AUTHORS:

¹Tessa de Wet

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8513-7609

²Marita Heyns

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8829-9857

³Vasti Marais-Opperman

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3465-0899

AFFILIATION:

¹Integrated Development & Employment Alliances (Pty) Ltd

²Optentia Research Unit North-West University

³Optentia Research Unit North-West University

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

marita.heyns@nwu.ac.za

Spirituality in the workplace in South Africa: A systematic literature review

ABSTRACT

Background: Spirituality is a multi-dimensional concept that involves a person's pursuit of well-being through connections with oneself, others, nature, and the transcendent. Spirituality in the workplace encompasses the integration of spirituality into organisational and work dynamics.

Purpose: This systematic literature review sourced and synthesised empirical research evidence to explore the influence and experience of perceived spirituality in the workplace on workers in the South African workplace.

Methodology: The systematic literature review plan was registered on the Open Science Framework. Keyword searches were conducted, and studies were screened following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) process and checklist. Specific inclusion and exclusion criteria informed the second screening and review of articles. Thirty-one articles fit the specific criteria for inclusion in the review. Relevant data was extracted using thematic analysis.

Findings/results: The respondents in the various studies spanned public and private sectors, encompassing various professions and ethnicities. The articles reviewed indicated that the perception of spirituality in the workplace manifested in a variety of constructs and concepts, positively influencing and impacting individual, group, and organisational levels. The review indicated that nuanced contextual differences may play a role in the experience of spirituality in the South African workplace.

Practical implications: The literature review suggests potential constructs for understanding workplace spirituality in South Africa, with future research potential for constructing a framework fostering a pluralistic model of spirituality at work.

Originality/value: Understanding spirituality in the South African work context could assist in bringing about more productive and healthy organisations. Provided data also forms a basis for developing a potential framework for implementing spirituality in South African organisations.

Keywords: meaningfulness; organisational spirituality; South Africa; spirituality; systematic literature review; well-being; workplace

OPSOMMING

Agtergrond: Spiritualiteit is 'n multidimensionele konsep wat die nastrewing van 'n persoon se algemene welsyn en gesondheid omvat, wat geïntegreerdheid met die self, ander, natuur en die bomenslike insluit. Spiritualiteit in die werkplek sluit die integrasie van spiritualiteit in organisatoriese en werksdinamika in.

Doel: Hierdie sistematiese literatuuroorsig het empiriese navorsingsbewyse verkry en gesintetiseer om die invloed en ervaring van waargenome spiritualiteit by die werk op werkers in die Suid-Afrikaanse werkplek te verken.

Metodologie: Die sistematiese literatuurstudieplan is op die Open Science Framework geregistreer. Sleutelwoordsoektogte is gedoen, en studies is gesif met behulp van die Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses- (PRISMA) proses en -kontrolelys. Spesifieke in- en uitsluitingskriteria het die tweede sifting en keuring van artikels gelei. Een-en-dertig (31) artikels pas by die spesifieke kriteria vir insluiting in die oorsig. Relevante data is onttrek deur tematiese analise te gebruik.

Bevindinge/resultate: Die respondente in die verskillende studies het oor openbare en private sektore gestrek en verskeie beroepe en etnisiteite ingesluit. Die artikels wat nagegaan is, het aangedui dat die persepsie van spiritualiteit in die werkplek gemanifesteer het in 'n verskeidenheid konstrukte en konsepte, wat individuele, groeps- en organisatoriese vlakke positief beïnvloed. Die oorsig het aangedui dat genuanseerde kontekstuele verskille 'n rol in die ervaring van spiritualiteit in die Suid-Afrikaanse werkplek kan speel.

Praktiese implikasies: Die literatuuroorsig stel potensiële konstrukte voor om werkplekspiritualiteit in Suid-Afrika te verstaan, met toekomstige navorsingspotensiaal vir die bou van 'n raamwerk wat 'n pluralistiese model van spiritualiteit by die werk bevorder.

