

# Understanding Generation Z's Religious and Spiritual Role Models

**Initial Findings,** 16 July 2024

**Edward A. David**, Principal Investigator; McDonald Postdoctoral Fellow in Christian Ethics and Public Life, Christ Church, Oxford

**Claire MacLeod**, Co-Investigator; Communications Officer, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion

**Phoebe Kelly**, Researcher, BA Candidate (World Philosophies), SOAS University of London

**Saadadden Monajed**, Researcher, MA Candidate (Legal and Political Theory), University College London

**Kalen Spatcher**, Researcher, BSc Candidate (Psychology), London Metropolitan University

DRAFT - DO NOT CITE WITHOUT LEAD AUTHOR  
PERMISSION

FACULTY OF  
**THEOLOGY  
AND  
RELIGION**



- This project explores young people's **narratives** of religious and spiritual role models ... as trends in **religious demographics** rapidly change, and as social life becomes increasingly mediated by **digital technologies**.
- We ask: Who do young people look up to? What are they like? What might young people's stories say about their perceptions of religion and spirituality?

# Phase 1. Exploratory pilot

## ▪ **Methods**

- Story completion
- Reflexive thematic analysis, NVivo

## ▪ **Theory: 'Exemplarist narrative'**

- Big picture meaning
- Personal meaning
- Moral meaning

## ▪ **Participants**

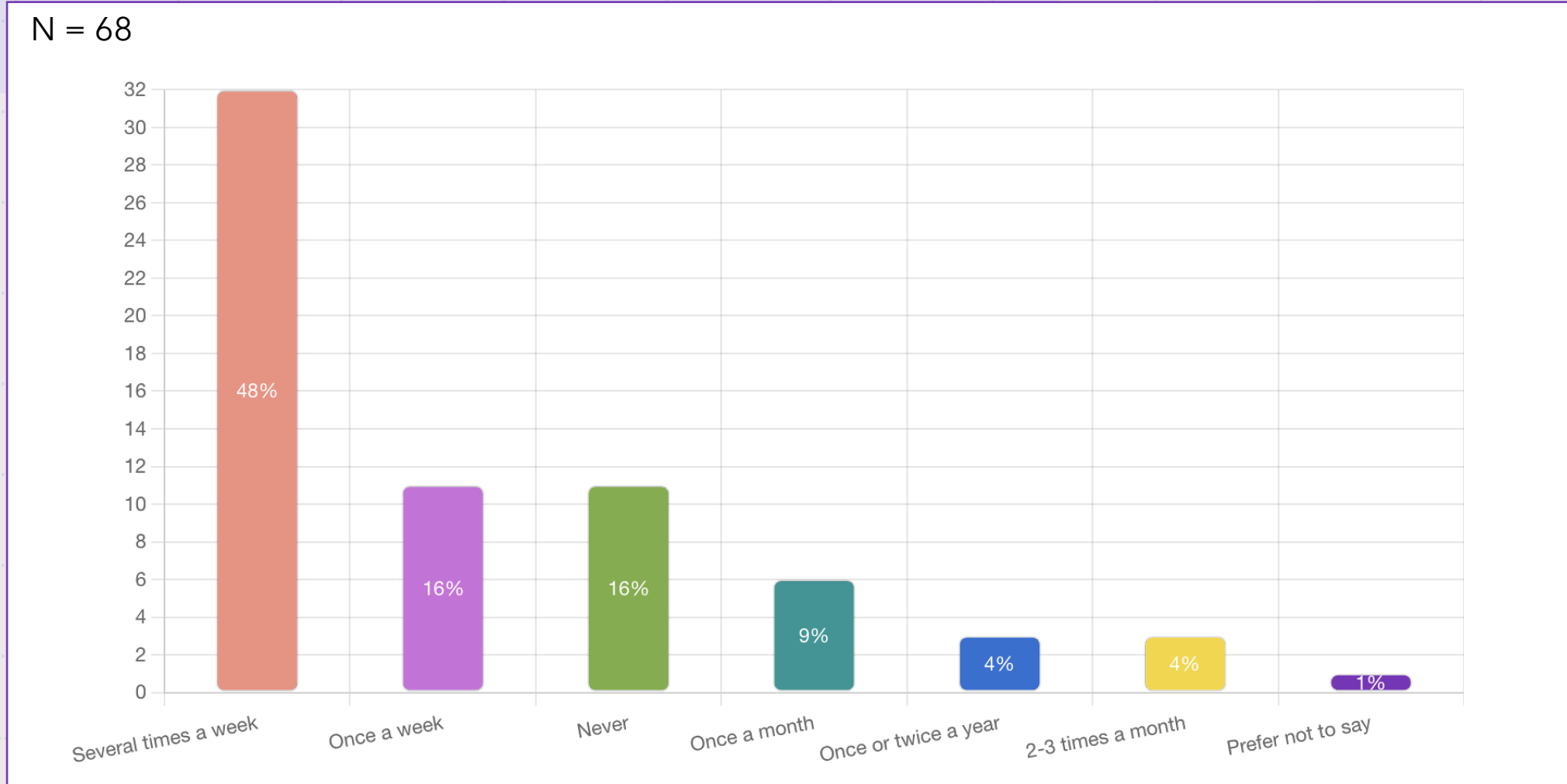
- 18 - 27 years old
- Primarily UK, but anywhere in the world
- Online recruitment



