Exploring The Reflections Of The Generation Z On The Laity's Constructivist-Spiritual Retreat

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Abstract: Reflections gained from a spiritual retreat experience enhance an individual's well-being by fostering self-awareness, emotional regulation, and personal growth, leading to improved spiritual wellness. This study explored the experiences of Generation Z students, aged 17-21, with family and school problems and avoidance behaviors, highlighting the impact of their participation in a spiritual retreat. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, semi-structured interviews in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with thirty participants were conducted, and data were triangulated through interviews with the parents of five participants. Findings revealed that the arts-based constructivist spiritual retreat provided significant self-transformational and spiritual benefits for adolescent students. Initially, participants described their spirituality as distressed, characterized by low self-esteem, and social isolation and rejection, adversely affecting their relationships and decision-making. During the retreat, they reflected on the importance of optimism, emotional expression, and enhanced faith, facilitated by sharing life stories, empathetic listening, and arts-based activities. Post-retreat, participants reported restored communication with parents and peers, personal development, and spiritual upliftment, including improved self-identity, self-appreciation, and healthier behaviors, demonstrating the retreat's effectiveness in addressing their cognitive, affective, and behavioral challenges. It was concluded that the constructivist spiritual retreat offers multiple benefits for adolescents with cognitive, affective, behavioral, and spiritual problems. It is recommended that the laity's arts-based constructivist spiritual retreat may be integrated into all public and private high schools' guidance programs.

Keywords: *Generation Z students, Spiritual retreat, reflections, constructivism*

1. Introduction

Spiritual retreats have long been recognized as profound experiences that encourage personal reflection, community bonding, and spiritual growth. Rooted in religious traditions, these retreats provide individuals the space to disconnect from daily distractions and reconnect with their inner selves and faith communities. Over time, the practice has evolved to adopt new frameworks, such as constructivism, which emphasizes the active role of individuals in constructing personal and shared meanings during spiritual journeys. This approach has redefined retreats, emphasizing the participant's autonomy and interactive engagement in shaping their spiritual experiences.

Generation Z (Gen Z), those born in the 1990s and raised in a highly globalized and technologized world, exhibit lifestyles shaped by digital-centered living and constant interaction with smartphones, laptops, and social media (Dolot, 2018; Manap et al., 2021; Paztor & Bak, 2021). This exposure has profoundly influenced their communication, recreation, and decision-making processes, often detaching them from reality and immersing them in virtual environments (Gaidhani et al., 2019; Paztor & Bak, 2021). Consequently, Gen Z is increasingly vulnerable to mental health challenges and negative social influences facilitated by unrestricted online content (Manap et al., 2021).

This digital immersion has led to a concerning decline in spiritual and ethical grounding among Gen Z, with many Filipino students struggling to prioritize spiritual values amidst academic pressures, family issues, and the pervasive effects of mass media. Lourembam and Ete (2021) describe this phenomenon as a "spiritual threat," citing its psycho-spiritual impact, including depression, suicidal tendencies, and self-destructive behaviors among youth. These challenges highlight the need for targeted interventions that address the spiritual dimension of Gen Z's lives to foster cognitive, behavioral, and emotional transformation.

To mitigate this spiritual threat, strategies grounded in promoting spiritual well-being are essential. Activities that develop spiritual reflections encouraging self-actualization and catering to the psychological and spiritual needs of Gen Z could serve as effective tools to counter the negative effects of globalization and technologization, helping young individuals build resilience and make values-driven decisions.

This study is grounded in Piaget's constructivist theory, which asserts that individuals actively construct their understanding of the world through experiences, interactions, and reflections (Sharma & Shukla, 2017; Lalhruaitaluagi & Kaur, 2024). Constructivism highlights the dynamic nature of learning, where learners engage as active participants, using scaffolds—supportive structures that bridge knowledge gaps—to develop deeper understanding (Li et al., 2023; Ignacio & Paras, 2024). This approach contrasts traditional learning models by promoting contextual and experiential learning, emphasizing the learner's prior knowledge and experiences as central to constructing new understanding (Alam, 2023).

