

# Contemporary spiritual seeking: understanding information interactions in contemplation and spirituality

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## Abstract

*Purpose.* Discussions in contemporary spirituality frequently highlight a phenomenon of spiritual seeking; moreover, people often describe their spiritual journeys in terms of a search. This study takes a closer look at this metaphor by presenting a study that analysed spiritual seeking and its informational features in contemporary non-institutionalised settings.

*Design/methodology/approach.* In this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen spiritual teachers and speakers who were asked questions about spiritual seeking in contemporary non-institutionalised spirituality.

*Findings.* Our participants explained that contemporary spiritual seekers sought spiritual information as a result of affective, developmental and metaphysical concerns. Moreover, our analysis indicated that spiritual information-seeking behaviour incorporated practices such as prayer, yoga and meditation, and contemporary spiritual information interactions were facilitated through spiritual retreats, meditation classes, yoga classes and online social platforms.

*Research limitations/implications.* Since we focused on spiritual seeking in contemporary non-institutionalised settings, our findings cannot exhaustively represent all spiritual pursuits in contemporary society. Our study (1) Identifies the informational features of contemporary spiritual seeking; (2) Explains spiritual seeking as an activity that may theoretically reside within a broader framework of profound information interactions; (3) Helps theorise the concept of qualitative profundity in information science research.

*Originality/value.* This study provides an intuitive contextual approach for undertaking information research in under-explored domains such as contemplation and spirituality.

## Introduction

*“At 18 years old, I found myself in New York City submerged in the world of student protests. But at the same time, I had an even stronger pull towards another movement that was just beginning to happen as the gurus from the East began washing up on the shores of America. I’d had a yearning for some kind of spiritual life ever since I can remember, even as a young child. My parents were atheists; I had no religious training. In fact, in my family, religion was synonymous with a lack of intelligence. But I was strongly compelled to check it out. So I had two very strong aspects of myself—a political/social justice self and a spiritual self. That was what brought me to the spiritual search”* (Elizabeth Lesser, interviewed in Fox, 2015).

Discussions in contemporary spirituality frequently highlight a phenomenon of spiritual seeking. Moreover, people often describe their spiritual journeys in terms of a search. Seeking and searching are central to library and information research; however, their characteristic features in the context of contemplation and spirituality remain underexplored.

To this end, we aim to contribute to the growing information research in the domain of contemplation and spirituality by presenting a study that analysed the phenomenon of contemporary spiritual seeking. The findings: (1) Identify the informational features of contemporary spiritual seeking; (2) Explain spiritual seeking as an activity that may theoretically reside within a broader framework of profound information interactions; (3) Help theorise the concept of qualitative profundity in information science research.

## Background

Contemporary spirituality emerged alongside secularism as a modern Euro-American alternative to institutionalised religion (van der Veer, 2009). Characterised by emphasising individual experiences and ways of life, contemporary spirituality is often portrayed in popular culture as a profound pursuit of personal growth surrounded by searches for meaning, purpose and value in life (e.g. Martel, 2001; Gilbert, 2007). These pursuits may be influenced by spiritual ideas and practices such as those in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shamanism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam; however, what sets them apart is a non-commitment to any formalised tradition. In sociology, scholars now suggest that these individual pursuits for meaning could be explained as a wider social anthropological phenomenon of *seekership* or spiritual seeking (Sutcliffe, 2016).

Initially used in the context of religious conversion and deviance (Lofland and Stark, 1965), the term *seekership* has gathered greater acceptance in popular and scholarly works concerning non-institutionalised categories such as New Age, Unchurched, and Spiritual But Not Religious (e.g. Sutcliffe and Bowman, 2022; Fuller, 2001; Mercadante, 2014). The proliferation of these categories depicts a significant shift in our understanding of spirituality in the last few decades, as Western and Westernised cultures increasingly juxtapose contemporary spirituality with religion (Huss, 2014). This shift positions contemporary spirituality away from traditional associations with religious grand narratives and instead links it to postmodernism's pluralistic, relativist and anti-authoritarian attitudes. Therefore, contemporary spiritual seeking or *seekership* may be understood collectively as searching for personal meaning and value systems in a post-religious society (Sentner, 2014).

