



## **Faith for thought: a content analysis of traditional Christian, SBNR and atheist content creators and their messages to younger generations**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper examines the influence of digital media on the spread of Christian, atheist, and Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) ideologies, particularly among younger generations. By using a content analysis methodology, the study analyzed YouTube videos and related online sources, utilizing transcript extraction and thematic analysis tools to identify prevalent terms and ideas. It was initially hypothesized that SBNR content would show noticeable growth and emphasize individualized spiritual discovery over adherence to existing frameworks, as understood from previous textual research. The findings, however, indicated that while Christian and atheist content creators maintained considerable visibility and engagement with their online audiences, SBNR content was markedly underrepresented and presented lower interaction overall. It is exhibited in the findings that SBNR content prioritized discovery of “true” personal identities and inclusivity rather than doctrinal adherence. Such results suggest that although societal trends are more likely to favor personalized spirituality, mainstream digital platforms are yet to fully integrate SBNR perspectives. Further research is recommended to explore a broader selection of digital environments to better examine the nuances of emerging spiritual movements.

### **Introduction**

Since 2012, over 35 to 40 percent of Americans were found likely to change their religious traditions, especially “emerging” adults who had a “tendency to support religious pluralism and syncretism” (McClure, 2016). Religious belief systems have experienced major changes over time, with deviations from traditional doctrines becoming increasingly pronounced in response to modernization and broader historical developments. In the wake of World War II, various social movements fostered a culture of iconoclastic experimentation, privileging unrestricted, direct experience over faith in historical traditions and the authority of existing institutions (Watts, 2018). Alongside ever-expanding globalization and awareness of world cultures, these countercultural or “spiritual” movements reflected an increasingly popular desire for “authentic” self-expression (Watts). In this environment, especially in North America and Europe, Baby Boomers began identifying as “spiritual” rather than “religious,” reframing religious practice within a largely desacralized postmodern context (Watts). Consequently, younger generations increasingly emphasized independently forming their own ideological systems, resulting in the development of more individualized beliefs which retain religious elements without strictly enforcing them, from which this Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) identity was created.

The expansion of this belief system is becoming more apparent in recent demographic trends. A major shift in the American religious landscape is reflected in a study by Pew Research Center, which reported that 37% of the 46 million unaffiliated Americans identified as SBNR (Pew Research, 2012). Generational influences are also inherent, where 32% of adults under 30 reported no religious affiliation or to having spiritual connections, compared to only 9% of those aged 65 and older (Pew Research, 2012). Although prior studies have documented the rise of the SBNR demographic, the role of digital media - especially content creation platforms - in advancing these beliefs remains underexplored. It is unclear whether digital platforms



contribute similarly to the spread of SBNR ideologies as they do for more established religions like Christianity or for secular movements like atheism. Religion and atheism feature prominently in digital media, as seen in Jubilee's Middle Ground series, taking a particular video which hosted a discussion between atheists and Christians (Jubilee, 2017). Despite widespread availability of digital discussions of religious and secular perspectives, the relative absence of SBNR communities in similar content prompts important questions regarding their underrepresentation.

Past studies, according to Ammerman, suggest that previous research has oversimplified SBNR identities by imposing binary distinctions between "religious" and "spiritual," failing to fully express their complexity (Ammerman, 2013). Accordingly, this project will conduct a content analysis of YouTube creators across religious, atheist, and SBNR categories, examining how their use of themes and terminology differs - and how these distinctions may shape patterns of audience engagement.

