Spirituality during COVID-19 in Northern Italy: The experience of participating in an online prayer group

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Abstract

Spirituality has ascendant value during times of adversity. Religious activities have been found to increase spirituality, and therefore might be considered a coping resource for the individual. The present research aims to explore participants' experience in an online Catholic prayer group in northern Italy that was held throughout the period of COVID-19 social restrictions.

The group comprised 16 Catholic individuals aged 34 to 85, who were interviewed in writing following a protocol of four open-ended questions. The results reported four main thematic areas: (1) the benefits of the spiritual journey while coping with the pandemic; (2) the potential of the online setting; (3) the challenges of the online setting; and (4) the bond with God and how it evolved during the pandemic. The findings confirm the valuable contribution of the on-line group religious activity to the participants' wellbeing, particularly during the time of social distancing.

Keywords Spirituality · COVID-19 pandemic · Prayer group · Spiritual support · Online group
Introduction

Spiritual and religious practices have been recognized as essential coping mechanisms when dealing with life-changing and traumatic events. For many, these practices are an integral component of their daily life, positively affecting the quality of life, health, and well-being (Koenig, 2012). Spiritual and religious activities are associated with better health outcomes (Oman & Thoresen, 2005), higher social support, self-efficacy, and self-cohesion (George et al., 2002). An increase in religious activity seems to play a significant role in responding successfully to life’s challenges, especially while coping with stressors and serious illnesses (Oman & Thoresen, 2005; Pargament et al., 2004; Testoni et al., 2016).

While the concept of ‘religion’ tends to refer to the more formal aspects of the relationship with the transcendent, which includes beliefs, behaviors, rituals, and ceremonies that may be held or practiced in private (Koenig, 2012), ‘spirituality’ is a more complex multidimensional concept that has been used to refer to the more personal, subjective, existential experience (de Meezenbroek et al., 2012; Gijsberts et al., 2011). Jager Meezenbroek et al. (2012), for example, link spirituality to the ability to experience a connection with the essence of life. They describe four dimensions of spirituality: connectedness with the transcendent, a higher being (such as God); connectedness with the self; connectedness with others; and connectedness with nature (Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012). Another concept relates to spiritual well-being and is also defined by four domains (Fisher, 2010): (1) the personal domain relates to how one intra-relates with oneself, (2) the communal domain refers to the quality and depth of interpersonal relationships, (3) the environmental domain relates to the notion of unity with the environment, and (4) the transcendental domain is associated with the relationship with a higher entity. Studies indicate the connection between the domains of spirituality and aspects of mental health and well-being (Lifshitz et al., 2019; Thauvoye et al., 2018; Zimmer et al., 2016).

The literature indicates that religiosity and spirituality can foster the development of one another (King & Crowther, 2004). For instance, it has been found that religious practices encourage spiritual growth, while spiritual practices are often part of religious participation (Armstrong & Crowther, 2002). Research has documented that spirituality and religious activity can enhance well-being and people’s coping ability when experiencing adverse life events such as cancer, heart problems, death of a close family member, divorce, or injury (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Pargament, 2001). Religious faith is also associated with resilience, optimism, and ego strength (Benson et al., 2019; Markstrom, 1999), as well as better self-control (Laird et al., 2011).

Given the association between religiosity, spirituality, and mental health, religious activity might be considered a resilient strategy during the pandemic (Testoni, Zanellato, et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, like other natural disasters, may be classified as an ongoing traumatic event that can negatively impact the psychological system at the individual and the collective levels (Binder, 2020; Fetzer et al., 2020; Masiero et al., 2020). During times of adversity, many seek closeness to God (Pargament, 1996). Recent research, which analyzed the daily data on Google searches in 95 countries, demonstrates that during the COVID-19 crisis, Google searches for prayers increased by 50%, reaching the highest level ever recorded (Bentzen, 2020). In March 2020, one of the most searched for prayers was “coronavirus prayer,” asking God for protection against the coronavirus, staying strong, and thanking nurses for their efforts (Pew Research Center, 2020). The tendency for people
to use religion to deal with a crisis can be understood within religious coping terminology (Norenzayan et al., 2006; Pargament, 2001; Park et al., 1990). The prayers seek a closer relationship to God and might explain the tragedy by referring to it as an act of God, which provides a source of resilience by explaining the event as something related to a meaningful divine plan, an expression of God’s will (Testoni, Zanellato, et al., 2021). Several studies showed evidence that religion and spirituality seem to have an essential role in reducing suffering, improving health prospects, coping, and minimizing the consequences of COVID-19 social restrictions (Hart, 2020; Hart & Koenig, 2020; Koenig, 2020; Lucchetti et al., 2020).