Guided by this theoretical framework, the study examines how the retreat experience promotes participants' spiritual health, personal growth, and psycho-spiritual well-being. The findings demonstrate the potential of constructivist approaches to address the complex needs of Generation Z students, advocating their broader adoption in educational and therapeutic settings.

This study explores the reflections of Senior High School students of one of the public schools in Zamboanga del Sur Division belonging to the Generation Z who attended the laity's constructivist-spiritual retreat. By examining their insights and experiences, the research seeks to uncover how this generation perceives and responds to a retreat structure that values individual interpretation and collective spiritual growth. In doing so, it sheds light on the evolving dynamics of spirituality among young people and the potential of constructivist approaches to address their spiritual needs in a rapidly changing world.

2. Objectives

The dearth of research on Generation Z's spirituality in the public-school contexts had intrigued the researcher to explore the participants' reflections on the constructivist spiritual retreat. This study aimed to explore the benefits of these participants' reflections after experiencing the retreat. Whether the participants have benefitted from the conducted retreat in terms of personal, social, academic, and spiritual aspects was explored in this study. Another purpose of this study was to explore the effects of the Retreat Module used by the facilitators. This study's findings serve as the baseline for integrating this module in the private and public schools' Guidance Program of the Department of Education.

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing the case study method popularized by Merriam (1998) to explore the experiences and transformations of Generation Z students who participated in a constructivist spiritual retreat. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth examination of participants' socio-emotional challenges, such as depression and anxiety, often linked to personal and family issues. Observations and feedback from parents, teachers, and students consistently highlighted the retreat's positive impact on students' mental well-being and academic performance.

4. Results and Discussions

The case of this study is the participants' social, mental and emotional conditions as reflected in their behaviors before and after attending the constructivist spiritual retreat. This study explored their past experiences to gain insights on their reflections before the retreat and how the retreat experience transformed their lives.

The researcher identified three categories namely: Socio-Emotional State Before Undergoing the Laity's Constructivist Spiritual Retreat; Relevant Reflections on Attending the Laity's Constructivist Spiritual Retreat; and Life Changes After Attending the Laity's Constructivist Spiritual Retreat.

From the three categories, ten sub-categories emerged describing the participants' reflections before and after the retreat experience, namely Socio-emotional Distress, Low Self-esteem, Social Isolation and Rejection, Avoidance Behaviors, Importance of Optimism and Desiring for Change, Reflections on the Effects of Emotional Expression, Reflections on Enhanced Faith and Spirituality, Restoration of Positive Communication, Personal Development, and Spiritual Upliftment.

4.1. Socio-Emotional State Before Undergoing the Laity's Constructivist Spiritual Retreat

This category explores the conditions of the participants' socio-emotional state prior to attending the Laity's Constructivist Spiritual Retreat. It encompasses their initial beliefs, practices, and experiences related to spirituality. The researcher capsulized all emerging keywords from this category into four sub-categories, namely *Socio-emotional Distress, Low Self-Esteem, Social Isolation and Rejection, and Avoidance Behaviors*.

4.1.1 *Socio-Emotional Distress*

Many participants talked about the inner issues and socio-emotional distress they experienced with their parents, siblings, and classmates before they had undergone the constructivist spiritual retreat.

> *"Before the retreat, I was so rude."* – Student 3 (S3)

> *"I blamed God of the problems that I encountered."* – (S4)

> *"Then, there was a time when they (his parents) fought. They really fought. I was in the middle because I don't like chaos. Instead of them just fighting, it seems that all the anger has been given to me. It's like being tortured."* – (S8)

"I feel like I'm being pulled to choose between the left and right, Satan or God, I felt that I was with Satan." - S26

"Before, I was stupid. I used to talk back to my teachers. I was a bully. I always skipped classes, even when the teacher was watching. I always argue with anybody and never obeyed them." – S30

The testimonies highlight the complex relationship between socio-emotional distress, peer-related problems, and behavioral challenges among adolescents in school. Schlesier et al. (2023) observed that familial issues often evolve into peer-related problems as students spend significant time with peers in school. Oyelade and Adebayo (2023) emphasize the vulnerability of adolescents to conflicts like bullying, stemming from unavoidable human interactions, and note that such experiences often lead to socio-emotional distress, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. The constructivist approach is presented as an effective framework for addressing these challenges. Arora et al. (2023) underscore the value of scaffolding instructions and structured activities to facilitate insight and meaning-making, while Lalhruaitluagi and Kaur (2024) affirm that constructivism enables individuals to engage actively in resolving their problems through practice and hypothesis formulation. This approach, applied through a spiritual retreat module, aids adolescents in identifying inner struggles, sharing experiences, and achieving self-transformation.