Although the term is yet to be sufficiently theorised in sociological research, some early descriptions of seekership are available; for example, Campbell (1972) described seekers as those who *'adopted a problem-solving perspective while defining conventional religious institutions and beliefs as inadequate'* (p. 123). Shortly before this, Lofland and Stark (1965) explained seekership as *'a floundering among religious alternatives, [with] an openness to a variety of religious views, frequently esoteric, combined with [a] failure to embrace the specific ideology and fellowship of some set of believers'* (p. 870). As an alternative to the negative representations utilised by Lofland and Stark, Strauss (1979) suggested viewing seekership positively by considering an individual seeker as someone *'striving and strategizing to achieve meaningful change to his or her life experience'* (p. 158). Furthermore, Roof (1993) depicted seekers as those who *'turn[ed] to serious metaphysical quests on their own in hopes of finding a more fulfilling way of believing and living'* (p. 79).

In more recent contributions, Fuller (2001) described a type of unchurched individuals as being *'concerned with spiritual issues but [choosing] to pursue them outside of a formal religious organization'* (p. 4). Finally, Mercadante (2014) categorised a type of spiritual but not religious people as seekers *'seeking a spiritual home in which to settle down'*. Therefore, it is evident that spiritual seeking activities may serve as *'the minimal points of ideological congruence'* (Lofland and Stark, 1965, p. 870) for these categories and provide the necessary context for understanding information interactions in contemporary spirituality. However, a detailed analysis of seekership and its informational features remains yet to be performed.

As a research area, spiritual needs are relatively understudied in information science. Some excellent work carried out in this direction has explained the information practices of Christian church leaders, Catholic individuals, Muslim converts and Western Buddhists (e.g. Siracky, 2013; Michels, 2014; Gorichanaz, 2016; Guzik, 2017; Chabot, 2019). However, these studies have concerned themselves with formalised traditions and do not represent contemporary spirituality and its distinctive religious non-affiliation. Instead, conceptual attempts to bridge information science with the emerging discipline of contemplative studies (e.g. Latham *et al.*, 2020; Gorichanaz, 2020; Gorichanaz and Latham, 2019; Pyati, 2019) may count as forays into contemporary spirituality. These conceptualisations may benefit from an understanding of spiritual seeking, as it may help us explain how and why people engage with various spiritual information sources in contemporary Western society.

In addition to engagements with documentary information sources, spiritual seeking can involve various contemplative spiritual practices such as meditation, chanting, retreat, pilgrimage, labyrinth walking, journaling and dialogue. Many of these practices have their origins in spiritual traditions and may help facilitate the outcomes sought by contemporary spiritual seekers. For example, Sutcliffe (2016) explained that:

*'the range of practices available to support this 'search' is glimpsed in my own career as a seeker in Edinburgh in the 1980s: Between 1983 and 1986, in no particular order, I read popular accounts of Buddhism and Taoism, consulted the I Ching, learnt to read Tarot cards ... had my astrological birthchart prepared ... practised Zen meditation and struggled with T'ai Chi'* (Sutcliffe, 2016 p. ).

Therefore, contemporary spiritual seeking may amalgamate conventional epistemological inquiry with contemplative and embodied forms of information seeking. However, the precise relationship between spiritual information seeking and contemplative spiritual practice is not well understood.

Topics typically discussed amongst contemporary spiritual seekers take the form of themes such as transcendence, human nature, community and after-life (Mercadante, 2014). One such topic that relates to transcendence is non-duality or non-dualism. In recent studies, scholars have discussed non-duality in relation to mysticism, contemplative practice, spiritual philosophy and spiritual experience (e.g. Kourie, 2008; Josipovic, 2010; Loy, 2012; Wade, 2018). Initially attributed to Eastern spiritual sources such as the Hindu Upanishads, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist texts and the Taoist Tao Te Ching (Taft, 2014), non-dualism has also been compared to writings in apophatic Christian mysticism and Kabbalistic Judaism (Bannon, 2015; Michaelson, 2009).

In addition, non-duality is a popular spiritual topic on online video-sharing platforms and internet forums, with teachers and speakers facilitating everyday discussions in contemporary spirituality. These discussions can serve as valuable grounds for information research as they provide a means of investigating information interactions in the domain of contemporary spirituality.