Oorspronklikheid/waarde: Begrip van spiritualiteit in die Suid-Afrikaanse werkskonteks kan daartoe bydra om produktiewer en gesonder organisasies tot stand te bring. Data wat voorsien is, skep ook 'n basis vir die ontwikkeling van 'n potensiële raamwerk vir die implementering van spiritualiteit in Suid-Afrikaanse organisasies.

Kernbegrippe: betekenisvolheid; organisatoriese spiritualiteit; sistematiese literatuurstudie; spiritualiteit; Suid-Afrika; welstand; werksplek

1.   Introduction

Spirituality in the workplace encompasses the integration of spirituality into organisational and work dynamics. Common themes, derived from various definitions, include a connection to meaning in life, unity with the universe, and an awareness of a "life force" (De Klerk, 2005). Spiritual well-being, indicating balance across life aspects, contributes to a positive experience of being alive (Gill, 2022). This multi-dimensional concept involves a person's pursuit of well-being through connections with oneself, others, nature, and the transcendent (Meezenbroek et al., 2012).

Spirituality in the workplace is relevant for understanding employee well-being, organisational culture, leadership effectiveness, diversity management, ethical decision-making, and organisational performance. It has been explored extensively, revealing themes such as engaging work, community, spiritual connection, and diversity (Neal et al., 2022). Theoretical models, such as that of Gomez and Fisher (2003), identify four sub-domains of spiritual well-being: personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental (Nel, 2016). Existing workplace spirituality models, such as the spiritual freedom model (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002), indicate connections to organisational outcomes.

Despite complexities and overlaps with other constructs, studies indicate positive influences of workplace spirituality on moral emotions, leadership, hope, self-efficacy, optimism, job satisfaction, and organisational culture (Hardy et al., 2014; Kokt & Palmer, 2019; McKee et al., 2011; Sanders et al., 2004). Conversely, an absence of spirituality is linked to spiritual stuntedness (De Klerk-Luttig, 2008).

While Western perspectives dominate the literature, a limited understanding of spirituality in the workplace in sub-Saharan Africa prevails. Indigenous conceptualisations that may be applicable to the work context, such as Ubuntu, emphasise cultural and contextual influences on well-being (Temane & Wissing, 2008). With its unique challenges, South Africa has shown links between workplace spirituality, meaning in life, work wellness, and general well-being (De Klerk, 2005; Khumalo et al., 2015).

Even though the value of spirituality in the workplace has been garnering more support, reviews show that information and context-specific research are not readily available (Barik & Nayak, 2024). Research gaps exist, particularly in understanding spirituality in South African workplaces beyond Western models. A conceptual framework is valuable to explore objective social indicators and their impact on well-being, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the South African work psyche.