However, the pandemic has significantly affected religious activities, including canceling live religious services, closing religious schools, canceling pilgrimages, and prohibiting group interactions in the church, including during festivals and celebrations (Dein et al., 2020; DeFranza et al., 2020). Studies also confirm the importance of public health measures to ensure the continuity of religious and spiritual activities during the pandemic and the value of training healthcare professionals to address patients’ and families’ spiritual and religious beliefs (Lucchetti et al., 2020). In addition, the World Health Organization recognized the significant role religious leaders and faith communities have had in supporting the public during COVID-19. Accordingly, an interim guide was published entitled “Practical Considerations and Recommendations for Religious Leaders and Faith-Based Communities in the Context of COVID-19.” Religious leaders and communities are seen as a safety net for vulnerable populations, both by providing support and by sharing evidence-based steps to prevent COVID-19 within the large community (World Health Organization, 2020). As a consequence of these needs, many religious communities all over the world are conducting online services, stretching the world’s data bandwidth at certain times of the week to stream live videos of suitably modified rituals, sermons, and prayers (Wildman et al., 2020). The present research aims to understand the experience of participation in a Catholic prayer group in northern Italy that was held online throughout the COVID-19 social restrictions.

**Methods**

**Study procedure**

In March 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic during a phase of social restrictions, an online prayer group called Spiritual Journey was initiated and facilitated by a priest (the fourth author) to support people in their homes through communal praying, sharing, and discussions. The group sessions were conducted via Zoom or the Telegram platform twice a day for about half an hour (in the morning and afternoon) and on Monday evenings for about two hours, when the session included discussion and more space for reflections and sharing.

In March 2021, a year after the group was established, the participants were recruited to participate in the present study, with participation in both daily sessions and the Monday evening sessions serving as the inclusion criteria. Using homogeneous sampling (Patton, 2002), all group participants of the Monday evening session were invited to take part in the study, and all of them agreed to participate. They were contacted via email by the second author, who was external to the facilitation of the group process. Written consent to participate in the research was sent and signed by email along with the open-ended questions used to collect
the data. Participants’ names and any other identifying information remain confidential to the other researchers. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Experimentation, University of Padua (confirmation number B8BE0FCD270597A7B49184E51AAC9CF9).

The participants comprised 16 Catholic individuals aged 34 to 85 years old (\(M=54.75, SD=11\); 81.25% female) from northern Italy (see Table 1).

**Data collection**

Participants answered a written questionnaire consisting of four open-ended questions sent by email as a Word file. The questions were designed to elicit an understanding of the experience of participating in the online prayer group during COVID-19 social restrictions. The questions were:

1) Please describe in detail your experience in this spiritual journey (Monday evening sessions and daily prayers) during the pandemic year;
2) Please describe in detail what are the negative and positive aspects you have found in making this spiritual journey in the online mode (Zoom and Telegram);
3) Please describe in detail the most significant moments, experiences, and events you experienced during this spiritual journey;
4) Please describe in detail your connection with God and if and how it has changed during this pandemic. Please explain, also, why it has changed or has not changed.

