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## SPIRITUALITY, SEXUALITY AND WELLBEING: META-ANALYSIS

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**ABSTRACT:** A positive association between Spirituality, Sexuality, and Wellbeing have been part of the Eastern tradition since ancient times. Satisfying sexual relationships were considered as the most needed psychological ingredient to achieve spirituality. However, studies showing this association have been very rare in the past. Wellbeing is seen from a holistic viewpoint where one's Sexuality and Spirituality contribute to the fullest. The present study tries to find out how religious and spiritual, cultural practices are related to sexual practices which in turn affects the well-being of the individual. The paper adopted systematic review process to synthesise quantitative studies on sexuality, spirituality, and wellbeing. PRISMA model is followed in sample selection to report the study process and findings. In total, 26 articles are included for meta-analysis. We applied random-effect model to test the effect size of the relationship among the variables. The results indicated significant positive effect of spirituality on sexuality and significant negative effect of religiosity on sexual behaviour irrespective of the cultural context.

**Keywords:** Spirituality; Sexuality; Wellbeing; Meta-analysis

### INTRODUCTION:

*The world of the Gods is made manifest in spirituality and in sexuality. The celestial ones appear in spirituality, the earthly in sexuality. Jung's Red Book (2009)*

The quest for achieving well-being is as old as human civilization. Diverging conceptions have emerged about the 'true' nature of human and connectedness with nature, the Divine and all living beings. The celebration of connection with others provides psychological oxygen to wellbeing; it could

be divine or with fellow human. The peak experience of connecting with divine is termed as spirituality and with human is sexual ecstasy. It involves similar emotional experience accompanied by peace and contentment depending on the quality of relationship (Nelson, 1980). The drive to experience oneness involves beliefs and behaviours which part of our cultural-self conditioned by religious norms and values. Numerous studies have investigated the nature of spiritual, religious practices across cultures and its influence on wellbeing.

In this chapter, we synthesis theories of indigenous sexual practices, spirituality and well-being, with special focus on the concepts from India. We adopted systematic review and meta-analysis to understand the interrelationship between these three concepts. The chapter ends with highlighting the various parameters derived from the analysis.

Sex is an essentially an act of procreation with sensual pleasure, placed at the base of the pyramid of Needs (Maslow). It can have positive and negative effects on wellbeing. Positive effects include reduced stress levels, improved mood, and increased self-esteem. Negative effects include feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety. The relationship between sex and wellbeing is complex and varies from person to person depending on various cultural factors. The negative view on sexual intimacy started in the early church, where it was taught that sex was meant for procreation and not for enjoyment; often associated with shame. This had negative implication of on young people leading sexual relationship without spiritual grounding, engaged in dangerous sexual practices with guilt (Tukker, 2013). Freudian psychology addressed the dysfunctional aspects of the agents of mind at different levels of consciousness. From this perspective, conflict between instinctual drive and super ego disturbs the mental health and well being of the individual. The cultural norms exercised through religious moral codes (Ego) create a division between sexual pleasure (Id) and the divine (Super ego). This gap between sexual desire and spiritual realization leads to inner conflict causing various psychological disorders. In order to promote healthy personality, the individual has to resolve the conflict.

Historically, preaxial religion emphasized on rejoicing sensual experience, pleasure and wellness. The key religious ideas included feminine principal amounting to worship of Goddess and yoni worship, a symbol of fertility and growth. These themes can be observed through the sexual arts and cultural festivals across cultures. Inner cultivation exercises associated with sexual activity had been used for improving health, wellness, rejuvenation, and prolonging life. Various traditions have emerged intertwining spiritual, sexual experiences with the intention of promoting wellbeing. According to script theory of sexual functioning, social and cultural expectations guide our behaviour (Gagnon, 1990; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael & Michaels, 1994). Discovering these scripts, both in individuals and across cultures, reveals much about sexual functioning. It is observed that a person perceiving sexuality as potentially dangerous, dirty, or forbidden is more vulnerable to developing sexual dysfunction later in life (McGoldrick et al., 2007). Similarly, Verma, Khaitan, and Singh (1998) reported that 77% of a large number of male patients reported difficulties with premature ejaculation. This focus on problems with ejaculation is most likely the result of a strong culturally held belief in India that loss of semen causes depletion of physical and mental energy. Synergy of balance in all dimensions of health, but particularly in the coupling of spiritual and sexual selves, provides a rich and subtle reality within which individuals can realize a full expression of their humanness. It involves