1.1   Research aim

This systematic literature review aims to source and synthesise original empirical research evidence (collected through quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method approaches) that explores the influence and experience of perceived spirituality on workers in the South African workplace. To reach this aim, the research question was formulated using the Participant, Intervention, Comparison, and Outcome (PICO) model (see Figure 1). This model is considered a useful strategy for formulating systematic review research questions. "Participants" included working adults in any industry in South Africa. "Intervention" was the spirituality research undertaken in the various organisations where the studies were conducted. "Comparison" was the impact of spirituality highlighted by the data generated from the working adults, and the "Outcome" was potential themes and constructs that can be utilised in organisational frameworks.
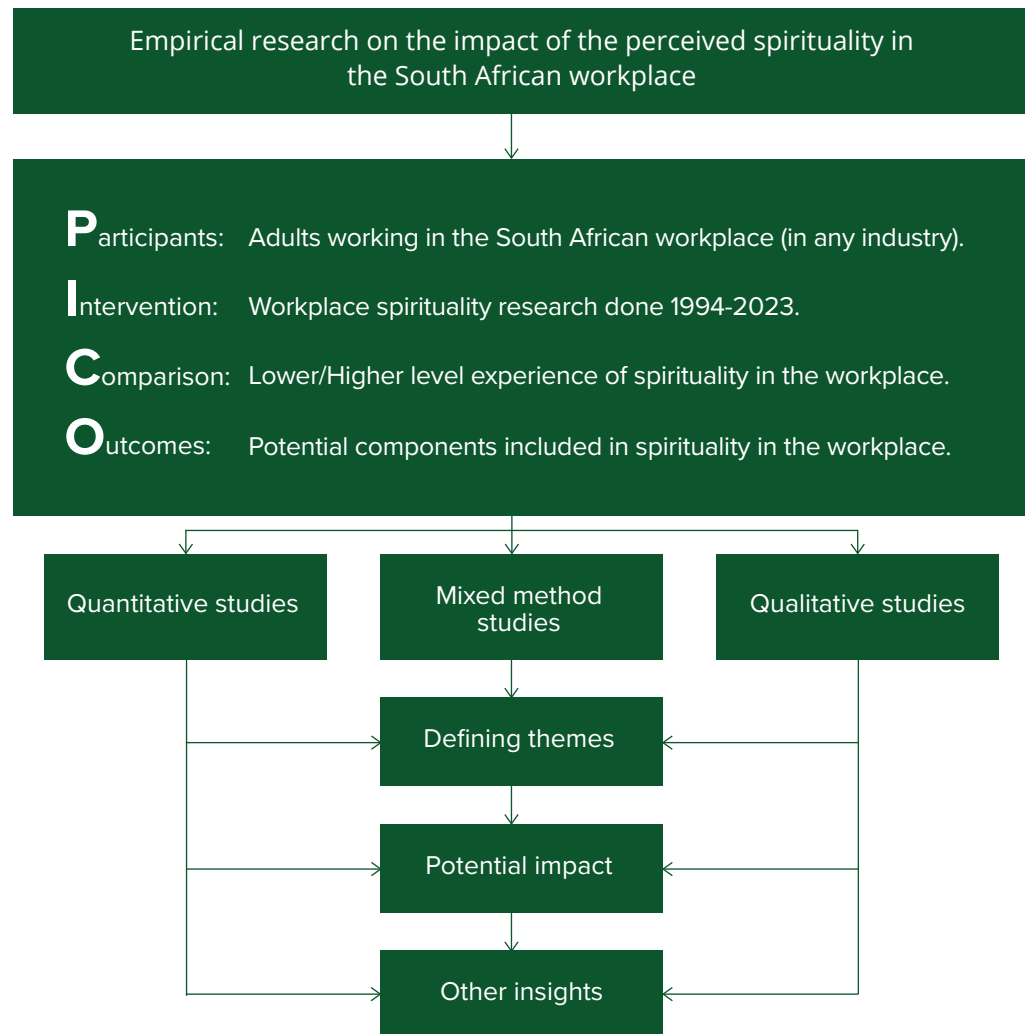
Empirical research on the impact of the perceived spirituality in the South African workplace

Participants: Adults working in the South African workplace (in any industry).

Intervention: Workplace spirituality research done 1994-2023.

Comparison: Lower/Higher level experience of spirituality in the workplace.

Outcomes: Potential components included in spirituality in the workplace.

| Quantitative studies | Mixed method studies | Qualitative studies |

Defining themes

Potential impact

Other insights

Figure 1: *Objective of the systematic literature review*

The main research question, therefore, was: What empirical research has been done about the perception and outcomes of spirituality of working adults in the South African workplace that can inform potential frameworks for including spirituality in the South African workplace?

1.2   Specific objectives

The following objectives were set for this study:

- to conduct a systematic literature review to identify empirical research relating to spirituality in the South African work context

- to source information on potential relationships that have been reported on various workplace spirituality constructs in relation to other work constructs

- to extract themes to provide a comprehensive view of spirituality in the workplace in the South African work context as provided in the sourced literature.