In guidance and counseling services, the constructivist lens is essential for the guidance counselors in creating scaffolds to help the clients reconnect to the sources of their depression and anxiety, empowering them to release their feelings and gain insights to effect self-efficacy.

4.1.2. *Low Self-Esteem*

The testimonies collectively reflect the participants' struggles with self-perception and confidence prior to attending a retreat. Many participants felt a lack of self-awareness or understanding of their identity, perceiving themselves as weak and inadequate. They were easily hurt by negative comments, which led to low self-confidence and shyness. Their inconsistent self-image and fluctuating confidence were accompanied by long-standing shyness and a sense of physical and emotional weakness, particularly with a fear of speaking up. Some acknowledged their sexual orientation and attraction to women, adding to their self-reflection. They also lacked confidence in academic and verbal situations, resulting in wrong answers and low self-assurance. Struggling with self-belief, they found tasks challenging despite having plans for their future. This was compounded by difficulties in class, which led to a moderate level of self-confidence. The following are the testimonies of the participants highlighting spiritual distress.

"Before the retreat, I found myself weak." – S1

"Before the retreat, I easily got hurt when I heard negative comments about myself from others. I had a low self-confidence and shy." – S3

"Before the retreat, I never knew of myself." – S7

"Before the retreat, I was attracted to women. Lesbian, that is it." – S26

Anxiety and depression negatively affect adolescents' perception of self (Singh et al., 2024). Lei et al. (2024) asserted that due to their negative perceptions of the self, adolescents with low self-esteem fail to recognize their self-worth resulting in weak cognition.

In guidance and counseling services, this study suggests the emphasis of arts-based constructivist spiritual guidance and counselling techniques so that the clients can maximize the counselling session for engaging with the constructivist activities that encourage emotion expression, gaining of insights and deeper meaning of one's existence, and development of self-esteem.

4.1.3. *Social Isolation and Rejection*

Most testimonies highlight the profound emotional impact of familial indifference and lack of support. Many participants articulate feelings of being unheard and unimportant within their families, leading to internalized stress and a sense of not belonging. Some participants struggle to share personal problems due to perceived indifference, feel deeply ignored, likening their experience to being adopted, which underscores a significant lack of maternal care. Conversely, others cope by withdrawing from family interactions, retreating to their room to avoid further emotional distress, reflecting a protective measure against the lack of familial understanding and support.

"I have no one to share, I can keep my problem inside. None in our family dared to listen to my problem. It seemed that no one take care of me." – S2

"At first, I got inside the home from the school alone. I stayed inside the room and always thought of anything. I did not answer when they (parents) called me." – S3

"Before the retreat had not come yet, I felt like I was not my mother's daughter. I felt I was ignored. I felt like I was adopted." – S9

When an individual thinks of being isolated from a social environment, she/he is in a state of stress, emptiness, and detachment (Mireku et al., 2023). This is prevalent in the testimonies of some participants in this study. Barredo et al. (2021, as cited in Mireku et al., 2023) affirmed that some social and school environment factors cause adolescent isolation. The family environment where an adolescent receives poor-quality attention causes loneliness and rejection (Gierveld et al., 2018; Watson & Stelle, 2011, as cited in Mireku et al., 2023).

In the Guidance and Counseling program, scaffolding seminars for parents may be appropriate and more effective in developing familial support and good parenting techniques.