communication, trust, openness and acceptance with lovers or partners. Without self-awareness or established ethical principles, a person will be ill-equipped to create intimacy within ourselves or with others, to communicate effectively our sexual needs and desires, or meet others' needs for a healthy sexuality. These factors are fostered by cultural values and socialization process. Hence, cultural factors play a vital role in developing a mature sexual and spiritual being.

It is a well-known fact that Indian traditions and cultural practices emphasize on holistic living. There are various indigenous theories and spiritual teachings highlighting the synergizing effect of the spirit, mind, and body for well-being in India. The eastern approach advocates appropriate sexual expression and transmutation can enhance well-being and spiritual fulfilment. This intertwining of spirituality and sexuality is considered as a path toward enlightenment and transcendence (Kleinplatz & Krippner, 2014). Tantric Yoga utilized the sexual experience as a means to enlightenment (Dynchtwald, 1979).

Trails of this indigenous culture could be observed even among Western thinkers. People like Maslow and Jung have quoted the importance of the Indian Chakra system while delineating the optimal experiences of Individuals (Beshara, 2013). While delineating his hierarchy of needs, Maslow said the strongest needs are the physiological needs (sex, food, and water). Satisfying the deficiency needs is essential for B-needs and "psychic economy of plenty" will ensure self actualization and integration with unitive consciousness (Maslow, 1979). Jung expanded the psycho-spiritual-mythic dimensions of soul as expressed through sexual psychopathology. His theoretical perspectives pointed to the soul at work beneath sexual symptoms and explored the vast expressions of human desire. He believed that religious aspect to sexuality was an essential aspect of the function of the psyche and achieving the process of individuation.

### **CURRENT STUDY:**

Spiritual connectedness is, in essence, the same connectedness that we are striving for when we express ourselves sexually. It involves the same somatic and visceral senses, the same altered states of consciousness, and is accompanied by the same feelings of ecstasy, peace, and contentment. Connectedness is essentially an emotional experience. If as human beings we did not experience fear, love, awe, or lust, we could not experience this wonderful connectedness in either the spiritual or sexual dimensions of our health. We cannot think ourselves into connectedness; we must let ourselves "feel" connected or "experience" connectedness. The drive for connectedness links our sexuality and our spirituality in a way that is unique among the dimensions of health. Often our desire to find sexual connectedness involves beliefs and behavior that are part of our spiritual self.

Eastern traditions emphasized the experience and realization of spiritual purpose through sexual expression. In other words, active and satisfying sexual expression is compatible with the achievement of spiritual purpose (Shining & Epple, 2020); whereas western culture tends to consider the main purpose of sex as pleasure (Culliford, 2011). Further, various religious practices advocated the sexual abstinence and sublimination as way to serve others and achieve salvation. New age spirituality advocates for transmutation of sexual energy for holistic development and self-actualization. Recent attempts of "Science of Wellbeing" concept of Positive Psychology brings a change to this perspective. Wellbeing is seen from a holistic viewpoint where one's Sexuality and Spirituality contribute to the fullest.

**Research Question:**

- How religious and spiritual, cultural practices are related to sexual practices which in turn affects the well-being of the individual?

**Purpose of the meta-analysis:**

This study aims to synthesis the findings on spirituality and sexuality by conducting a comprehensive meta-analysis on the effects of spirituality and sexuality on well-being. Therefore, this meta-analysis sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between spirituality, sexuality?
2. What sexual practices moderate the relationship between spirituality and well-being?

**Method:**

A systematic review and meta-analysis on well-being, different aspects of spirituality and sexuality was conducted. This approach examines overall relationship in spirituality, sexuality and wellbeing across the literature by pooling effects from individual publications.