The prevalence of online discussions about spiritual seeking and non-duality suggests a potential richness in information phenomena that motivates the following primary research questions:

1. How do contemporary spiritual teachers and non-duality speakers explain spiritual seeking?
2. What are the informational features of contemporary spiritual seeking?

## **Method**

Latham *et al.* (2020) emphasised a growing interest in contemplative practices in the West and called for more research into the relationship between information and contemplation. Prior to this, Kari and Hartel (2007) advised that qualitative methods were particularly useful for information research into contemplation and spirituality. Since qualitative methods often gather valid generalisations to efficiently understand a variety of appropriate situations (Phillips and Pugh, 2015), in this study, we sought the involvement of spiritual teachers and speakers as they could provide rich data about spiritual seeking attempts and common perceptions held amongst contemporary spiritual seekers.

We searched the popular video-sharing platform YouTube for specific keywords such as spiritual seeking and non-duality and found several recorded discussions and talks provided on these topics. We then used purposive and opportunistic sampling to select teachers and speakers who talked about spiritual seeking and non-duality through their YouTube videos and solicited participation by directly emailing potential interviewees. The potential participants all spoke English and had spent a considerable number of years speaking to Western audiences in contemporary spirituality. They had a visible history of engaging with spiritual information, evidenced by anecdotes in their talks, and could articulate aspects of contemporary spirituality without associating with traditional religiosity. These attributes made them a valuable resource capable of providing generalisations about spiritual seeking in contemporary Western society.

After gaining approval from our Ethical Review Board, we conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen contemporary spiritual teachers and non-duality speakers. Three participants resided in the UK, three in the Netherlands, two in the USA, and one each in Canada, Spain, Germany, Austria and Mauritius (see table I for our character descriptions of the participants). As a token of gratitude for their time and participation, we sent each participant a gift voucher worth £20 at the end of the data collection stage (only one participant was made aware of this before participation).

Table I: Character descriptions of participants

Participant Number	Gender	Country	Description
P1	Male	USA	A writer and modern non-duality teacher who has been speaking on the topics of non-duality, self-inquiry and enlightenment since 2005.
P2	Male	Canada	A contemporary non-duality speaker who is interested in sharing the nonduality message by organising online talks, discussions and conferences.
P3	Female	Netherlands	A non-duality speaker who was a spiritual seeker for several years. She now speaks about radical non-duality to online and in-person audiences.
P4	Female	England	A writer and non-duality speaker who spent several years on the spiritual path. She came across the message of non-duality from other speakers and now travels and speaks to audiences in various countries.
P5	Female	Mauritius	A Writer and guide to liberation who has been speaking and presenting on the topic of non-duality, liberation and related topics since 2011.
P6	Female	Spain	A writer and non-duality speaker who has been speaking to audiences in contemporary spirituality for the past seven years.
P7	Male	Germany	An author and non-duality speaker who has been speaking on the topic of non-duality since 2011. He has written several books on non-duality and has been holding talks and intensives throughout the world.
P8	Female	Netherlands	A non-duality speaker and former spiritual seeker who gives in-person talks in her country and Zoom meetings all over the world.
P9	Female	England	A spiritual teacher who holds group events online and around the world. She has been talking about the topics of non-duality, embodied awareness, channelling and self-inquiry for several years.
P10	Male	USA	A contemporary spiritual teacher, writer and former spiritual seeker whose writings have featured in popular philosophical magazines and journals.
P11	Male	Austria	A contemporary non-duality speaker who is regularly invited to speak at various international venues.
P12	Female	Netherlands	A non-duality speaker and former spiritual seeker who shares talks and discussions about non-duality, spiritual seeking and psychology through her YouTube and social media platforms.

P13	Male	England	A spiritual teacher and former spiritual seeker who holds weekly meetings in person and online. He has spoken at various non-duality events and provides online talks, spiritual discourses and contemplative group discussions to both Western and Eastern audiences.
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We interviewed our participants electronically through Zoom's online video conferencing platform. Most interviews were about 45 minutes long, with the shortest being 31 minutes and the longest being 83 minutes. Before each interview, we took the participants through an information sheet explaining the kinds of questions we would ask, our intention to audio record the interviews, and the data handling and anonymisation process.