## Literature Review

To understand the significance of the emergence of these new spiritual belief systems, it is important to examine the characteristics and principles embraced by Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) communities. The marked increase in American adults identifying as SBNR highlights a clear transformative shift in the religious landscape of the United States. 22% of U.S. adults identify as SBNR; while a large majority of this demographic has the tendency to still believe in the existence of a higher spiritual power (73%), their conceptualization of this power often diverges from the traditional Christian God (20%), resulting in lower affiliation with organized religion (Pew Research Center, 2023). Such a shift reflects the broader cultural transformations that have taken place that moves the SBNR away from institutionalized religion toward more individualized spiritual expression. Scholars, with this context, have interpreted the SBNR identity as a transitional 'bridge' between religious affiliation and disaffiliation. SBNR individuals often exist in a liminal space that resists conventional categorization, which raises significant questions about how this group contributes to the broader cultural shift away from traditional religious institutions regarding attitudes toward faith, community, and personal identity in modern society (Marshall and Olson, 2018). Most prominently, what defines the SBNR identity most critically is the prioritization of subjective emotional experience over institutional affiliation. Even those who did report some connection to a major religion "did not justify their institutional affiliation on the basis of loyalty to the religious institution itself. Instead, they spoke of feeling connected or close to specific individuals whom they knew at their place of worship; for them, what mattered most was the subjective feelings" (Watts, 2018). This prioritization of personal feelings over the institutional context in which they occur thus reflects the core emphasis of SBNR belief on untrammelled individual freedom, which will help to understand this emerging belief system.

Privileging personal spirituality over traditional orthodox religion is becoming increasingly evident with the constantly evolving context of technological advancement and the widespread accessibility and influence of social media in contemporary society. Social Networking Sites (SNS) in particular have designed new realms for experimental expressions of new beliefs and construction of personal identity. Increasing accessibility to a diverse range of spiritual content on video-sharing platforms such as YouTube in this era of humanity makes one able to adopt and syncretize components of a widened range of belief systems and ultimately establish an individualized path of spirituality which deviates from stricter doctrinal structures. This trend is

the most evident among youth who, being the most exposed to such procedures of religious and cultural diversification, exhibit a greater tendency to adopt an open and extensive approach towards spirituality. Given their greater exposure to religious diversity and awareness or acceptance of cultural relativism, young adults and adolescents were also found more open to “customiz[ing] their own tailor-made spirituality” and “soften[ing] their exclusivist claims by acknowledging the limitations of what they know about other religions” (McClure, 2016). This tolerant attitude seems a clear reflection of its recent historical development, given similar contemporary political attitudes favoring diversity and inclusion.

This adaptive and flexible approach to faith reflects the general present-day political and cultural movements which advocate for diversity and inclusivity. According to O'Leary (1996), the digital revolution has altered the context of religious identity formation, with individuals turning to virtual environments to satisfy their individual spiritual needs instead of reaching out to physical institutions. As individuals spend more time interacting with the internet, online environments have become the most ‘arenas of spiritual discovery. Such an increase in internet interaction also impacts traditional religion, which is now attempting to modernize itself in a bid to appeal to modern-day listeners. A study by Haskell and Burgoyne (2016) examined 22 mainline Protestant churches and found that the most successful and popular congregations were more likely to adopt contemporary worship styles and reinforce the necessity for youth-based programs within their organizations. Specifically, the nine growing churches in their study had been significantly more likely than their thirteen declining counterparts to adapt their services to fit the preferences of their younger members, therefore they resulted in higher gains in followers for their particular methods of practicing faith. This highlights the ever-growing cultural shift in religion where institutional faiths that have existed since the most foundational times of world history must now compete with individualized spiritual ideologies by emphasizing emotional resonance, accessibility, and modern communication strategies. Growing emphasis on autonomy and individualism among young American adults align with longstanding American cultural values such as individualism and independence. The U.S. cultural norm of valuing self-determination over collective authority - also relating to religious movements - has deep historical roots, stretching back to the First and Second Great Awakenings, and the countercultural movements of the 20th century. As outlined by the University of Rochester's International Services Office, individualism remains a defining characteristic of American society. This context helps to explain why emerging adults in the U.S. are increasingly attracted to belief systems that allow greater flexibility and self-expression, rather than those rooted in rigid theological authority.

In addition to its cultural compatibility, the SBNR identity may also offer psychological benefits, consequently bringing more appeal to these emerging young adults. Barkin et al. (2015) conducted a study on upper-middle-class young adults (ages 18–24), finding that greater spiritual development was significantly associated with better mental health outcomes, increased life satisfaction, and reduced antisocial behaviors. These findings were reiterated by Veselska et al. (2018), who found that spirituality was positively correlated with self-rated positive health and fewer medical complaints among adolescents, while religiosity, measured by church attendance and perceived importance of faith, was not significantly linked to improved well-being. These studies suggest that the SBNR's emphasis on internal fulfillment and discovering personal meaning may be particularly well-suited to supporting mental resilience among young people.