**Search Process:**

This systematic review was carried out databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar for the period of last ten years from 2012 to 2023. The search terms included a broad conceptualization of spiritual, sexuality practices and wellbeing:

((((((((TS=(spiritual)) OR TS=(spirituality)) OR TS=(religious)) AND TS=(sex)) OR TS=(sexual)) OR TS=(sexuality)) OR TS=(kama)) AND TS=(wellbeing)) OR TS=(well-being)) OR TS=(positive feeling)) OR TS=(psychological well-being)) OR TS=(psychological wellbeing) This resulted in 10,288 articles. Articles were removed on the basis of failing to meet the following criteria.

1. The study must include well-being. There are a wide variety of well-being measures, with substantial heterogeneity in the constructs included, while satisfaction with marital life is included. However, domain-specific measures of well-being were excluded.
2. The study must include a measure of spirituality and sexuality. This includes religiosity, spirituality, and spiritual practices.
3. The study must be quantitative—not qualitative, conceptual, review or theoretical.
4. The study must include correlation coefficient. In cases where a study met the other criteria but was missing r value, authors were contacted for additional information.
5. Duplicates were removed.

This resulted in 102 articles. The titles and abstracts of every article were manually reviewed to identify sample size and r value in the study. Finally, 26 papers were considered for the analysis.

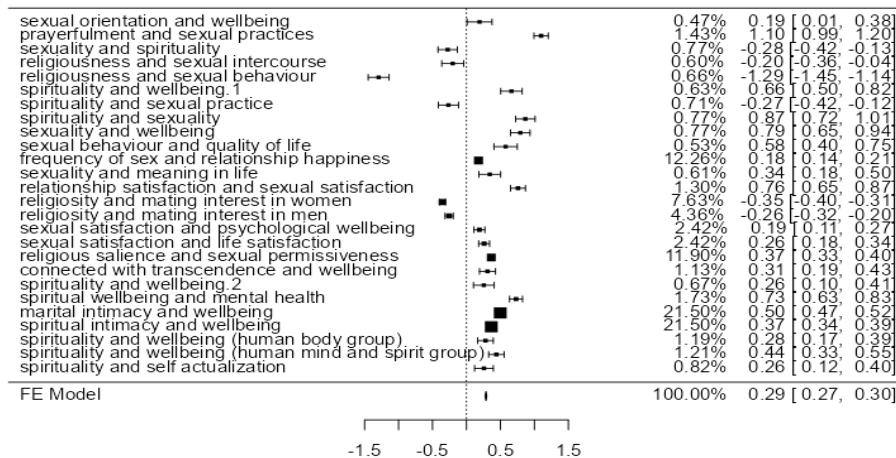
**Statistical analysis:**

Data such as Author, Year, Study, Sample Size, and Correlation value from 26 articles were extracted and recorded into the MS-Excel datasheet files for further analysis in Jamovi 2.3.21. We used module MAJOR in Jamovi for meta analysis. We performed the fixed-effect and random effect with module measure Fisher's z transformed correlations. 95% confidence interval (CI) was measured for each of the articles.

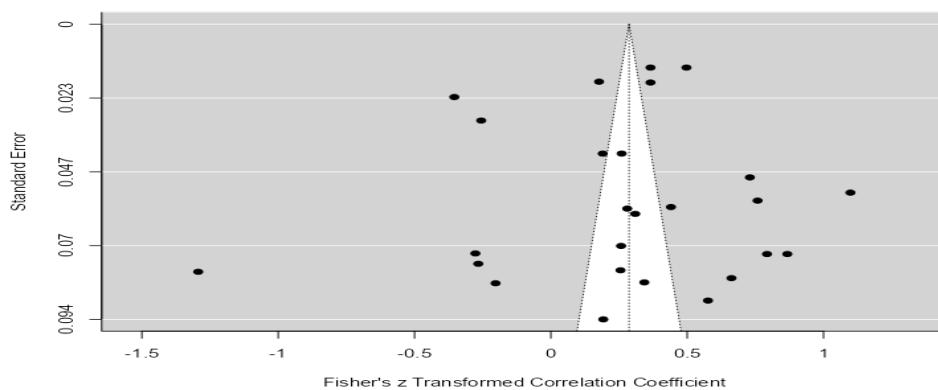
**Results:**

We used Fisher r-to-z transformed correlation coefficient as the outcome measure; employed fixed-effects ad random effect model to analyse the data. The Q-test for heterogeneity (Cochran 1954)