Our interview strategy aimed to gather opinions from several teachers and speakers in order to attain a detailed description of contemporary spiritual seeking. We used an empathy-first approach similar to McKay *et al.* (2020). This approach involved recognising the inquisitive nature of the interviews and avoiding judgemental questions wherever possible. Therefore, we did not ask questions that would force the participants to defend their opinions; instead, we provided frequent empathic acknowledgements interspersed with probes encouraging the interviewees to further elaborate on their words.

Each interview began with an invitation asking the participants to *describe a story of spiritual seeking* or the question *what is spiritual seeking?* We explained that the participants could answer this through a general understanding of spiritual seeking, a personal spiritual seeking story, or both. Further probes then elucidated details through questions such as *why does the seeking apparently happen?* *What are seekers looking for?* *What does the search look like?* And *is something found in the end?* Most interviews then transitioned into questions about the kinds of information spiritual seekers might come across, how seekers sought, used and evaluated information sources and the role of spiritual information in spiritual seeking. Finally, we concluded the interviews with a generic question on the topic of non-duality, such as *What is non-duality?*

## Analysis

In analysing each interview, the first author thematically coded the transcripts by looking for answers to the following questions:

1. What is spiritual seeking?
2. What questions do spiritual seekers have?
3. What does the search look like informationally?
4. How does spiritual seeking relate to problem-solving and everyday life activities?

We arrived at these questions by identifying relationships between the participants' responses and our primary research questions. Questions 1, 2 and 3 were straightforwardly related to the primary research questions. However, due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, interviewees often shared additional insights when asked to talk more about certain aspects. These insights generally took the form of answers to question 4 and helped further characterise spiritual seeking's informational features.

The second author helped validate the themes by providing detailed feedback during the analysis and further suggestions during the write-up. There were no disagreements during coding and write-up.

## **Limitations**

Since we focused on spiritual seeking in contemporary non-institutionalised settings, the interviewed group was reasonably homogenous to represent teachers and speakers who spoke on the topic of non-duality in non-institutionalised spirituality. However, contemporary spirituality can include discussions on other topics apart from non-duality; in addition, talks about spiritual seeking may also occur in institutionalised settings. Therefore, our findings cannot exhaustively represent all spiritual pursuits in contemporary society.

## **Findings**

### ***What is spiritual seeking?***

We began each interview by asking participants to help us describe the phenomenon of spiritual seeking. In response, ten participants contributed by generalising their everyday interactions with contemporary spiritual seekers, and an additional three participants narrated a personal spiritual seeking story.

Our participants described spiritual seeking as a persistent long-term endeavour to find an answer to one's problems. They explained that, in some instances, these problems might be related to adverse life events and challenges, igniting questions such as *'why is this happening to me? Is there some deeper meaning to this? [P9]'*. In other instances, mystical experiences may bring about *'a sensing of something deeper [P9]'* or *'new way of seeing reality [P5]'*, instigating attempts to seek a spiritual explanation to the mystery. Spiritual seeking might be negatively characterised as an attempt to *'get rid of certain feelings [P8]'* and *'escape reality [P2]'*, or conversely, there may be *'a beauty in looking in spirituality for truth or answering questions you might have [P4]'*. P11 described spiritual seeking as *'the need to find an answer to my existence or my reality [P11]'*, and for P12, it was an *'anxious voice that was telling me I needed to find the truth [P12]'*.

Overall, our participants' descriptions of spiritual seeking displayed qualitative attributes of depth, height and interiority. These attributes were portrayed in words that the participants reached out for to characterise general understandings of personal meaning, transcendence and individuality. We identified these thematically as: a search for something deeper, a search for something higher, and a search inward.

### ***A search for something deeper***

The first theme relates to descriptions that characterised spiritual seeking as a search for meaning, purpose and existential fulfilment metaphorically portrayed as a search for something deeper.

*'[spiritual seeking] is the search for something deeper I think... it's just the assumption that there must be something deeper, something deeper than what's on the surface, something deeper than what's perceived... It just seems to be this subtle unfulfillment and the need to somehow find an answer to it' [P7].*

A common perception under this theme asserted that although traditional religiosity is declining, some people may be *'more inclined to spirituality [P3]'*, and as a result, they may actively look for something *'beyond the normal mundane human activities that [are] accessible in some sense [P10]'*. Accordingly, these descriptions viewed spiritual seeking as looking for personal meaning and fulfilment through spiritual teachings and guidance offered by spiritual sources.