**Data analysis**

The written answers to the open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six main phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2018). The analysis

| Pseudonyms | Age | Job (as written by the participants) |
|------------|-----|-------------------------------------|
| George     | 34  | School administrative employee     |
| Matthew    | 43  | Designer                            |
| Sarah      | 45  | Employee                            |
| Nancy      | 49  | Florist                             |
| Emily      | 49  | Employee                            |
| Dorothy    | 53  | Missionary                          |
| Margaret   | 54  | Teacher’s aide                      |
| Ashley     | 55  | Housewife                           |
| Jessica    | 55  | Bank Director                       |
| Margot     | 55  | Teacher                             |
| Linda      | 55  | Employee                            |
| Susan      | 59  | Employee                            |
| Elizabeth  | 61  | Kindergarten teacher                |
| Jennifer   | 61  | Housewife                           |
| John       | 63  | Pensioner                           |
| Mary       | 85  | Pensioner                           |

Table 1 Description of Participants (Pseudonyms Are Used to Preserve Confidentiality)
began with a read-through of the written forms to familiarize the researchers with the data. The second and third authors employed Atlas.ti research software to create an initial set of codes. They reviewed and discussed sample quotes during the coding process to ensure that the code definitions were consistent and appropriately applied to the responses. An initial set of codes was created for the dataset, followed by an examination of the codes to identify themes—significant broader patterns of meaning. In the subsequent phase, all candidate themes were translated into English, checked by the first and last authors, and refined if needed. Next, a detailed analysis of each theme’s content resulted in the definition and final labeling of the themes for the writing up of the results (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Four main themes were identified from the experiences reported in the open-ended questions: (1) the benefits of the spiritual journey while coping with the pandemic, (2) the potential of the online setting, (3) the challenges of the online setting, and (4) the bond with God and how it evolved during the pandemic.

1. Theme 1: The benefits of the spiritual journey while coping with the pandemic

This theme focused on the benefits of participation in the prayer group. In particular, these benefits materialized mainly in the following ways: helping to cope with the difficulties related to the pandemic, providing daily support, and stimulating and enriching personal questioning.

1.a. Enhancing a sense of connectedness despite the distance

The findings show that the modality of group prayer has demonstrated efficacy as a supportive strategy for handling the difficult period of COVID-19 social restrictions by helping people perceive a sense of communion that bonded them to each other. For example, Ashley, a 55-year-old housewife, explained:

In a time like this, when loneliness and isolation have become life partners, this kind of journey helps a lot because you feel part of a group; even listening to the comments and observations of others helps you to understand that your feeling is shared by others, that you are not suffering alone in this situation.

Emily, a 49-year-old female employee, sees in community harmony a source of support: “We often thank the Lord for this opportunity He has given us. This sense of community, in my opinion, helps us every day to face the daily difficulties that the pandemic brings.” Jennifer, a 61-year-old housewife, described the way the prayer group served as a coping resource during social restrictions: “feeling and seeing each other, even if for a short time in the day, was enough to feel alive and not fall into depression.”

Even with the separation due to the COVID-19 social restrictions and not being able to physically attend the prayer group, many participants emphasized a greater feeling of intimacy with the others in the group. Susan, a 59-year-old female employee, states:
In prayer, in which we used Telegram, although not having the opportunity to see each other, a nice empathic atmosphere and spiritual presence were often created, and the acquaintance with the group of people has become increasingly intimate and deep, even at a distance.

Mary, an 85-year-old retired woman, expresses in her own words a similar concept:

If you speak freely and with your heart, distance is nullified. Being in Brazil or being neighbors, it doesn’t matter; there is an invisible thread that unites us, that allows us to share moments of suffering, joy, hope, gratitude and makes prayer unique.

John, a 63-year-old retired man, reiterates the strength of having a shared experience with the others despite the distance: “Another exciting moment was to be so close to people that are far away: we shared, prayed, and lived deep moments without feeling the distance.”

1.b. Enhancing a sense of stability

Incorporating a fixed schedule of activities at precise times conferred a sense of serenity and inner stability on the participants’ everyday lives. The words of Elizabeth, a 61-year-old schoolteacher, fully expressed this aspect:

In this period, I began to be more regular in daily meditation, in the reading of the Gospel, and, in this last period, with the praises and the vespers. I feel that this participation gives me more serenity and calm in dealing with my everyday life in the family.