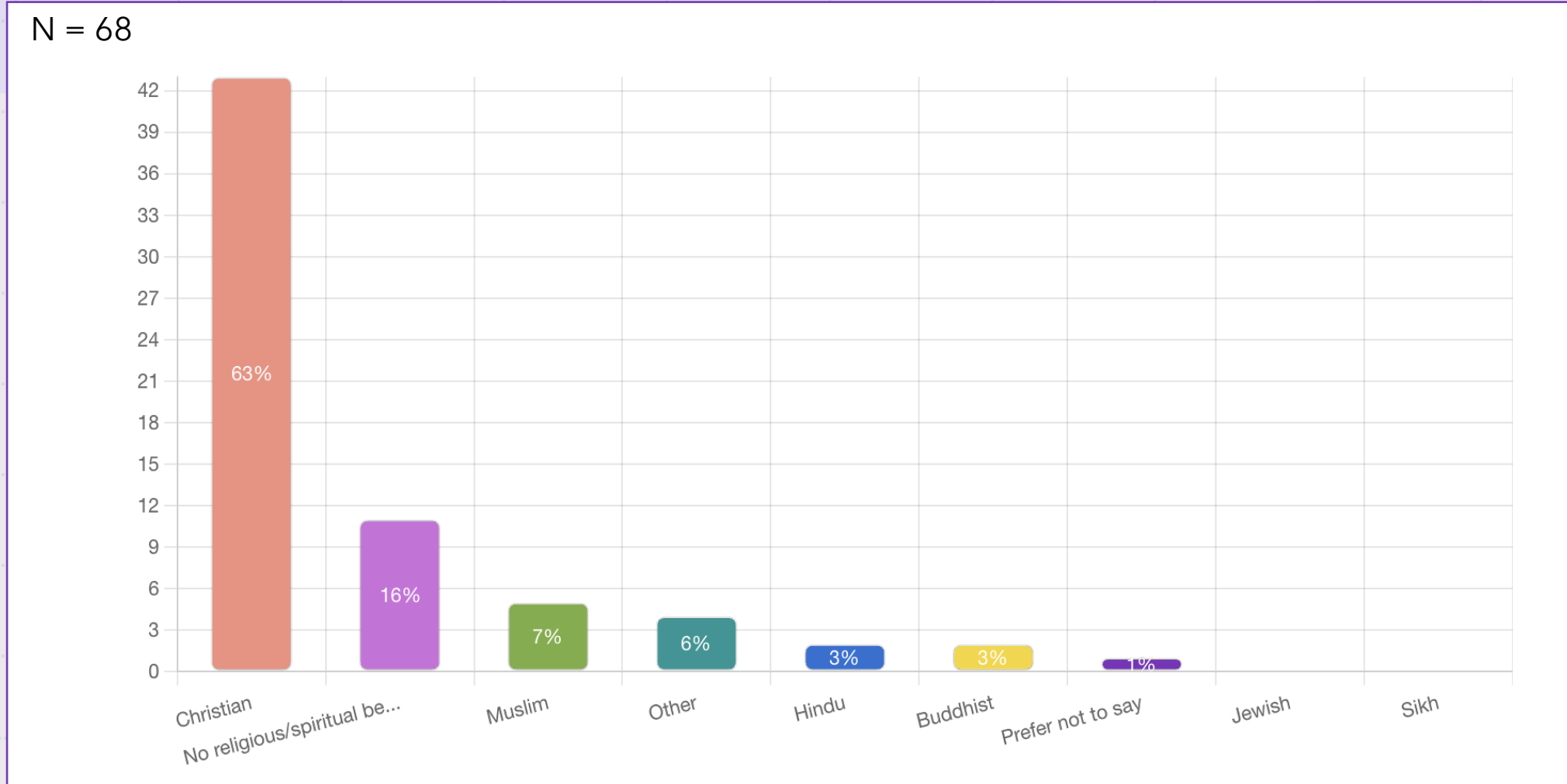
# Participant Demographics

DRAFT - DO NOT CITE WITHOUT LEAD AUTHOR  
PERMISSION