Responses under this theme also included spiritual seeking attempts that expressed an inquisitiveness about the mystery of life and sought ways to address that curiosity by engaging with spiritual content and resources.

*'somebody's trying to figure out who and what they are, or the nature of reality, or something in them calls to there's more than what meets the eye... they're just curious; curiosity drives them on the spiritual search' [P1]*

#### ***A search for something higher***

The second theme comprised responses that associated spiritual seeking with a search for something higher. These descriptions felt that, in popular culture, people often *'hear stories about spirituality or things that are higher [P4]'* and are therefore influenced by ideas and concepts of transcendence typical of formalised spiritual traditions. As a result, responses under this theme indicated that spiritual seekers often sought spiritual information to pursue the goals outlined in specific traditions.

*'spiritual seeking, I think generally is, people have this idea of some kind of ultimate truth, or this special state, which is called enlightenment' [P3]*

*'they might go to Buddhism, Buddhism might say, this is the thing you need. Or they might go to Christianity, and it says, this is the thing you need. So [spiritual seeking] depends on the seeker's concept of what it is they're looking for' [P6]*

Additionally, one participant explained that although contemporary spiritual seeking activities may not associate with traditional religiosity, there may still be situations where in their search for something deeper and higher, *'a person gets out of religion but goes to a different religion, but they call it spirituality [P2]'*. Therefore contemporary spiritual seeking might portray spiritual but not religious attitudes whilst still looking for personal meaning and value systems through traditional religious means.

#### ***A search inward***



In addition to descriptions of spiritual seeking as searches for something deeper and higher, a third theme depicted a qualitative measure of interiority. Descriptions under this theme explained that spiritual seeking was an individualistic task; concerned with improving one's personal experiences and quality of life. In contrast with pursuits that may instead be looking for *'fulfilment in the outside world [P7]'*, these descriptions believed spiritual seeking was a search inward; and highlighted seekers' concerns with thoughts, feelings and inner experiences of an intimate and private nature.

*'spirituality is more about how I experience; how can I appreciate life? How can I make it good inside? It's an inside seeking, in feelings, in thoughts' [P7]*

Some descriptions emphasised interiority by contrasting spiritual seeking with dogmatic religiosity and scientific empiricism. They explained that whilst science and religion may have similar quests, they operated within a model of externality that reservedly distanced itself from the object being pursued in a way that spirituality did not.

*'In religion, it's like, you know, there's someone outside that can save me, like God or, you know, Muhammad, [but] in spirituality [people] think that it's the inner higher self now. So they're looking for it, but this is the inward journey now' [P2]*

*'In sciences' seeking, you're dealing with Matter; so you can do tests and seek that way by when it comes to spiritual seeking, it's all rather subjective' [P1]*

### ***What questions do spiritual seekers have?***

When asked about their thoughts on what spiritual seekers were looking for, several participants explained that spiritual seekers were seeking answers to particular kinds of questions. In some cases, these questions were related to meaning, purpose and existential concerns. In other instances, spiritual seekers sought ways to develop their mastery of life and recover emotionally.

P6 generalised that spiritual seekers were either *'looking for a concept of enlightenment, or a religious experience, or for their pain to stop [P6]'*, and P10 felt that seekers were *'searching for a couple of possible things that are probably intertwined with each other [P10]'*. Overall, we identified three significant concerns –affective, developmental and metaphysical concerns.

### ***Affective concerns***

The first category of concerns pointed to emotional ups and downs and deep-seated feelings of unhappiness that may provide impetus to seek help in order to recuperate or feel better. These upsets may greatly vary in terms of their intensity from being generally *'anxious [P12]'* to *'practically suicidal [P1]'*, and therefore, some seekers may intuitively seek out materials and resources motivated by feelings of *'not [being] in control of their own lives' [P1]*.