However, despite its obvious psychological and cultural relevance, the SBNR identity is often underrepresented or misrepresented in mainstream media. Scholars such as van Driel and Richardson (1997) have analyzed how media portrayals of unconventional belief systems often fall into deep suspicion in the respective audiences, using a content analysis of American print media to find that new religious movements (NRMs) or any unique belief system that has not yet been widely exposed to the public are frequently categorized as “cults” or “dangerous sects,” aiming to associate mistrust or reluctance through such pejorative portrayals. Furthermore, such unconventional belief systems are related to controversies in news media, which demotes their position in social cultures and encourages public fear and marginalization in society and therefore preventing the spread of these new ideas.

In relation to SBNR context, the literature to date suggests that non-traditional spiritual identities face institutional disadvantages in their portrayal within mainstream media sources. Because of their divergence from traditional religious or atheist frameworks, SBNR communities become marginalized in mainstream depictions. Additionally, when such groups are represented, they are likely to be represented in an inaccurate way where they are characterized to not have any serious theological engagement and are closer to simple ‘trends’ to follow. Such misrepresentation not only distorts public opinion but also constrains perceived legitimacy of SBNR beliefs.

Further complications arise from shifting trends in media consumption. Historically, print media have enjoyed enormous power in framing public opinion, but newer electronic media sources, such as YouTube, are increasingly determining the discourse on spirituality and religious institutions. In contrast with conventional journalism, these newer electronic media give content creators the power to bypass conventional institutional gatekeepers, allowing them to reach directly to some segments of the audience. Yet we cannot be entirely confident that this democratization of content has been of any influence in raising awareness of SBNR groups. Thus, as SBNR identities grow more visible, it is required to perform extra research on examining their representation across various media formats, and explore how SBNR creators present their content in comparison to religious and atheist producers to examine communication strategies used in this continuously changing cultural context.

## Hypothesis

Based on findings from existing literature regarding the increasing prevalence of spirituality in contemporary society, it is reasonable to hypothesize that there will be a notable increase in the number of Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) content creators on platforms such as YouTube that will convey the inherent cultural shift toward individualized spiritual exploration over adherence to traditional religious institutions. Furthermore, it is expected that SBNR content creators will mainly engage with themes tailored to the subjective experiences and personal development of their audiences, including self-discovery, personalized identity formation, and reflection of morals. In contrast, religious and atheist creators are predicted to focus more on topics based in structured belief systems and institutional doctrines, reflecting the ideological frameworks inherent to their respective worldviews and historical values.

## Method

To measure the hypothesis that belief systems express themselves differently in digital platforms based on their theological or spiritual position, a content analysis methodology. A content analysis is a qualitative research method used to examine the presence of certain

words, themes, or concepts within given data such as text or media, and it allows for both quantitative analysis of the frequency of certain words and qualitative analysis of the presence, meanings, and relationships of such certain words, themes, or concepts (Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, n.d). The primary focus was on examining how Christian, atheist, and Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) content creators communicate their ideas through YouTube videos, podcasts, and blogs. The project goal was to identify thematic similarities and differences between each belief system and to understand how those differences affect presentation, outreach, and engagement.

The research process was carried out in a three-way procedure, labelled respectively Platform Selection and Rationale, Content collection and Viewing, and Compilation and Comparison of data.

### **Platform Selection and Rationale**

The study started with determining the most suitable platform to source content. The platform used as the principal platform for content concerning Christianity and atheism was YouTube because, as of 2025, it is the second most powerful social media platform, having over 2.5 billion monthly users (Shepherd, 2025). In addition, YouTube's algorithm promotes easier visibility of material as well as rapid audience formation, so it is a great site to examine how belief-based messages are conveyed and received. In addition, its "Popular" tab provided a simple way to watch heavily viewed and engaged-with content.