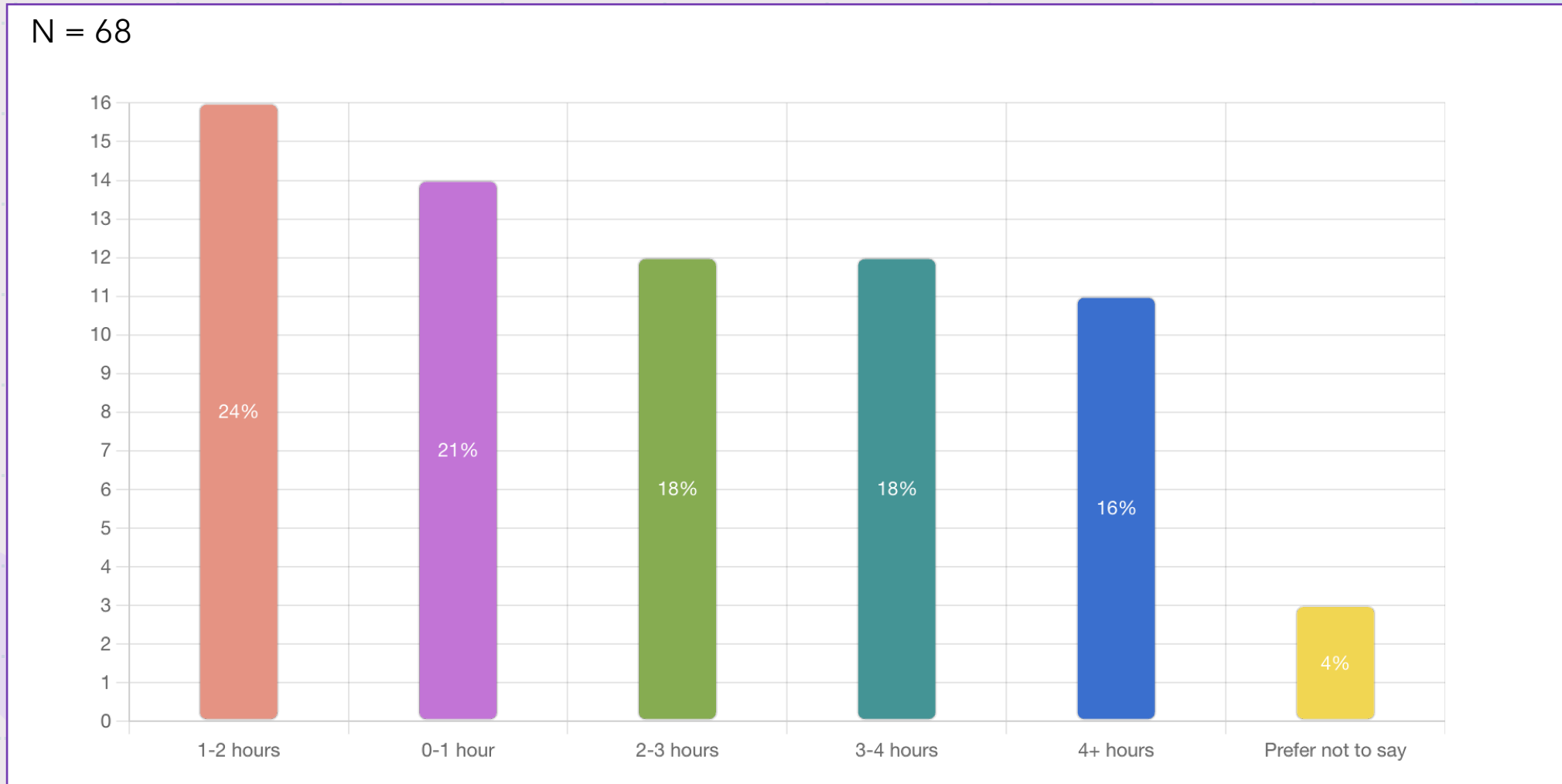
# How often do you take part in religious/spiritual practices or services?