*'There's usually a sense of unhappiness or a feeling of dissatisfaction with life. And so there's a seeking for finding satisfaction somewhere in a deeper meaning' [P9]*

*'I think it's also a drive for something that will bring peace of mind, that will bring relief from suffering' [P10]*

P2 empathised that *'in the story of someone's life when someone dies, or they have a breakup, [there] can be quite a lot of suffering... so they're trying to relieve their sadness [P2]'* and P13 summarised by generalising that spiritual seekers were often looking for *'a total happiness that never ends, and that contains no sorrow in it [P13]'*. In most interviews, affective concerns were cited as foundational motivations that served as a bedrock for subsequent concerns.

### ***Developmental concerns***

In the second category of concerns, some participants explained that spiritual seekers might be interested in seeking spiritual growth and personal development. P13 explained that spiritual seeking often involved prior exposure to ideas that may mobilise seekers to further *'seek in [specific] spiritual traditions based upon their own knowledge of spirituality [P13]'*. Similarly, P9 illustrated that *'if somebody's been brought up in an Eastern environment, for example, their mind might have an idea of enlightenment and what enlightenment means...[so] something starts to seek that as the answer to solve my life's problems [P9]'*

*'Spirituality is about becoming a better You' [P12]*

*'So that is like an ultimate goal for the spiritual seeker, if you get there, then you have made it, then you are enlightened' [P3]*

*'It's almost like self-improvement, that I can attain spiritual maturity or a consciousness or a development of the spirit' [P2]*

P3 helped elucidate popular understandings of spiritual growth by highlighting that growth *'in the material world... can be money, can be status, all these kinds of things [P3]'*. However, in the case of spirituality, growth often took the form of wanting less rather than more. Similarly, P2 described that spirituality often associated growth with *'a desire to have less desires, a desire to have no desires [P2]'*.

### ***Metaphysical concerns***

A final category of concerns was related to metaphysics such as identity, value, purpose and possibility. These concerns were persistent and seemed to manifest as *'a sense of incompleteness [P12]'* and an embodied feeling of *'something gone wrong [P8]'*.

*'there is a drive for existential meaning, which is some stuff like why are we here at all? What is the purpose of life? And a sense that, some answers like that somehow can be found' [P10]*

*So I think that's where spirituality kicks in, assuming God or those deeper values, a real truth, real peace, something metaphysical' [P7]*

Offering a generalisation, P1 metaphorised these concerns as spiritual seekers *'trying to fill this hole they feel within themselves [P1]'* and P11 characterised them as an underlying *'sense that something's lost [P11]'*, which P4 explained may lead to *'a natural desire to find that and fix that [P4]'*.

In general, our participants did not characterise these affective, developmental and metaphysical concerns as mutually exclusive, rather, as P10 initially pointed out, these concerns were usually entwined with each other.

### ***What does the search look like informationally?***

In our attempts to understand the informational features of contemporary spiritual seeking, we probed participants at various junctures that provided opportunities to discuss information activities, interactions, spaces and resources. Their responses specified conventional documentary and personal sources as well as distinctive types of practices characteristic of spirituality. We elaborate on these through an account of spiritual seekers' information sources and practices.

#### ***Information sources***

In interviews where participants shared anecdotes about their personal spiritual seeking attempts, some participants offered narratives about conventional documentary information sources.

*'10 years ago I was looking for enlightenment. I didn't know what that was, how it would look like, but the book's name was Spiritual Enlightenment, [in fact] just before that I was getting into this author [called] Robert Scheinfeld and he recommended Jed McKenna's books [called Spiritual Enlightenment]. So I read [all] three books in 13 days' [P5]*

*'I had like 13 years where I was the typical spiritual seeker, and I've read hundreds, if not thousands of books on every spiritual metaphysical topic that seemed interesting at the time' [P1]*

In addition to documentary sources, some narratives shared accounts of preliminary interactions on online social platforms. For example, P5 recalled that quite early on, *'I arrived at some internet forum... and that was like the final push for me' [P5]*. These sources served as introductory gateways and long-term foundations for spiritual seeking.

Participants who provided generalisations explained that spiritual information was often shared and encountered socially; for example, P2 elaborated that in order to alleviate their affective concerns, *'people [wonder] maybe I should do this meditation, so some people go for Yoga, some people go for Realisation; some people go for Non-duality...and in the midst of all of that, going deeper and deeper into the path, they usually find a Guru or a teacher' [P2]*. P3 illustrated this mechanism by explaining that seekers *'are looking in this field, and then these teachings [be]come available in a way, it's all over the world, so much material, and all sorts of teachings ... are kind of giving this message of, yes, I can help you [with] what you are seeking' [P3]*. As a result, seekers gather additional information through interactions with other people and encounters that may provide a sense of validation.