The SBNR category faced difficulties with YouTube. In contrast to Christianity and atheism, both of which have established public figures and content hubs, SBNR is characterized by a lack of central authority or influencer-driven channels. Thus, extra platforms were necessary. A mix of blogs, Reddit forums, and podcasts was employed to compile SBNR views. The search for these materials was directed by academic guidance - namely the works of Dr. Linda Mercadante, a professor who writes extensively on SBNR beliefs. Her blog and citations led to other sound sources.

### **Content Source Identification**

The most fundamental step to this section of the methodology was the basic Google Search. I identified - while not scholarly - ranking websites for each belief system that compiled different platforms of Youtube content creators of each belief system (for Christian and atheist creators), for which I used Medium's article by Martin (2024) to identify the most accessible and younger-generation-oriented YouTube channels. For atheist YouTube channels, I identified a Reddit chain (R/askanatheist on reddit: What are some good atheist YouTube channels?, 2020) where a discussion forum open to all commenters who had prior knowledge about these channels. SBNR sources were collected upon more extensive Google Searches for there were no available forum in which they discussed rankings of "best to worst" SBNR resources.



Table 1: Selected YouTube channels and alternative media resources for belief systems

| Religious               | Atheist                      | SBNR                             |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| DLM Christian Lifestyle | The Atheist Experience       | None But Curious (Blog, podcast) |
| THE BEAT by Allen Parr  | Genetically Modified Skeptic | The Sanctuary (YouTube video)    |
| Joel Osteen             | Alex O'Connor                | Healthy Beliefs (Blog)           |

### Content Collection

For each selected YouTube channel (Christian and atheist), the first ten videos under the "Popular" tab were selected and viewed so that I could ensure consistency in the particular aspects of the videos I was looking out for, and so that I could identify the most prevalent themes more easily. For each video, the following data was recorded:

- View count
- Like count
- Comment count
- Subscriber count (channel-level)

This data helped assess engagement levels and allowed for better comparison of how different belief systems connect with audiences.

For the SBNR sources, all available podcast episodes and blog entries from selected creators were included due to the lower volume of content. Rather than selecting ten items, every entry was treated as significant because the nature of the SBNR identity meant each piece likely carried unique insights.

### Analysis

Once content was collected, the next step was to convert it into a format suitable for text analysis. This was done using NoteGPT, a transcription tool capable of extracting YouTube video audio into readable text. All ten videos from each selected channel were transcribed. For podcasts, available transcripts were used when provided. Blog entries were already in text format. These transcripts were then uploaded into Voyant Tools, a powerful digital humanities tool that enables real-time text analysis. Voyant produced word frequency counts and visualizations such as word clouds and trends over time, allowing for identification of the most frequently occurring terms and phrases in each belief system's content. Through Voyant, attention was also given to words that often appeared together, which offered insight into not just what terms were used but how they were used - revealing potential framing techniques or narrative strategies.

### Data and Findings

To further discuss the similarities and differences between the selected belief systems' ideologies and how they are spread across social media platforms to gain traction from their respective audiences, it is necessary to define each belief system and what elements each of

their systems believe in the most prominently - such will consequently be indicated in my research - to gain a better basic understanding of each genre of belief system. Such can be found in the table below:

**Table 2. Definitions of central terms in this research**

| Terms                       | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Christian                   | Someone who follows the teachings of Jesus Christ and adheres to Christianity, a monotheistic religion based on the Bible. (Merriam-Webster)                                                                          |
| Atheist                     | An individual who does not believe in the existence of God or any divine beings. Atheism rejects religious faith as a source of knowledge (Britannica)                                                                |
| Spiritual But Not Religious | SBNR refers to individuals who embrace personal spirituality without adhering to an organized religion. They often seek meaning through personal experiences rather than institutional doctrines (Pew Research, 2023) |

Overall “popularity” of each selected channel was calculated by comparing the numerical data: the channels’ subscriber counts, total viewership since their first publication to present day, and the average number of likes and comments for each channel’s top 10 most popular videos. Obviously, some sources of data used for some of the belief systems - particularly SBNR content creators - were exempted from having their “likes and comments” averaged, for this did not apply to their methods of information transmission.