2.   METHODOLOGY

This systematic literature review compiles research findings from primary studies (Arabsorkhi et al., 2014) spanning diverse work contexts to create a narrative within the same research area (Goulden et al., 2023), aiming to offer evidence for future research and interventions (Potts et al., 2023).

By applying an integrative research approach, the literature review defines attributes related to the topic and incorporates experiential perspectives from the local context (Nandram & Bindlish, 2022).

2.1 Transparency and openness

By balancing a universalist aim with a focus on local content and context, the study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) protocol, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) process and checklist (http://prisma-statement.org/). PRISMA, known for improving reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Liberati et al., 2009), has been applied effectively in social sciences research studies (Page et al., 2021).

2.2 Search protocol and registration

The systematic literature review plan (De Wet et al., 2024) was registered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) to adhere to transparent and reproducible research etiquette and encourage collaboration. Prior to this registration, the OSF was searched to look for similar research that had been registered. None were found.

2.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria for inclusion in the original database were as follows:

- original empirical research studies with perspectives of South African respondents

- studies containing empirically grounded research data (qualitative or quantitative)

- empirical research data collected in South African workplace contexts

- data referring to workplace spirituality or the impact of respondents' perspectives on work

- articles published in peer-reviewed journals for quality validation.

Exclusion criteria comprised studies that:

- lack electronic database accessibility for empirical evidence

- lack access to full-text documents

- do not report on original studies

- lack evidence of sound empirical research methodology

- include literature reviews or secondary sources;

- are unpublished studies (theses and dissertations)

- are conference papers.

2.4 Search strategy and study selection

The search strategy utilised the WorldCat Discovery function on the North-West University library's electronic platform, covering 318 subscribed databases and 187,941 journals. In addition, Google Scholar was employed to search for relevant documents.

Boolean strings used included ("spirituality in the workplace" AND "South Africa") OR ("spirituality at work" AND "South Africa") OR ("workplace spirituality" AND "South Africa") as keywords and phrases. The date filter was set for 1994-2023.