Several participants also mentioned mystical glimpses as sources of experiential knowledge and insight. When probed for further details, P9 characterised a glimpse as *'a spontaneous opening of [a] curtain or lifting of [a] veil [which] often closes again' [P9]*. These glimpses did not instil a kind of cognitive certainty usually associated with serendipitous encounters or aha! moments, instead, they often served as evidential fragments of how the end of the spiritual search may appear. As a result, P2, P7 and P11 explained that glimpses might intensify spiritual seeking by imparting further impetus or temporarily slow it down by providing some relief.

Therefore, spiritual seeking involved a variety of information sources such as books, online discussions, spiritual teachers and mystical glimpses. Moreover, the participants felt that contemporary spiritual information interactions were facilitated through spiritual retreats, meditation classes, yoga classes and online social platforms.

### ***Information practices***

Responding to our requests to elaborate on how seekers generally went about searching, several participants described a blend of information practices such as reading and listening and contemplative practices such as praying and meditating.

P13 explained that, at first, spiritual seekers may use the information practices most familiar to them, *'So if people are used to getting information from YouTube videos, then they will look on YouTube perhaps. If they're used to reading books, they'll read books. If they're used to talking to people, they'll talk to people' [P13]*. Subsequently, they may learn about contemplative practices and *'through meditation, through prayer, through insights and intuition, they can also get spiritual knowledge this way' [P13]*. Similarly, P10 described a melange of techniques that incorporated *'reading books, talking to other seekers, talking to teachers sometimes, maybe trying meditation here and there, trying prayer here and there' [P10]*.

Therefore, contemporary spiritual seeking could amalgamate conventional epistemological inquiry with contemplative and embodied forms of information practice.

### ***How does spiritual seeking relate to problem-solving and everyday life activities?***

Several descriptions of spiritual seeking emphasised the normality of the phenomenon. These descriptions drew parallels with other similar pursuits to illustrate that contemporary spirituality was a *'vaguely delineated domain [P10]*' where people sought outcomes that were not dramatically different from other developmental pursuits.

*'spirituality says, you don't need a car to be happy, or you don't need a big house to be happy. You can manage to create the same feeling of happiness within you by having the right thoughts, by meditating, by whatever. But it's [seeking] the same thing' [P7]*

*'you could look for things in career or food or entertainment or friendship as well, but you could also look for things in spirituality. So it's simply another form of seeking really, not better or worse' [P4]*

*'going to therapy is the same as going to a spiritual teaching, or a spiritual teacher because both of them are just looking for the same outcome' [P8]*

Since these descriptions did not view spiritual seeking as categorically different from other informational pursuits, there may be information interactions in other domains that have similar concerns but approach them through alternative means. Spiritual seeking may, therefore, reside within a broader framework of similar information interactions with attributes of depth, height and interiority.

## **Discussion**

In discussing the findings from our investigation, we highlight that although spiritual teachers and speakers characterised spiritual seeking as looking for answers to one's problems, they did not describe the search cognitively. Instead, their descriptions of spiritual seeking utilised qualitative attributes of depth, height and interiority. This contrasted with traditional understandings of information which conceptualise information interactions epistemically, often ignoring their aesthetic dimensions (Ma, 2012). At first, our participants' descriptions of spiritual seeking as a search for something deeper, a search for something higher and a search inward seemed similar enough to deem a conglomeration; however, treating them as separate but interlinked themes helped us understand the attributes of spiritual seeking, that may point more broadly to qualitative aspects of profundity.

In their influential article on information and higher things, Kari and Hartel (2007) introduced a pleasurable and profound framework that called for more research in the domains of wisdom, virtues, values and human development, spirituality and religion, intuition, ethics and emotions. More than a decade on, although several studies have researched profound things (e.g. Clemens and Cushing, 2010; Latham, 2013; Gorichanaz, 2016; Caidi, 2019; Huttunen and Kortelainen, 2021), a theoretical exposition of the concept of profundity in information science research has not been attempted. Therefore, based on our findings, we offer a preliminary conceptualisation of profundity that speaks to the following question: What makes certain information and information interactions profound?