4.1.4. *Avoidance Behaviors*

Many participants admitted to having self-destructive or risk-taking behaviors in coping with problems such as substance abuse and excessive indulgence in activities like online addiction, smoking, isolation, drinking hard liquor, and skipping classes. The following are the participants' testimonies:

"Before, I used to suppress my feelings whenever I had a problem. I murmured why I encountered the problem, but later, I kept silent." – S4

"Before the retreat happened, I was very far from my parents. I kept on scrolling my cellphone." – S8

"Before the retreat, when I had a problem at home, I just wanted to stay in the house. I hardly went out; then I would not say I liked talking to people, especially since I got angry with my mom and dad." – S9

"My way of dealing with problems especially personally is… when I'm at home I just keep quiet. Just make cellphone activities and then at night I cried. Then I have to hide." – S12

"Before, I was always absent. I did not pass the requirements much." – S15

"Before the retreat, I shared with my friends my problems, and they told me to have a drinking session." – S18

"Sir, before our retreat, if I have a problem, I only keep it to myself. I did not share. I did not open it because I wanted to be alone." – S20

"My experience before the retreat was that I was very naughty at home. I did not help with household chores because I was addicted to playing ML (Mobile Legend). I was a burden to my parents." – S21

"I used to skip classes to smoke and then came back inside the room. I like to smoke." – S23

"Before the retreat took place, I used to abuse my body through excessive smoking." – S24

Ime et al. (2024) postulated that adolescents spend more time online and on the internet because of the continually fast-emerging development of new gadgets, learning, and entertaining online settings. Singh et al. (2021) found that stress and anxiety were associated with excessive internet and media use as coping mechanisms for adolescents.

The findings imply that avoidance behaviors are prevalent in the Generation Z and the MAGC program may streamline counseling techniques and strategies allowing its MAGC students to explore relevant theories in handling adolescent clients with harmful avoidance behaviors.

4.2. Relevant Reflections on Attending the Laity's Constructivist Spiritual Retreat

Four sub-categories emerged from this category, namely: *Importance of Optimism and Desiring for Change, Reflections on the Effects of Emotional Expression, and Reflections on Enhanced Faith and Spirituality*.

4.2.1. *Importance of Optimism and Desiring for Change*

Despite facing challenges, the participants exhibit optimism and a willingness to improve their lives through active engagement in spiritual retreat activities. Many participants talked about their reflections and realizations indebted to the various retreat activities conducted by the retreat facilitators. These activities motivated individuals to reflect on the importance of optimism

and having a desire to change their way of thinking and behaviors. Below are the testimonies of the participants stating their reflections.

"After the retreat, I thought of controlling my eating habit." – S3

"Regarding my studies, I always tried hard to make solutions especially on class reporting because I found it difficult to do so. I told myself I could do it because others can." – S3

"After the retreat, I feel I am already strong enough to face my problems. I asked the Lord for help. I believe that I can overcome them. Instead of crying immediately, I am always optimistic." – S5

"After the retreat, I now say that I should no longer be shy. I really like to report unlike before that, I was really shy." – S8

"After the retreat, we realized that drinking should not be allowed at all. Now, I stop smoking." – S13

"After the retreat, I realized that it was not good to be ashamed because it did not help us improve ourselves. I can see in myself that I am important. It has a value." – S15

"I drunk but not Tanduay and other expensive liquor. After the retreat, I realized that what I did was wrong."– S18

"After the retreat, sir, I was very enlightened. I realized that everything I was doing was wrong." – S27

"After the retreat, I realized that it was not good. My mind was controlled by ML (Mobile Legend). I felt pity to my parents who always worked on our rice field and me inside the house like a pig waiting for food. My parents were already exhausted. It was not good. I should change it." – S30

Tetzner & Becker (2018, as cited in Pyo et al., 2024) posited a significant relationship between optimism and success in the various areas of an individual's life. Alyana et al. (2023) correlate optimism with positive emotions like happiness and a pleasurable outcome. These positive emotions may drive the participants to reflect on changing their bad habits.

Notably, the constructivist lens applied in the retreat module helps the participants to come up with their reflections resulting in valuing optimism and desire for change.

4.2.2. *Reflections on the Effects of Emotional Expression*

The testimonies highlight the essential benefits of expressing their emotions during the various structured retreat activities. The participants seem to benefit the opportunity to be listened by the retreat facilitator and their colleagues allowing them to freely release their deep-seated feelings and attentively listen to the life stories of their classmates that touched their hearts too that enabled them to listen from their peers' reflections.