Two reviewers were involved in the screening and review process. Figure 2 illustrates the process followed for the identification and selection of sources.
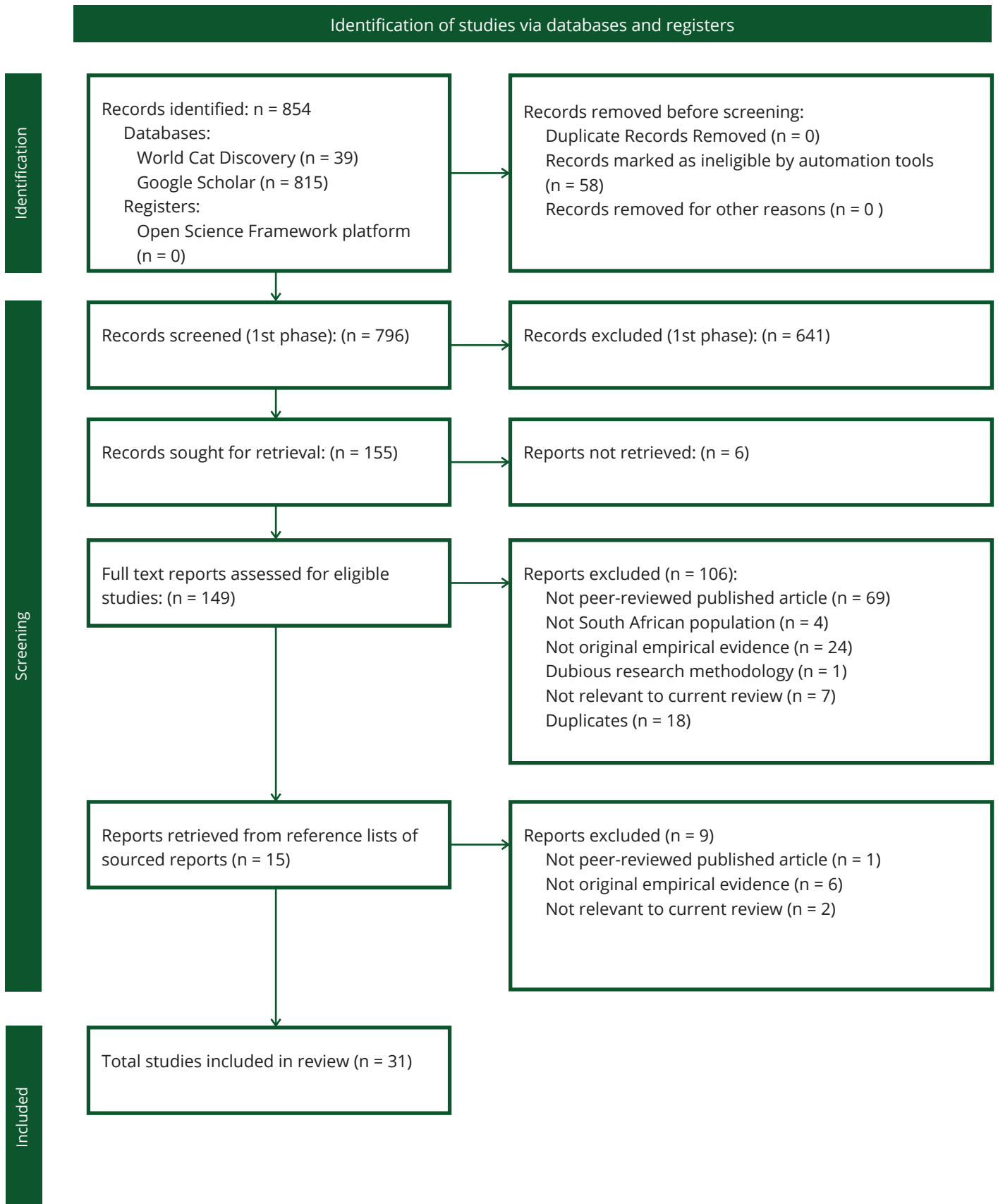
Identification of studies via databases and registers

Identification

Records identified: n = 854
  Databases:
    World Cat Discovery (n = 39)
    Google Scholar (n = 815)
  Registers:
    Open Science Framework platform
    (n = 0)

Records removed before screening:
    Duplicate Records Removed (n = 0)
    Records marked as ineligible by automation tools
    (n = 58)
    Records removed for other reasons (n = 0)

Screening

Records screened (1st phase): (n = 796)

Records excluded (1st phase): (n = 641)

Records sought for retrieval: (n = 155)

Reports not retrieved: (n = 6)

Full text reports assessed for eligible
studies: (n = 149)

Reports excluded (n = 106):
    Not peer-reviewed published article (n = 69)
    Not South African population (n = 4)
    Not original empirical evidence (n = 24)
    Dubious research methodology (n = 1)
    Not relevant to current review (n = 7)
    Duplicates (n = 18)

Reports retrieved from reference lists of
sourced reports (n = 15)

Reports excluded (n = 9)
    Not peer-reviewed published article (n = 1)
    Not original empirical evidence (n = 6)
    Not relevant to current review (n = 2)

Included

Total studies included in review (n = 31)

Figure 2: *Systematic literature sourcing using PRISMA-P*

One reviewer employed the Electronic Directory Search (EDS) function, yielding 39 citations, while Google Scholar produced 815 records. A second reviewer conducted screenings, eliminating 647 irrelevant documents, leaving 149 articles. A summary of each study's content relevant to this review was compiled. A more detailed screening identified 15 additional sources. Thirty-one articles met the criteria. A final check was done to ensure that the various journals in which the articles were published had a peer-review process in place.