The profound is deep and sublime (Kari and Hartel, 2007). As an aspect of aesthetics, depth is often utilised as a qualitative measure of interactions that imbue a sense of personal meaning. For example, we believe that loving differs from attitudes such as liking in terms of its depth (Helm, 2021). As a result, meaningful information interactions have often been characterised as possessing a degree of depth, and conversely, unmeaningful interactions have been depicted as superficial or lacking in depth (e.g. Dunlap *et al.*, 2007; Clemens and Cushing, 2010; Attrill and Jalil, 2011). Depth also relates to a sense of mystery and illusiveness, which, when unravelled, may invoke an appreciation of underlying complexity and artistic talent (e.g. Schumm, 2004). For these reasons, depth may be seen as an aspect of qualitative profundity; however, not the only one.

The sublime refers to height and interiority. In his writings on the beautiful and sublime, Kant described the sublime as inspiring a sense of awe, wonder and overwhelmingness and explained sublimity as a feeling of being confronted with something immeasurably greater, transcendent and boundless (Kant 1987). At the same time, he believed that *'it is in ourselves and our attitude of thought, which introduces*

*sublimity into the representation of nature*' (Kant 1987, §23, p. 104). For Kant, the sublime did not exist independently of one's subjectivity and way of thinking. Instead, he believed that sublimity arose through a generative play of opposites by recognising one's powerlessness, mortality or minuteness when confronted with an expansive vastness and somehow still being an individual capable of action and agency.

In our study, the participants' distinctions between depth and height, conveyed by the use of opposite spatial metaphors, embody attempts to move away from positions of unfulfillment along different axes. The depth metaphor was used to describe a search for meaning and purpose, and in contrast, height pointed to an act of transcendence. Our analysis helped identify these aspects to reveal that profound interactions may exist within a three-dimensional space of depth, height and interiority. And although these aspects may at times overlap, every profound interaction need not possess all three aspects. For example, volunteer work may have depth and interiority but may not be trying to attain a higher state.

Conceptualised in this way, interactions involving one aspect, such as interiority, may be seen as teetering on the edges and vertices of profundity. moreover, involving two aspects would be traversing over multiple faces, and finally, involving all three aspects would be to occupy the cube in its entirety expansively.

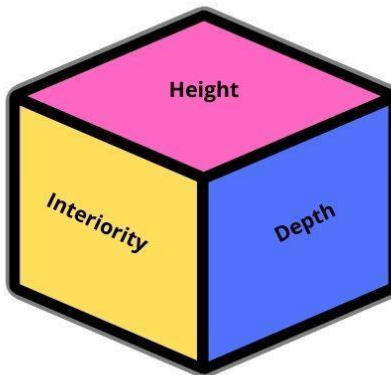


Figure 1: Cube of Profundity

Consequently, we propose that interactions that possess depth, height and interiority be considered within a cube of profundity (see figure 1). Moreover, information and information interactions within this cube may be theoretically conceived as profound.

## Summary and Conclusion

To summarise, our participants felt that spiritual seekers often sought information as a result of affective, developmental and metaphysical concerns. Moreover, spiritual information-seeking behaviour incorporated practices such as prayer, yoga and meditation, and contemporary spiritual information interactions were facilitated through spiritual retreats, meditation classes, yoga classes and online social platforms. These findings support prior work that characterises spiritual seeking as an attempt to make

discoveries and gain new insights (Fuller, 2001). In addition, our study reiterates the individualistic concerns of spiritual seekers, many of which have been a focal point of discussions amongst scholars of contemporary non-institutionalised spirituality (e.g. Ammerman, 2013, Mercadante, 2014).

In this paper, we explained that popular narratives of the *spiritual search* provided an intuitive contextual metaphor for investigating information interactions in the domain of contemplation and spirituality. Our study analysed the informational features of contemporary spiritual seeking and highlighted that traditional epistemic conceptualisations of information might not capture the aesthetic profundity of interactions that do not neatly fall into work-related problem-solving or everyday life. Therefore, activities such as spiritual seeking may theoretically reside within a broader framework of profound information interactions with qualitative aspects such as depth, height and interiority.

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