**Table 3. Catalogue of content creators observed**

| Sources   | Platform             | Channel / website name                  | Subscriber count | Total viewership  | Average Likes count | Average comments count |
|-----------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Christian | YouTube              | The BEAT by Allen Parr                  | 1.28M            | 147,236,825 views | 49.3K               | 12,114.3               |
| Christian | YouTube              | DLM Christian Lifestyle                 | 1.2M             | 75,777,332 views  | 73.4K               | 10,271.3               |
| Christian | YouTube              | Joel Osteen                             | 3.63M            | 669,318,788 views | 109.6K              | 5,433.2                |
| Atheist   | YouTube              | Genetically Modified Skeptic            | 784K             | 107,727,522 views | 103.8K              | 30,042.1               |
| Atheist   | YouTube              | The Atheist Experience                  | 423K             | 261,567,046 views | 16.9K               | 8,150.4                |
| Atheist   | YouTube              | Alex O'Connor                           | 1.31M            | 238,422,541 views | 77.3K               | 23,696.3               |
| SBNR      | YouTube              | The Sanctuary (not solely SBNR focused) | 601              | 37,383 views      | N/A                 | N/A*                   |
| SBNR      | Blog                 | Dr Linda Mercadante                     | N/A              | N/A               | N/A                 | N/A                    |
| SBNR      | Blog, podcast series | None But Curious                        | N/A              | N/A               | N/A                 | N/A                    |

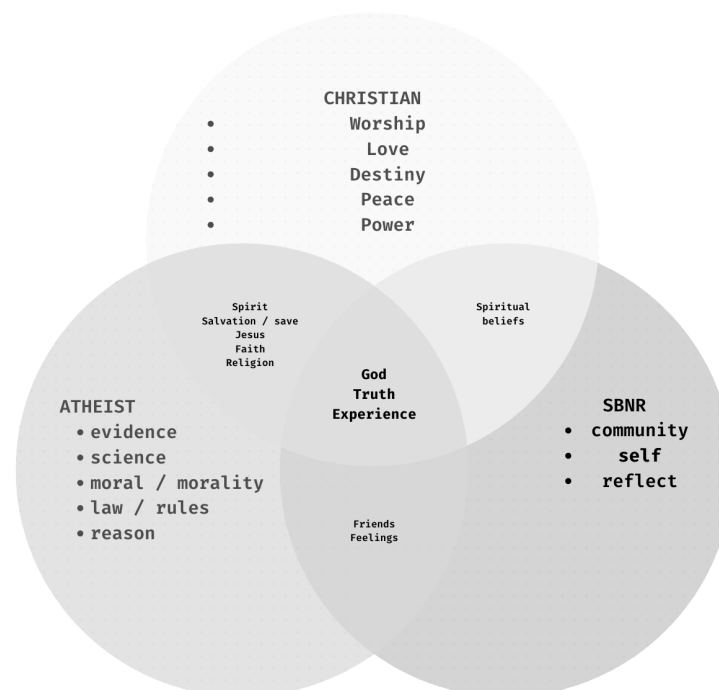
\* The SBNR YouTube video used for this research was a single lecture that was decided to not be able to be counted towards a “collective” calculation of likes and comments as had been done to the religious and atheist channels.

Numerical differences between the channels for each belief system are presented in the above table. Clearly, there is a difference in overall “popularity” between just the religious and atheist

YouTube channels, which was still expected due to how atheism is still a growing system of beliefs in American society and does not have as much firm grounding as does the religious, who now hold significant cultural and historical standards for Americans, shaping their identities and core values as “Americans”.

The most prevalent terms found across all sources are compiled in a Venn diagram below:

**Figure 1. Venn diagram on the most prevalent terms across all belief systems**



## Discussion

Quite inherently, regarding popularity, while religious content creators had greater viewership and average likes compared to that of atheist channels, atheist channels had a significantly higher average comments count across their ten most popular videos that were watched, bringing up a possible need to question why that may have occurred. From what was observed, the selected atheist channels focused on refuting the ideas of traditional religious believers and validating their own “non-believing” states, wherein they try to resist Christian arguments suggesting following doctrine-based teachings and accepting the existence of a higher entity that supposedly is looking out for them at all times. Perhaps such intentions to try and prove themselves right that atheism is a valid response towards - as two of my atheist Youtube content creators GMS and Alex O’Connor were - disillusionment towards religion, for example among many other factors that contributed to resistance towards institutionalized, doctrine-based and traditional religious belief systems, created a more defensive and even resistant stance towards those who disagreed with their opinions on having no faith towards a particular entity, thus leading to the greater number of comments where individuals began arguments in the comment sections of these atheist YouTube videos between religious and non-religious populations. Therefore, it is valid to also recognize that Christian YouTube channels obviously had less comments but higher average likes count - mostly due to how the