2.5   Data extraction

Data extraction was carried out on the 31 included articles, of which 13 studies were quantitative, seventeen were qualitative, and one was a mixed-method study. The data from the one mixed method study was incorporated into the quantitative and qualitative categories for data extraction. The analysis focused on extracting themes in the South African work context and relationships found among workplace spirituality and other constructs.

3.   FINDINGS

The sampled populations spanned various workplace contexts in the public and private sectors, encompassing refining, retailing, mining, higher education, faith-based, engineering, administration, manufacturing, law enforcement, public healthcare, basic education, financial services, small business, and higher education organisations. The studies included a broad range of white-collar professions and spanned the breadth of the race groupings found in South Africa. Study sample sizes ranged from 60-789 participants across different age groups.

The systematic literature review indicated that the studies referred to established definitions of "workplace spirituality" or "spirituality at work" (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; De Klerk, 2005; Karakas, 2010; Kolodinsky et al., 2008; Milliman et al., 2003; Mitroff & Denton, 1999; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1979). Themes found in the literature relating to the effect of spirituality in the workplace can be categorised into personal, group and organisation level manifestation and effects, with varied descriptors and sub-elements under each of these levels (De Klerk et al., 2006; Mayer et al., 2015; Mohan & Uys, 2006; Van Tonder & Ramdass, 2009).

3.1   Personal level manifestations and effects

Most of the analysed studies focused on the manifestation and effect of individually perceived spirituality in the workplace. Findings across studies indicated that the main theme on individual level centred around a perceived need to find purpose, meaning, and significance in work (De Klerk et al., 2006; Fatoki, 2019; Honiball et al., 2014; Kotze et al., 2022; Mohan & Uys, 2006; Van der Walt & Steyn, 2019), having the opportunity to nourish the inner life, as well as expressing personal identity through work (Kokt & Palmer, 2019; Mohan & Uys, 2006; Nieuwenhuis & Ntho-Ntho, 2015; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021; Van der Walt & Steyn, 2019).

The studies also provided evidence that spirituality at work positively influences employees' perceptions of various work-related constructs, including employee performance, physical and mental health, organisational commitment, fairness, responsibility, pro-environmental behaviour, thriving at work, work engagement, employee motivation, job involvement, and job satisfaction (Fatoki, 2019; Kokt & Palmer, 2019; Kotze et al., 2022; Ramnarain & Parumasur, 2015; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2021; Van der Walt, 2018; Van der Walt & De Klerk, 2014; Van der Walt & Steyn, 2019; Van der Walt & Swanepoel, 2015).

The perceived importance of spirituality in the workplace was clear on an individual level. However, studies indicated that practices that build spiritual capacity remained something that mostly happened outside the work context, even though it leads to perceived positive

behaviours and constructive impact benefits in the workplace itself (De Klerk et al., 2006; Honiball et al., 2014; Mayer & Viviers, 2014; Mohan & Uys, 2006).

Findings also showed that personal spirituality varied significantly across demographic groups such as gender and age (Mayer et al., 2015; Vosloo et al., 2009) but that organisational spirituality was less impacted by other demographics (Van der Walt & De Klerk, 2015).

At an individual level, the inclusion or exclusion of religion as a component of spirituality in the workplace is nuanced. Studies indicated that perceived spirituality in the workplace is not specifically linked to religion (Bester & Muller, 2017; Fatoki, 2019; Ramnarain & Parumasur, 2015), with potential resistance to explicit inclusion of it in workplace wellness (Bester & Muller, 2017; Mayer & Viviers, 2014; Mayer et al., 2015) and indications that perceived existential well-being has a higher direct effect than perceived religious well-being on employees' psychological well-being (Vosloo et al., 2009). Studies indicated that on an individual level, religion was perceived as part of the relational armour and wellness of those who practised religion as part of their spirituality. However, differences in spiritual beliefs and practices at work could also lead to discrimination and rejection (Nkomo, 2016).