and the  $I^2$  statistic are utilized to assess the heterogeneity among the studies. Studentized residuals and Cook's distances are used to examine whether studies may be outliers and/or influential in the context of the model. A total of  $k=26$  studies were included in the analysis. The observed Fisher r-to-z transformed correlation coefficients ranged from -1.2933 to 1.0986, with the majority of estimates being positive (77%). The estimated average Fisher r-to-z transformed correlation coefficient based on the fixed-effects model was 0.2867 with a 95% confidence interval (CI: 0.2742 to 0.2993). Hence, it is concluded that the average outcome differed significantly from zero ( $z = 44.8756$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). The Q-test indicated high heterogeneity ( $Q (25) = 2499.2523$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ,  $I^2 = 98.9997\%$ ), suggesting diversity in study comes. The regression test indicated funnel plot asymmetry ( $p < 0.0001$ ) but the rank correlation test ( $p = 0.4533$ ) did not indicate funnel plot asymmetry.



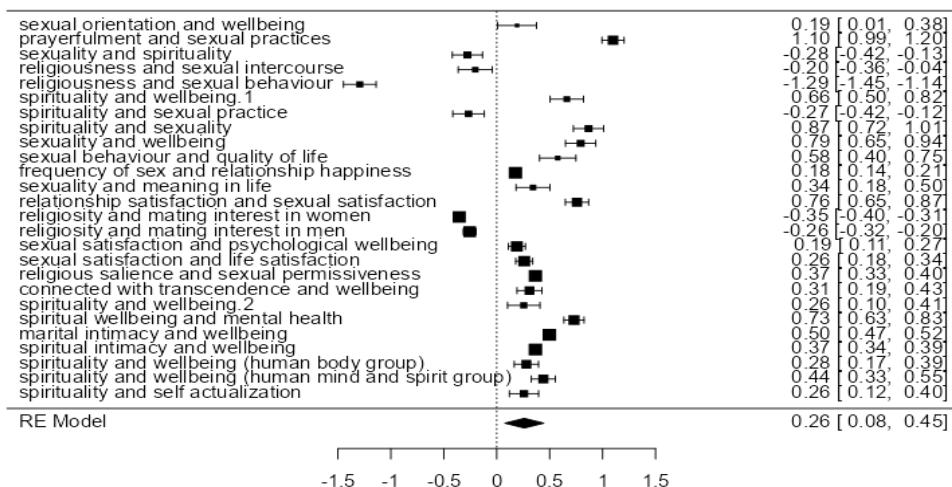
**FIGURE 1**  
**Forest Plot: Fixed Effect**



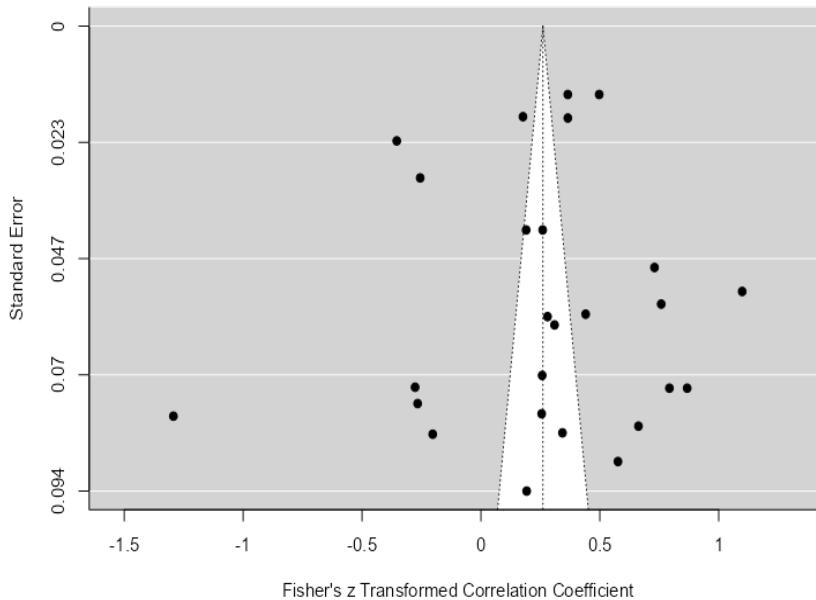
**FIGURE 2**  
**Funnel Plot: Fixed Effect**