majority of the Christian YouTube audience was composed of “grateful” individuals who wanted confirmation and facts about their beliefs that proved their ideas “right” and were generally satisfied with the messages being transmitted by their YouTubers - and higher subscriber count, also likely to be resulting from a larger sense of shared “dedication” to their religion which consequently leads them to be invested in such media platforms that provide them of the necessary validation for their beliefs, compared to that of atheist YouTube channels with less subscribers, accounting for the possibilities that this resulted due to no inherent necessity to remain “faithful” to a belief system that argues against “faith” (no inherent force pushing individuals to follow certain beliefs in order to “fit in” with the institutionalized ideals, rather just to remain neutral without holding any distinct beliefs). SBNR content could not be measured in similar ways to the YouTube channels since they did not have the same sort of measurement units (likes, subscribers), however there was a visible lack of comments on the published blogs, which could suggest that such platforms on which SBNR communities communicated on were not so much of a ‘group’ activity, compared to how institutionalized religions and atheism have spaces for open discussion and debate, and they preferred direct communication through direct contact or emails compared to indirect ways such as commenting on posts.

To understand the correlation between the three measured belief systems, it is important to examine the most recurrent themes across all belief systems, where three of the most significant themes were compiled into table comparisons below:

**Table 4. Table analyzing the theme Role of God**

|           |                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Religious | Joel Osteen:<br>“Invite God Into Your Difficulties”                                                            | “When you invite him into the fire, you're going to have a favor that pushes you up when life tries to push you down, a strength to excel when you could be slacking off, a power to overcome what should stop you.” (23:42)                                                                              |
| Atheist   | Genetically Modified Skeptic:<br>“I took a Christian class about atheism. It was worse than I expected.”       | “Let's assume a god does exist. Does that tell us about its nature, its influence on the cosmos, if and how it relates to morality, if it's alone or just one of many? No. The fact of god's existence doesn't tell us anything about whether its existence is in any way relevant to human life.” (2:39) |
| SBNR      | The Sanctuary:<br>“#SBNR   Meet-n-Greet: The Spiritual But Not Religious   Full Service Livestream   04.19.20” | “They believe that God represents a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach rather than an all-powerful all-knowing perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today” (52:34)<br>“God is in the mind rather than in the heavens” (52:59)                                           |

The contrasted images of God in Religious, Atheist, and SBNR structures accentuate the variation of belief within contemporary discourse. In Joel Osteen's sermon, God is a loving and

powerful being - a divine protector who actively intervenes in the life of the believer to provide salvation, strength, and reassurance. This image puts God in the center and personal, upholding classical theistic conceptions grounded on Christian theology. Contrary to this, atheist positions not only rule out the goodness of such a being but even the utility of one, often using a lack of empirical evidence as grounds for ruling out divine agency in general. Atheist content creators often look at belief in God as unsupported, opting for scientific reason over religious myth. However, the SBNR consciousness of the Sanctuary sermon reimagines God as a symbol or metaphor rather than a far-off savior figure - a figure for self-actualization, higher consciousness, or inner peace. The reinterpretation puts spirituality outside of rigid dogma and reimagines it as an inward journey, where the divine is less a power of creation and more a symbol of one's increasing self-awareness. All of these diverse perspectives are indicative of broader social shifts in how individuals view and relate to spirituality, the divine, and life's meaning.

