultural dynamics ([Holtzhausen, 2000](#); [Weaver, 2016](#)). We also issue a call to researchers; the spiritual but not religious are a complex influential and social phenomenon that resists ready explanation and typology. We assert that more research is required, and that these individuals offer a unique opportunity to advance public relations and theoretical and methodological approaches toward the public.

6. Conclusion

The nature of U.S. society's fabric is changing, with over one in four adults now identifying as spiritual but not religious; a significant departure from historical trends. This demographic is not organized nor do they share a defined, collective dogma. In this article, we applied a public relations' Sense-Making approach through formative, qualitative research using in-depth interviews with individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious. We applied the public relations' theoretical concepts of the 'inactive public' and the public beyond the organization to frame and understand this demographic.

Our primary findings revealed that these individuals do not share specific beliefs but tend to share a general belief in connection between living beings, the Earth and one another. In general, these individuals value acceptance, tolerance, autonomy, independent thinking and values such as compassion, love and peace. They often encounter a "gap" or struggle to articulate their beliefs due to an unwillingness to define the undefinable, the inability to find words to capture how they feel or an uncertainty of what is true and a fixed belief for them. They define spirituality broadly, and religion is understood largely to be either negative or organizational and dogmatic. These individuals reported a sense of discomfort with the label "spiritual but not religious" but generally lacked an alternative label to replace it. Behaviors, perspectives, life and political choices were reported to be influenced by their beliefs. And they tended to believe that the media and others either ignored them or misunderstood or misrepresented them.

There are several limitations of this work. First, this research was conducted in two U.S. Midwestern cities. This constrains our findings to a geographical region that is not representative of this entire demographic. We believe more participants from diverse geographic regions, extending not only to different geographic locations in the United States (beyond the Midwest) but to other countries in the world, would lend helpful insights. Additionally, the majority of our sample reported a Christian upbringing. More research with a broader spectrum of religious upbringings would be beneficial.

In this vein and due to our need to understand this important social change, we strongly encourage more formative research with this group by other scholars who may explore new geographic regions, new ideas and new trends; and we encourage approaching this unprecedented phenomenon with an open mind. Particularly, we encourage further exploration into (1) the implications and possibilities of the ties between the spiritual but not religious and the natural environment, (2) the impact of beliefs on political life, (3) the struggle to articulate beliefs and its source and consequences, (4) the nature of a group that cherishes connection but rejects organization, (5) the implications of this group's status as an 'inactive public' beyond the organization and the consequences this has on the quantity and type of attention they receive and (6) continued exploration of an 'inactive public' that reports active engagement on a personal scale.

While many of our participants reported being uncomfortable discussing their beliefs with others, our choices around spirituality are a crucial component of our human existence. This remains true whether a particular individual may feel comfortable speaking of it. This

discomfort may lead to a social silence that misleads; as these participants all expressed that their beliefs influenced their behaviors, lives, identities and perspectives.

Data Availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

Appendix

Interview Protocol Questions Included in Analysis. Interviewers were trained to ask probing and follow-up questions to elucidate richer data

1. When someone says they are a member of a particular religion, this usually means they have a certain set of beliefs about things that we can't truly know, such as: life after death, that people have souls, that there is karma, rebirth, moral codes we should follow or there are consequences after death, that God exists, etc. However, we also know that people who aren't members of a particular religion can have beliefs too. I'm talking with you today because you responded to a call for people who are "spiritual but not religious." What I'd like to ask you first is, in identifying yourself as "spiritual but not religious," what are your beliefs?
2. Are human beings or all living beings connected in some intangible way?
3. What are the five words you associate the most with your "spiritual but not religious" beliefs?
4. How do you define "spiritual"?
5. How do you define "religious"?
6. Do you use other terms to describe this aspect of your identity other than "spiritual but not religious"?
7. If so, which do you use most often?
8. What is your preferred term for it?
9. How, if at all, do your beliefs influence how you behave?
10. How, if at all, do your beliefs influence how you see the world?
11. What parts of your life do you feel this piece of your identity influences?
12. Can a person be both spiritual and religious? Or are they antithetical to one another?
13. Do others you know who identify as "spiritual but not religious" share similar beliefs?
14. Do you think others should adopt this belief system?
15. Do your beliefs influence how you live?
16. If so, can you give an example of something you did that is based on your beliefs?
17. Are your beliefs tied to your political ideology?
18. Do your beliefs influence the political candidates you choose to support? Please explain.
19. In general, how do you think people who are spiritual but not religious are perceived by others?
20. In general, how do you think people who are spiritual but not religious are perceived by the media?

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