**Random Effect:**

The estimated average Fisher r-to-z transformed correlation coefficient based on the random-effects model was 0.2608 (95% CI: 0.0760 to 0.4456). Therefore, it is concluded that the average outcome differed significantly from zero ( $z = 2.7655$ ,  $p = 0.0057$ ). Funnel plot asymmetry was assessed using the rank correlation test and the regression test, did not show significant evidence of funnel plot asymmetry indicating no publication bias in the selected study. According to the Q-test, the true outcomes appear to be heterogeneous ( $Q(25) = 2499.2523$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ,  $\tau^2 = 0.2274$ ,  $I^2 = 99.4855\%$ ). A 95% prediction interval for the true outcomes is given by -0.6920 to 1.2136. Hence, although the average outcome is estimated to be positive, in some studies the true outcome may in fact be negative. Hence, it can be concluded that there is a significant correlation between spirituality, sexuality and wellbeing, but there is substantial heterogeneity across the selected studies.



**FIGURE 3**  
**Forest Plot: Random Effect**



**FIGURE 4**  
**Funnel Plot: Random Effect**

**Discussion:**

Our study focused on the relationship between spirituality and sexuality in a positive way among the general population. We considered these two variables from positive psychological perspective how they are related to wellbeing. This study aimed at quantify the relationship among spirituality, sexuality and wellbeing taking studies published between 2012 to 2023. The overall effect was significant with positive small effect size.

There are two main takeaways from the current study. First, we found a strong significant effect of prayerfulness and sexual practices; spiritual wellbeing and mental health. This indicates that sexual practices are considered as an act of well with prayer or spiritual intention, it has significant positive mental health. It is consistent with the indigenous tantric spiritual practices which views sexual practices as sacred act and it is a duty of the partners to complement each other's needs to work out the karma and transcend together.

Secondly, religiousness had negative effect on sexual intercourse and behaviour. These negative effect stem from the religious belief that creates guilt and shame regarding sexual act as detrimental effect on psychological wellbeing (Wacks, Lazar & Sommerfeld, 2023). It can be substantiated with the findings of Ali, Keo & Chaudhuri (2020) that South Asian individuals in USA often participate in faith communities (such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity) as a source of social support, in which perceptions toward sex are influenced by religious doctrine (Ragavan et al., 2018; Zaidi et al., 2014) implying that even if the individuals are brought up in a different culture, the religious doctrine plays vital role in shaping their sexual practices. Though the spiritual part of person's being is different from religiosity (Fahlberg & Falberg, 1991), religious identity is linked to stronger positive "personal meaning". According to cognitive Approach to spirituality, spiritual development

arises from increasingly meaningful and organized connections of the self to “something more” (Johnson, 2000; Roehlkepartain, Benson, et al., 2006). “Something more” could be any person or non-human relationship or higher dimension. In the era of Artificial Intelligence, artificial partnership or relationship with non-human objects are considered as alternative mechanism in terms of healing and affective relationship as a part of the homeostatic process (Aoki & Kimura, 2021); serving therapeutical purpose. This could also lead to delusional practice.

### **Conclusion:**

Our study highlights those spiritual practices had significant effect on sexual practices in a positive way; whereas religiousness had negative effect on sexual behaviour. Hence, given the strong effect of religious doctrine on sexual behaviour, there is a need for holistic spiritual education and experiential and reflecting learning.

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