3.2   Team and/or group-level findings

Findings on team and/or group level focused on the manifestation and effect of perceived spirituality on the relationships and dynamics within the organisation, showing a conditional positive impact of spirituality on relational dynamics (De Klerk et al., 2006; Mohan & Uys, 2006; Van Tonder & Ramdass, 2009). This positive impact was observed in organisations with homogeneous belief and value systems (Nkomo, 2016).

First and foremost, studies indicated a perceived need to discover and reflect on personal and work values, principles, ethics, and characteristics that guide daily actions at work (Botha & Brand, 2009; Parumasur & Govender, 2016; Ramnarain & Parumasur, 2015; Van Tonder & Ramdass, 2009). Respondents also indicated the perceived need to have a sense of belonging, humaneness, and connection with people and leaders at work (Fatoki, 2019; Honiball et al., 2015; Kokt & Palmer, 2019; Kotze et al., 2022; Parumasur & Govender, 2016; Van der Walt & Steyn, 2019; Vilakati et al., 2013). Findings showed that spirituality at work influenced real and perceived work leadership dynamics and characteristics (Mathafena & Hewitt, 2018; Vilakati et al., 2013).

Nuanced differences in organisational spiritual needs based more on cultural and ethnic perspectives were indicated (Albertini & Smith, 2008; Mayer et al., 2015; Van Rensburg et al., 2013; Vilakati et al., 2013) rather than differences based on other demographic variables (Ramnarain & Parumasur, 2015; Van der Walt & De Klerk, 2015). However, it was reported that education level, age and tenure were significant moderating factors in perceived organisational spirituality (Albertini & Smith, 2008; Van der Walt & De Klerk, 2014, 2015).

The research also showed that where organisational citizenship behaviour was prevalent in the organisation's culture, certain elements (civic virtue, altruism, and sportsmanship) correlated with and positively predicted workplace spirituality (Parumasur & Govender, 2016).

3.3   Organisation level findings

The findings relevant to the organisational level showed that spirituality is best approached from an integrated, comprehensive perspective. This perspective allows for individual, team/group and organisation-wide permutations in the workplace (Honiball et al., 2014; Parumasur & Govender, 2016; Van der Walt, 2018), being an embedded perspective in the nature and culture of the organisation (Honiball et al., 2014; Van der Walt & Steyn, 2019). Studies focused on how understanding spirituality in the workplace as a constructive and dynamic process (Bhagwan, 2010; Honiball et al., 2014; Kokt & Palmer, 2019; Vilakati et al., 2009) and incorporating holism, fulfilment, and well-being of workers lead to perceived

positive workplace well-being and outcomes (Bester & Muller, 2017; Kokt & Palmer, 2019; Mohan & Uys, 2006; Van der Walt & Steyn, 2019; Van Tonder & Ramdass, 2009). In contrast, there were also indications that not incorporating perceived spiritual behaviours and practices as part of the organisational culture may lead to reduced engagement and lowered performance. In such instances, monetary compensation is the main motivator (Ramnarain & Parumasur, 2015).

Alignment between the individuals' values and those of the organisation was also indicated as key to well-being at work (Fatoki, 2019; Kotze et al., 2022; Van der Walt & Steyn, 2019), including the awareness of the organisation's impact on and connection with the environment and others outside the workplace (Botha & Brand, 2009; Nkomo, 2016).

Qualitative studies also referred to potential cultural differences in organisational performance measurement, with African traditional cultural conceptions emphasising integrated personal and collective dignity, narrative methods of development, and success measured in spiritual and relational terms rather than monetary motivation (Mayer & Viviers, 2014; Vilakati et al., 2013).

4.   DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While generally considered a stand-alone construct, a few studies linked spirituality to religion, emphasising the role of religious conviction in shaping individual perspectives on spirituality at work. It would be pertinent to refine further and define different organisations' views on the inclusion or exclusion of religion and/or faith-based aspects in any interventions aimed at addressing spirituality matters.