Nancy, a 49-year-old florist, also benefited from the regularity of the meetings as a daily ritual that helped her maintain a sense of stability: “Participating in the lauds and vespers gave me strength during the day. I feel anchored; I feel a solid basis to face the day.” Sarah, a 45-year-old administrative clerk, had a similar sentiment: “I have experienced the importance of having a fixed appointment in prayer that marks a rhythm in my days.”

1.c. Providing a space for self-reflection and expression

The activity of reading and discussing the religious text and other materials proved to be a valuable resource for the participants as it led to reflections, spiritual and existential insights, and the sharing of personal experiences and perspectives. We could find these ideas in the words of Margaret, a 54-year-old teacher’s aide: “With reading, I had a ‘guided’ space to confront myself and continue to reflect about myself, my limit, the future of the world, and the great existential questions that I also bear in my heart.”

Dorothy, a 53-year-old missionary, wrote:

Both the shared prayer and the online reading of the book are, for me, a very important space for sharing experiences, reflections, emotions, where I can freely express myself and also listen to the experiences of others that enrich me.

Jessica, a 55-year-old bank manager, had a similar view. She affirmed: “During the various readings, the moments when the author explains his book, or when someone deepens by sharing resonances and experiences, are the most beautiful and uplifting parts.”
1.d. Connecting to the self and others through spontaneous prayers  The moment of spontaneous and personal prayers was identified as a significant part of the meeting. For example, Dorothy declared, “With the experience of prayer, I would say that the most significant moment is that of spontaneous prayers, towards the end, which allows elevating to God each person’s life, with both joys and sufferings.”

Margaret, a 54-year-old teacher’s aide, concurred that sharing personal prayers was one of the highlights of the journey that enhanced the engagement among group participants:

The space dedicated to our spontaneous prayers was also particularly significant. In those moments, I felt the other, his truest, deepest part

... what was close to his heart. There, I understood who he was and how sharing the faith bound us together. Even from a distance, I grasped the gift that each of us has made of himself to the others and how this has made us close and “intimately” united.Ashley, a 55-year-old housewife, described one of her favorite aspects:

Something I particularly love is free prayers before praying the Lord’s Prayer: “we entrust our problems and are thankful for the joys.” In this way, everyone gives you a little of themselves, a piece of his life. I always end up thinking about it for the rest of the day. You are with the others even after you think of them and then continue the prayer.

2. Theme 2: The potential of the online setting  This theme investigates the positive influence of the online setting on the participants.

2.a. Continuing with the meetings despite social restrictions  The participants appreciated the online setting as the only available way to experience the spiritual journey during the pandemic. We find this in the words of Elizabeth: “Surely, the online mode, being Zoom, Telegram, or any other, doesn’t meet my preferences, but I adapt, and I thank the technology nonetheless for giving us this possibility of a virtual encounter between people.”

In addition, the online mode, unlike the physical one, allowed for an encounter between people geographically distant, as reported in a statement by Dorothy: “It gives the opportunity to meet new friends and people, and to share an experience, even when staying away (overseas, in my case).”

2.b. Enhancing accessibility and flexibility  Several participants emphasized the accessibility of the online setting. For example, Susan wrote: “Another positive aspect for me is having access to these meetings from home, without the need to move, doing everything in comfort.” Sarah added the idea of the freedom and flexibility the online setting brought: “Another positive aspect is the convenience of being able to connect when you are in the car or when you are doing other things. I welcome positively the freedom that the online mode can give.”
Jessica elaborated on this idea and explained how the flexibility of the online setting enabled a consistent presence in the meetings: “Saving time on the way to the meeting place is another important factor; being able to stay comfortable, in tracksuits and barefoot during meetings, is another factor not to be underestimated.”

3. Theme 3: The challenges of the online setting  This theme concentrates on the disadvantages related to the use of online platforms for conducting the prayer group.