**Table 5. Table analyzing the theme of Identifying Self**

|                  |                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Religious</b> | THE BEAT by Allen Parr:<br>"These Popular Worship Songs Contain FALSE Theology And Should Probably Be Avoided" | "We need to make sure that the majority of the music that we listen to... has its focus on who God is and not the focus on who we are that's the problem with a lot of worship music today, it is man-centered." (11:56)                  |
| <b>Atheist</b>   | The Atheist Experience:<br>"Burden of Proof   John - Topeka, KS   Atheist Experience 21.18"                    | "My absence of a belief does not say anything about whether or not your claim is in fact correct or incorrect, it's about me not being convinced." (1:37)                                                                                 |
| <b>SBNR</b>      | None But Curious podcast:<br>"Self-Deception: Can We Avoid It?"                                                | "Practicing mindfulness helps individuals become more aware of their thoughts and feelings, reading and recognising cognitive distortions. Mindfulness involves focusing on the present moment than accepting it without judgment" (8:08) |

This comparison between religious, atheist, and SBNR views on the nature of worldviews reveals fundamental differences in how human beings are motivated towards seeking meaning, morality, and personal growth. Religious spirituality, like in the case of Parr's sermon, is founded on summoning people to an anticipation of sacrifice and absolute submission to a "God-centered" existence where personal desires come secondary to following God's will and following spiritually. This perspective emphasizes submission and outside direction as being at the center of a significant existence. Arguments from atheism, however, yield to a more rational and subjective choice, feeling that ethical thought and individual values are self-ordained and reason-chosen and hence exempt from any outside interference or divine intervention. In contrast, SBNR content such as a self-delusion podcast is indifferent to objective reason or external abandonment, but to promoting mindfulness and deep self-knowing. Internalizing spiritual awareness in such contexts makes introspection and ego-induced illusion destruction

its focal point. Such differences reflect the way in which both positions make external devotion, independent thinking, or internal awareness the focus leading to self-realization and truth.

**Table 6. Table analyzing the theme of Defining The Truth**

|                  |                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Religious</b> | DLM Christian Lifestyle:<br>"3 FALSE TEACHINGS in CHURCHES you should AVOID" | "But how will you know... when someone teaches the truth, or when they lie? You test what they say with Scripture, with the Bible. And if you don't know what the Bible says, and you are a Christian... then you need to read it, You need to study it, and it will change your life, and you won't be easily misled." (1:47) |
| <b>Atheist</b>   | Alex O'Connor:<br>"Deconstructing Ben Shapiro on Religion"                   | "Gödel's theorem shows us that there will be things described by our system that our system can't prove and so epistemically we need to make assumptions outside of the system but that just tells us... there's a gap between truth and proof..." (40:30)                                                                     |
| <b>SBNR</b>      | N/A                                                                          | N/A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

The differential treatment of "truth" in religious, atheist, and Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) stances echoes broader tensions in how knowledge is fixed and determined in belief systems. In DLM Christian Lifestyle content, the religious stance is that biblical writings and scripture are sufficient sources of truth, enshrining the existence and authority of God without further empirical verification. This reliance on divine revelation is the opposite of atheist creator O'Connor's stance, and thus it is difficult to equate "proof" with "truth," wondering whether one must believe in God or even rationally believe in God in the absence of scientific proof. Atheism, then, tends towards an epistemology of skepticism and empiricism. The absence of an SBNR stance in absolute terms on this specific issue may be significant in itself - revealing perhaps, unlike efforts at definitive truth in scientific fact or theological orthodoxy, that SBNR populations are simply less concerned with setting out one exclusive truth in the first place. Instead, therefore, they are more interested in personal meaning, experience, and inward-oriented awareness than in external approval, reflecting a more adaptive and individualistic engagement with spiritual concepts.

### Implications

Although the growth of less traditionally religious spaces such as SBNR and atheism might not have been necessarily overwhelmingly large in terms of numbers, their continued and all-pervasive presence in contemporary discourse holds the implication that they are, in many respects, making headway - albeit incrementally - within more general cultural narratives. Their presence on more mainstream digital media such as YouTube and podcasts suggests a reconfiguration of religious and spiritual forces in public life deserving of more intense scholarly debate. The most significant implication of this is that there must be more intense research into how shifting and developing belief systems intersect with and are expressed through modern

media. That is to say, not simply understanding how they are distributed but also how they travel to, affect, and influence the lives of their audience. With society pushing further into an increasingly digital and pluralistic world, equal representation of all systems of belief is crucial to ensuring that there are many voices being heard and legitimized within the public sphere.