The systematic literature review suggests potential constructs for understanding workplace spirituality, such as *familiarity* and *comfortability*. *Familiarity* may range from unawareness to high awareness, while *comfortability* may span from complete comfort to discomfort (Bester & Muller, 2017; Van Tonder & Ramdass, 2009), providing a foundation for conceptualising workplace spirituality interventions.

In a multicultural society like South Africa, understanding, recognising, and valuing the different manifestations of the human spirit in the workplace can promote cultural sensitivity and inclusion. In the studies analysed, diversity in views and perspectives on workplace spirituality is evident, with quantitative studies reflecting mostly Western perspectives. Though underrepresented, qualitative insights on African spirituality offer valuable diversity to juxtapose these views, with African culture having the potential to bring diverse perspectives into problem-solving and innovation processes. This can lead to creative solutions and new ways of thinking, which can benefit organisations and enrich organisation development initiatives in South African workplaces. Also, in terms of diversity, the focus on white-collar populations in the studies analysed suggests a need to understand other contextual nuances and perspectives of spirituality in the workplace. This is especially the case in blue-collar occupations, which may have distinct and different characteristics in terms of their work, environments, education, socio-economic status, and cultural attitudes.

The data depicting spirituality in the workplace as a dependent variable suggests value in integrating spirituality into existing well-being measures such as flourishing at work (Rothmann, 2013), sustainable employability capabilities (Abma et al., 2016), and ethics of care (Timmerman & Baart, 2022). These measures could enhance their value and impact in the workplace.

Lastly, recognising spirituality integratively at all levels (personal, group, and organisational) seems to be essential for organisational well-being. Despite the limited studies available, the evidence supports its inclusion as part of organisational culture-building, showcasing its

potential to enhance organisational functioning by covering all three levels of organisational being. The systematic literature review suggests that spirituality - perceived as powerful at individual, group, and organisational levels - could yield the most impact through an integrated and contextualised approach. A well-defined and mindfully applied holistic approach to spirituality in the workplace is likely to yield better results both for individual workers and organisations in the South African context. Future research endeavours could centre on constructing a framework fostering a pluralistic model of spirituality. Such a model would guide organisational leadership in infusing spiritual character into the organisational fabric through a multi-level approach.

5.   LIMITATIONS OF THE SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

This systematic literature review included only English and Afrikaans studies from electronically accessible, peer-reviewed articles.

Therefore, the inclusion and exclusion criteria may inadvertently cause potential publication, language, and selection biases, specifically because information on spirituality in the African context is potentially more accessible and available in other narrative forms than academic peer-reviewed publications. Other forms of data, such as dissertations and theses, could also include valuable academic information to augment the current review.

Another aspect that was touched upon in this review was the potential influence of demographic variables such as gender, age groupings (generations), ethnicity, urban versus rural geographic locations, language, and culture on the perception of spirituality in the workplace. Studies that included some of these variables included only small sample sizes contextualised to a specific organisational context.

More research is needed regarding the effect of demographic variables, specifically in the context of South Africa's workplace with various languages, cultures, ethnicities, and generations.

6.   CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review aimed to source and synthesise original empirical research evidence that explored the influence and experience of perceived spirituality on workers in the South African workplace.

Findings indicate that spirituality in the workplace could potentially affect and impact perceived performance and experience of the workplace on individual, team/group and organisational levels. Diversity in views and perspectives on workplace spirituality is evident, and more research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of workplace spirituality's dynamics on different levels.

The systematic literature review's academic focus provides a restricted perspective, urging exploration beyond academia for a comprehensive understanding of spirituality in the South African workplace. For instance, unpublished South African PhD studies can provide more information and enrich perspectives found in empirical research articles. They may also add further value in developing a framework for spirituality in the workplace.

This systematic literature review is foundational to understanding organisational spirituality and informing the creation of innovative and purposeful interventions that enhance organisational well-being and performance.

Data availability

The study was registered on the Open Science Framework: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/WY2MU.

Supplementary data will be made available on request.

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