"I like the Mephone all of us were touched and cried. It was very unforgettable memory because we read touching messages." – S1

"My favorite part of this retreat is on sharing problems because it's really nice in my feelings that have somebody you can share your problems with. Then, it's very nice feeling that you can release your pain." – S14

"I felt relieved because I unloaded a number of pains. Not only sad experiences but also my happy ones. Not fully stable but at least our heartaches were lessened, and our feelings were relieved. My anger with my father was resolved. I am now close with my father. Because of the retreat, I was able to release my anger to him. my feelings to him." – S5

"So, in that letter, I told my pain to my mom and I also said 'I love you there.' I can't tell my mom because I'm ashamed. That's how my mom cried. I also felt that my mother really loves me." – S10

"What I really like most about the activities that happened here, sir, is the dance exercise. That's where I enjoyed the most because I saw that almost all of us cooperated. Everyone really cooperated. We all enjoyed it. I really saw the students enjoying and expressing themselves." – S12

The testimonies of the participants suggest that adolescents engage positively in group activities because they have a high regard for peer groups' acceptance and validation of themselves (Xu, 2023). Xu (2023) posits that adolescents tend to mirror and imitate the good behaviors of their peers. Their intense need to belong drives them to build social networks with other peers (Sebastian et al., 2010, as cited in Mu & Du, 2024). Thus, the feeling of belongingness with the group of retreat participants and identicalness of experience revealed throughout whole activities contribute to the emerging development of therapeutic peer relationships.

This outcome is affirmed by the recommendation of Perkowska-Klejman & Gorka-Strzzalkowska (2023) on the importance of providing a friendly and well-organized learning environment for the students and satisfying their need for acceptance and respect.

4.2.3. *Reflections on Enhanced Faith and Spirituality*

The testimonies of the students about their faith and spirituality prove that everyone's retreat experience nurtured a sense of faithfulness and reliance on spiritual beliefs, particularly in God, as a source of strength and guidance. Some testimonies illustrate profound spiritual transformations facilitated by their experiences and the retreat.

> *"I develop my relationship with God. Before, I blamed God when I had a problem. After the retreat, I realized that it was not good. I become closer to Him."* – S1

> *"I blamed God on the problems I encountered. After the retreat, I try hard to find a solution and pray to God all problems I have. There is no impossible with Him."* – S4

> *"Then, when the retreat came, sir, I realized that you should thank the Lord for everything you have. You know how to be contented with what I have. That's when I realized that even for small things, we should be thankful to the Lord."* – S12

> *"I have observed in myself, sir, before I don't really like to go to church. If I went to church, I just slept inside. Now, after our retreat, I realized that we should really listen to the word of the Lord."* – S14

> *"As for me, sir, in my spiritual side, it improved my spiritual side. In the retreat, I was taught more about forgiveness. Honestly, to forgive is really hard."* – S21

Most participants' testimonies underscore learning forgiveness, growing through trials, and practicing gratitude, leading to a deeper, more resilient faith. Their testimonies suggest that depression and anxiety harmfully affected the well-being of the participants but were obviously restored by their religiosity and spirituality. Abdel-Khalek (2011, and King & Boyatzis, 2015, as cited in Kosarkova & Roubalova, 2023) posit that religiosity and spirituality significantly affect adolescents' well-being and total human development. The fact that the participant blamed God reflects her spiritual disorder. Thus, the participants' restoration of their faith and spiritual experience during the spiritual retreat positively affects their self-worth and self-esteem. Their spirituality helps them find the value and meaning of life and undergo traumatic past experiences (Kerinina & Kusristanti, 2023).

4.3. Life Changes After Attending the Laity's Constructivist Spiritual Retreat

This category explores how the constructivist spiritual retreat influences various aspects of participants' lives, such as their emotional well-being, relationships, spiritual beliefs, and daily habits. Three sub-categories emerged from this category, namely *Restoration of Positive Communication, Personal Development, and Spiritual Upliftment*, emphasizing how this retreat experience transforms the individual in terms of family and peer communication and personal and psycho-spiritual development.

4.3.1. *Restoration of Positive Communication*

The participants' testimonies collectively illustrate the positive impact of the retreat on family communication and relationships. They testified that the retreat activities led to a breakthrough with their father, resulting in a closer relationship and indicating that the retreat created a space for honest and open dialogue. The participants' testimonies highlight a significant change in the communication dynamics at home, noting that while conversations are still infrequent, there is a noticeable improvement, suggesting that the retreat helped reduce barriers and encourage more openness.