Yet another concern that is due for mention here is the discrepancy between expectation and experience regarding the perception of SBNR communities. Because their emphasis lies in individual freedom, emotional bonding, and accommodation to modern life, it was presumed that the identity of the SBNR would have received a huge following and exposure through popular media. And yet the truth is quite contrary: SBNR authors are quite under-represented as compared to religious or atheist spokespeople. This gap can be accounted for by various reasons, including the use of small sample sizes by prior research or the extremely decentralized, non-institutional nature of SBNR communities, which lack the structural cohesion or promotion capabilities to be heard in general media outlets. Such study results suggest structural imbalance likely to suppress the public legitimacy of new belief systems and warrant further examination of their presence, strategies, and challenges in today's media environments.

## Limitations

It is also necessary to recognize the lack - almost to the extent it could be considered an outright absence - of SBNR content in mainstream media platforms such as YouTube compared to that created by religious and atheist content creators. Being one of the greatest limitations of my research process, the inherent inadequacy of any creators talking about subjects related to SBNR or even spirituality as a whole on an unbiased platform - many rather preferred to point out the “disadvantages” of following spiritual belief systems and how that only discouraged individuals from pursuing their own spiritual goals if they started investing in such a “system” of beliefs - made it difficult to find the balance of sources between religious, atheist, and SBNR content creators. Such conditions that laid the foundations in which SBNR communities could not advance in may have discouraged SBNR creators to put their ideas forward in mainstream media - due to the lack of awareness regarding their more minority-type belief system.

There was also an obvious lack of consideration into the overall demographics of the audience while it started with the intention of measuring audience engagement with younger age groups, the overall scale of the digital audience spanned by Youtube was notably much greater in range of diversity in race gender economic status etc, but in particular the users who frequently watch such content could not be determined into specific categories of age. If the audience was constituted of limited demographic characteristics, for example individuals over the age of 60 years, this study would not result in any benefit towards the examination of the influence of the SBNR community towards emerging adults, therefore this was another limitation that would have to be considered for future studies.

## Conclusion

The findings of this research indicate that the initial hypothesis - predicting high visibility and growth of SBNR content creators on major internet platforms - was not strongly supported. Despite growing cultural conversation about spiritual individuality, SBNR worldviews continue to be remarkably underrepresented on major content-sharing sites like YouTube. Whereas religious and atheist producers have built robust online presences, often addressing large audiences directly, SBNR content was rarer and garnered much less engagement. This disparity

suggests that, at least in current media ecologies, SBNR perspectives are still beneath similar levels of exposure or influence.

Yet, the messages spread by SBNR producers exhibited a significant ideological change. In contrast to religious media that privilege obedience to a divine power or atheist media that privilege rational individualism, SBNR media privilege self-actualization, awareness, and the production of authentic inner knowledge. Instead of encouraging obedience to external dogma or dyadic claims to truth, these producers favor notions of fluidity, self-awareness, and spiritual independence. Their production implies a faith system impervious to institutional definition, but one which promotes loosely affiliated, contemplative communities instead. The relative online anonymity of SBNR producers can partly be explained by this particular ethos; their content is not produced for proselytizing or mass distribution in the manner characteristic of religious or atheist production. Additionally, these sites are not yet equipped to host or spread such content because they are busy with algorithmic engagement metrics that SBNR creators may not necessarily be attempting to attain. This is a significant barrier for researchers and consumers alike who are trying to make sense of novel belief systems which diverge from conventional communicative norms. Future research must strive to counterbalance this disparity by diversifying the sources, for instance, by qualitative interviewing of self-identifying SBNR. Additionally, examining non-algorithmic networks or smaller community-oriented networks would serve to counteract the availability restrictions on sources that circumscribed the ambit of this research. Expanding research parameters can shed light on the complex and changing part that spiritual-but-not-religious beliefs are playing in contemporary meaning-seeking - a subject that, while currently underrepresented, may be of growing importance in an ever more diverse, self-conscious digital universe.



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