3.a. The wish for a physical encounter  Most respondents clearly expressed the lack of physical presence in the online setting. Jessica, for example, stated:

Not being able to embrace, to properly greet, to grasp the small grimaces full of meaning; not being able to speak face to face with someone present without saying it in front of everyone—something that you just want to whisper in someone’s ear; not to be able to kneel together during prayer; lacking the opportunity to breathe that atmosphere made of songs, of weeping, of lived and shared life that closeness gives you.

Dorothy also related to this idea, writing:

However, this mode does not succeed in replacing the beauty and uniqueness of the present, where there is a deeper and more complete communication; I am thinking of the nonverbal, aspect, the corporeality, the physicality of meeting. . .

Sarah’s response was similar: “All aspects of the physical presence are missing: the contact, expressions, looks, and emotions that derive from the real presence.”

3.b. Lack of boundaries  Participants described how the online setting created an absence of boundaries between the spiritual journey and prayer sessions and other spaces of life. For example, Matthew, a 43-year-old designer, described the risk of blurring the boundaries of his personal spaces:

The negative aspect, for someone like me who does 3D projects, and therefore is permanently sitting at the computer, is related to the number of hours spent in front of the screen, with the consequent and unpleasant effort of having to apply online methods for duty and work (especially concerning smart working) and also for those activities that instead were linked exclusively to personal pleasure, like spiritual formation.

Margot, a 55-year-old female teacher, felt that “the disadvantage of this flexibility is that I risk praying while multitasking, without being able to carve out a time and space only and exclusively for prayer.” John related to the same issue: “Another aspect I always felt in the early periods was the lack of a place to stimulate meditation and prayer.”

4. Theme 4: The bond with God and how it evolved during the pandemic  This theme focuses on the bond between the individual and the Lord. The open-ended questions revealed common aspects of the relationship with God and its evolution during the pandemic.
4.a. The continuity of the bond with God  Most participants emphasized the continuity of their relationship with God during the most difficult phase of the pandemic. For example, George, a 34-year-old man who works as a school assistant wrote: “I thank Him because despite ups and downs, pandemic or no pandemic...He has me always bound to Him.” Margaret also expresses how the sense of continuity of the relationship with God enhances her sense of certainty:

forming a bond that does not change with the seasons of my life, nor with the viral attacks. The pandemic has definitely hit me, breaking everything down, and I do not hide having my thoughts of death, despair, fear of the future—perhaps more for my children and for who those who will come after me...but I continue to feel God as the only true certainty.

Mary expressed how her trust in God’s will helped her to accept the difficult situation:

The pandemic has not changed my personal relationship with God. The difficulties encountered in life have taught me that God was not against me but with me, since serenity has never abandoned me. Even now, with the pandemic, I do not think of punishments, of a God who beats, but of a path that mankind must take to discover the right one because it is to Him that creation has been entrusted. I do not expect a miracle, but we should be able to distinguish good from evil with all the gifts received. It is to humans that God entrusted his will.

4.b. Strengthening of the bond  Some participants instead remarked on a positive change in their bond with the Lord; the difficulties related to the pandemic brought them closer to God instead of driving them away. For example, Dorothy revealed: “My relationship with God has changed a bit, becoming more intense and regular, I would say almost lived moment by moment, not taking anything for granted and, if possible, preparing myself more intensely for the moment of death.” Matthew strengthened this idea: “The pandemic has surely changed my bond with the Lord; it has strengthened it, it has made it even more authentic, more defined, and stronger.” Linda also experienced the determination for a more in-depth search for a relationship with God: “It was precisely in this moment of ‘inner’ isolation that I was most in search of that contact, of that relationship, felt in a strong and persistent way.”