> *"I think those things made my father realized. We become close again. I talked to him personally because I liked it."* – S5

> *"So, now when I come home we have a communication. 'Where have you been?', even though we don't talk much but we can talk more than before."* – S9

Open parent-child communication can reduce symptoms of depression among adolescents (Yang & Zeng, 2023; Ye, 2023). Samfira (2022) affirms the principle of her respondent parents that parent-child communication is vital in child development and familial environment.

4.3.2. *Personal development*

Individuals experience personal growth and development, which may include increased self-awareness, cognitive behavioral changes, focus on school tasks, resilience, and a sense of purpose. All structured spiritual retreat activities were geared toward acquiring learning and reflections for behavioral changes.

> *"For me, sir, on the change of the self, sir. I got a lot from the retreat sir. I changed myself. I lost my stupidity because I changed myself, because everything I did was wrong, mistakes. I took away those stupid actions because they are all wrong."* – S22

> *"After the retreat, my confidence increased, especially when there was a school report. I am not ashamed of my classmates anymore because I feel like I'm not the only one who has a problem."* – S11

> *"Then after our retreat, I have a self-confidence. It was like having the assignments, I have the guts to do it. You really need to have an important perspective on yourself."* – S16

> *"After the retreat, I was embarrassed using my cell phone in front of a teacher. I feel shy."* – S17

> *"After the retreat, I felt sorry for abusing my parents. I stopped playing games and started helping with the household chores. I was also able to stop playing ML."* – S24

> *"I am used to it now, and before the retreat, I got attracted to women. Lesbian, that is it. After the retreat, I realized it is better to attract a boy than a girl."* – S26

> *"Even though I didn't ask for their forgiveness, they probably knew I was sorry because I stopped doing what I used to do. I became more disciplined."* – S27

> *"After the retreat, I felt guilty of what I did. I realized that talking back to an eldest person was wrong. I could not control myself to lower my voice. Now, I know how to lower my voice."* – S33

> *"After the retreat, I realized that it is not good to abuse my body even once. I started cutting off my vice due to my mother's advice because I am still young for that vice"* – S35

This finding also suggests that the constructivist spiritual retreat may help the participants develop self-management techniques, as found in the earlier literature study of Nurhayati et al. (2023). This finding also supports the contention of Humayya et al. (2022) that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and mindfulness can help adolescents learn new and adaptive coping techniques to reduce family and school anxiety. Mindfulness therapy can improve adolescents' cognitive control of any situation and reduce online addiction and mobile attachments (Zadehasan et al., 2024).

4.3.3. *Spiritual Upliftment*

Most participants' testimonies emphasize psychological and spiritual well-being, suggesting that individuals found comfort, meaning, or guidance through spiritual or introspective practices of the constructivist spiritual retreat. Their retreat experience has changed their spiritual aspect of life. Participants' testimonies below suggest that the constructivist spiritual retreat they experienced had uplifted their spirituality.

> *"Despite the various problems I encountered, the more I trust in God. I do not always go to Church, but I know God personally. Whether you believe me or not, I always have time for prayer."* - S1

> *"When the retreat happened, I realized that I was wrong. I am closer to God."* - S2

> *"Spiritually, I have developed my trust to God in times of crisis. I am not always going to Church, but I always believe in God. I always pray to God good health for my family."* – S7

This finding is consistent with Schiffman's (2016 as cited in Pearson et al., 2024) finding that faith-based Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy is helpful for individuals with a deeper relationship with God because their faith and spirituality help them value

and appreciate spiritual activities for human development. Doxologia (2022, as cited in Neagu, 2024) asserts that prayer helps a depressive person focus, remove irrational thoughts, and gain vital energy.

5. Conclusions

Constructivist spiritual retreat has multiple benefits for adolescents' psycho-spiritual development who have cognitive, affective, and behavioral problems due to family and school stress. These findings are consistent with the earlier studies' findings of adolescents' anxiety and depression-related problems, social learning through scaffolding, and therapeutic group interventions based on Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) and arts-based mindfulness or religious/spiritual approaches.

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