4.c. Anger toward God  Several participants reported that they felt anger towards God. However, in all cases, their anger was confined to a phase of life and later turned into trust and gratitude to God. For example, Jennifer declares: “There was a time when I was angry with the Lord; I seemed not to see the end of this pandemic.” We find the aspect linked to trust in her subsequent words: “At this moment, I live my life for what it is; it has been given to me, and I must live it all.” It is possible to see a similar experience in Ashlie’s statement about facing the significant loss of her mother and the way her relationship with God evolved:

During the pandemic, He took my mother away, and I struggled to forgive Him. We fought; in fact, I fought with Him until recently. However, now that I am more serene than previously, I can see the many gifts He gave me and that He is still giving me.
Discussion

During the early waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, severe limitations were placed on group gatherings, including for religious worship. One of the responses to these social restrictions was the emergence of online prayer groups. This research was undertaken to explore participants’ experience in one such group—an Italian online Catholic prayer group held regularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings provide insight into how spiritual domains cultivated by the group process have provided support in addressing the difficulties related to the pandemic. Additionally, the potential and the challenging aspects of online prayer were considered, showing that it was possible to have a meaningful experience of group participation even through a virtual medium. Finally, the results showed an evolution of the relationship with God; while some of the participants indicated the continuity of the bond to God, others described how the bond evolved during this period.

Although this qualitative study explored participation in one particular online prayer group, the findings are in accord with previous studies that indicate the potential of religious involvement to positively influence aspects of mental health and well-being (George et al., 2002; Mouzon, 2017; Ronconi et al., 2009; Stroope et al., 2019) and the role of spirituality as a helpful coping mechanism in dealing with traumatic events (Koenig, 2012) and stressors (Oman & Thoresen, 2005; Pargament et al., 2004; Testoni et al., 2016). The analysis of the open-ended questions showed how the participants benefited from attending the online prayer group in which they felt supported during the COVID-19 social restrictions. Our findings show that the ability to experience social interaction in which significant issues such as faith, existential questions, and personal experiences are shared made it possible to take advantage of the social restrictions and enrich that time by fostering a spiritual experience. This exploitation of an otherwise undesirable situation may, arguably, enable better coping with the psychological distress associated with the COVID-19 social restrictions (Smith et al., 2020). While loneliness and social isolation were the main risks for mental health disturbance during the pandemic (Palgi et al., 2020), the findings point to the value of the online prayer group in helping the participants to feel a close relationship and a shared-universal experience while facing the difficulties imposed by the pandemic (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

Another element in the findings relates to the regularity with which the meetings took place. The participants emphasized that the framework of their daily schedule, imposed by the fixed prayer schedule, provided a sense of serenity and inner stability. These findings are in accord with a previous study that demonstrated the association between the frequency of praying and well-being (Poloma & Pendleton, 1991). The participants’ statements show that promoting daily discussion, raising questions, and encouraging personal reflection cultivated a sense of meaning in their daily lives—an essential component of psychological well-being (Aftab et al., 2019; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Testoni et al., 2018). The pandemic became an opportunity for the prayer group participants to strengthen community ties and promote resilience strategies (Testoni, Franco, et al., 2021; Testoni, Zanellato, et al., 2021).

A growing body of research indicates that religious practice and spirituality contribute to ameliorating the consequences of social distancing (Hart, 2020; Hart & Koenig, 2020; Koenig, 2020; Lucchetti et al., 2020). The current study’s findings show that maintaining their religious and spiritual practice in the online format contributed to the participants’ routine during COVID-19 social restrictions. These findings confirm the importance of public
health measures to protect the continuity of religious and spiritual activities during social isolation (Lucchetti et al., 2020), even though they must be conducted in virtual mode.

The constancy of the spiritual group was also supported by the accessibility and flexibility of the online setting as it allowed people to connect even when physically distant (Chen et al., 2020; Biancalani et al., 2021; Keisari et al., 2022). Despite the distance due to the virtual nature of the meetings, the participants reported an experience of profound closeness, where sharing and personal openness were equally possible. However, the participants were almost unanimous in reporting that they suffered from the absence of physical encounters and the lack of corporeality. They missed the possibility of nonverbal communication and expressed a desire for authentic physical contact.

The current study’s findings show that the online group offered participants a way to remain oriented towards God and cultivate a relationship with God. Findings show that the constant search for closeness to God, the perception of God’s presence, and the willingness to foster the bond to God helped participants to cope with the difficulties related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Closeness to God is a coping resource for many when a traumatic event such as the pandemic occurs (Goodman, 2020; Pargament, 1996). Furthermore, accepting one’s existential path within a meaningful divine plan—where events can be considered an expression of God’s will—can be a source of resilience (Testoni et al., 2016; Testoni, Zanellato, et al., 2021). Many participants expressed sentiments of gratitude and recognized the grace of having had the opportunity to participate in the journey, which allowed them to remain close to God.

Finally, in the context of the multidimensional theory of spiritual well-being (Fisher, 2010), it seems that the online prayer group enabled the participants to connect three of the four domains of spirituality. First, it enabled a connection to the personal domain as participants connected to existential issues regarding life’s meaning, purpose, and values. Second, it fostered a connection to the communal domain, enabling closeness and shared experience with others. Finally, it enabled the connection with the transcendent domain, which relates to the relationship between the self and God. The findings did not relate to the environmental domain, maybe because the process was conducted during restrictions when people had to stay at home. Also, the spiritual journey and the open-ended questions did not directly relate to this issue. However, three of the spiritual well-being domains were highly present in the findings, indicating that the online prayer group created a significant spiritual experience that enabled the participants to be connected to the personal, communal, and transcendent aspects of life experiences.

Limitations and future directions

The analysis of a single prayer group may preclude generalizing the results. In this sense, future research could opt for another research methodology, or it could adopt the qualitative mode to compare several prayer groups with heterogeneous characteristics. The structure and the content of the open-ended questions might limit the participants’ ability to relate to more complicated issues regarding the group process. In this way, the themes resulted directly from the questions addressed to the participants. It is recommended that future research also use in-depth interviews with the participants in order to relate to more sensitive issues regarding their experience of participating in the group and to cover more aspects
related to their experience. The qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions highlighted the importance of the spiritual path in helping participants face the difficulties related to COVID-19, highlighting the appropriate use of online platforms. Future research could heighten the understanding of the role of the online modes in the process, investigating what benefits can be derived from the integration of this practice with face-to-face meetings.

Conclusions

The findings confirm the value of participation in an online prayer group during the COVID-19 social restrictions. Admittedly, the online setting had limitations. Nevertheless, it did not prevent the perception of closeness among the group members, and it made the daily practice of the spiritual journey accessible. The findings confirm the importance of public policies to support the continuity of religious and spiritual activities during periods of social isolation.

Authors' Contributions: Conceptualization: Gianmarco Biancalani, Saverio Fassina, Ines Testoni; Methodology: Shoshi Keisari, Gianmarco Biancalani, Ines Testoni; Formal analysis and investigation: Gianmarco Biancalani, Erica Tavelli; Resources: Gianmarco Biancalani, Saverio Fassina, Ines Testoni; Supervision: Gianmarco Biancalani, Ines Testoni; Data curation: Shoshi Keisari, Gianmarco Biancalani, Erica Tavelli; Project Administration: Ines Testoni; Visualisation: Shoshi Keisari, Gianmarco Biancalani, Ines Testoni; Writing - original draft preparation: Gianmarco Biancalani, Erica Tavelli, Ines Testoni; Writing - review and editing: Shoshi Keisari.

Funding The research group did not receive funds for this study.

Availability of Data and Material Not applicable

Code Availability Not applicable

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethics Approval This study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Experimentation of the University of Padua (n. 5B5DAE671C8E195C65AC7BA9D2D33A10)

Consent to participate

Participants were explained in detail all the objectives of the research and the methodology of analysis used. We have guaranteed them to anonymize the contents of the obtained texts and only those who have given written and signed consent have participated in the research.

Consent for publication

All participants gave their consent for the publication of the present article, giving the possibility to use the collected data for research purposes by signing the informed consent.
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