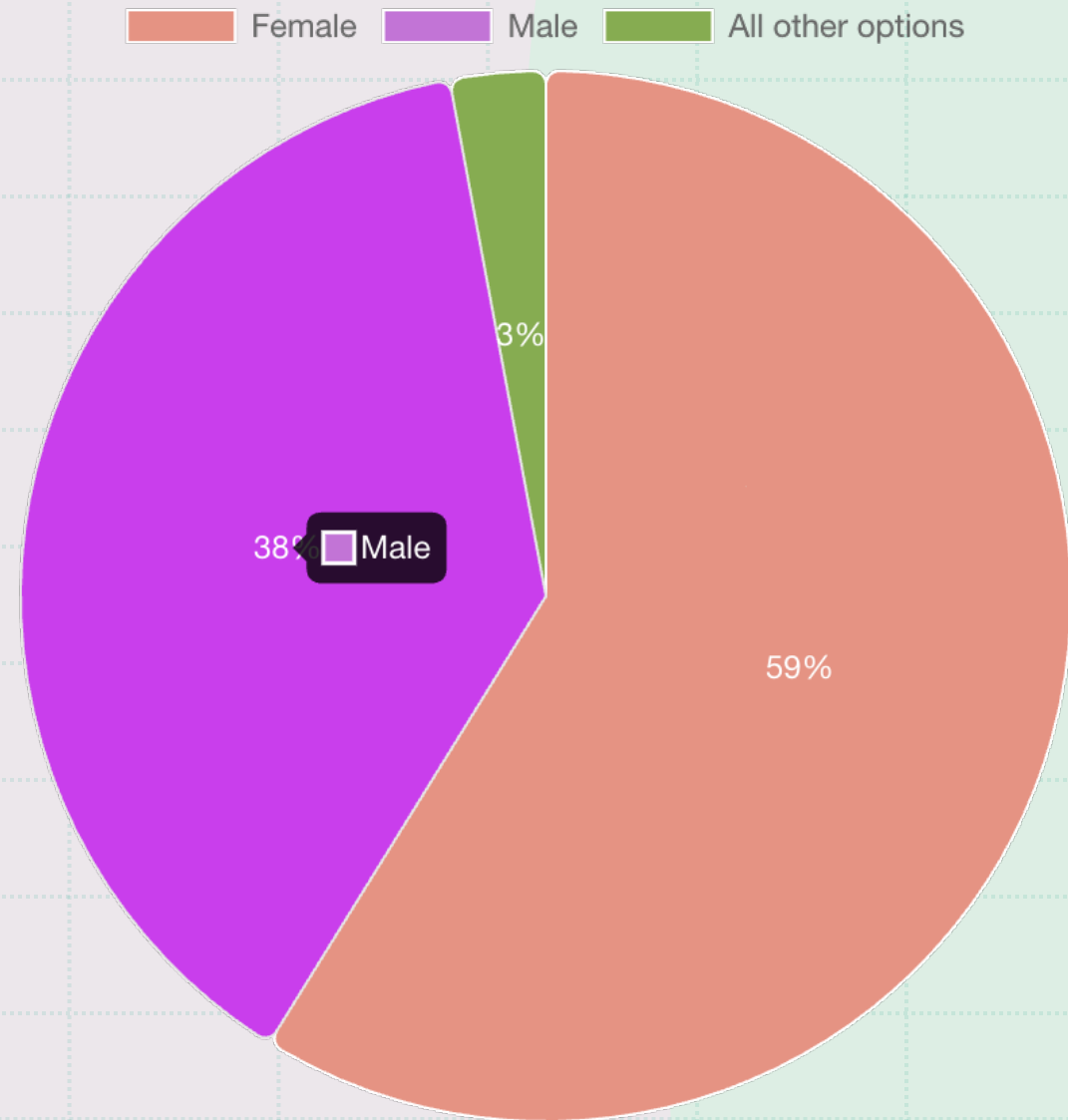
# Which best describes your religious/spiritual beliefs?



# On average, how many hours per day do you use social media?

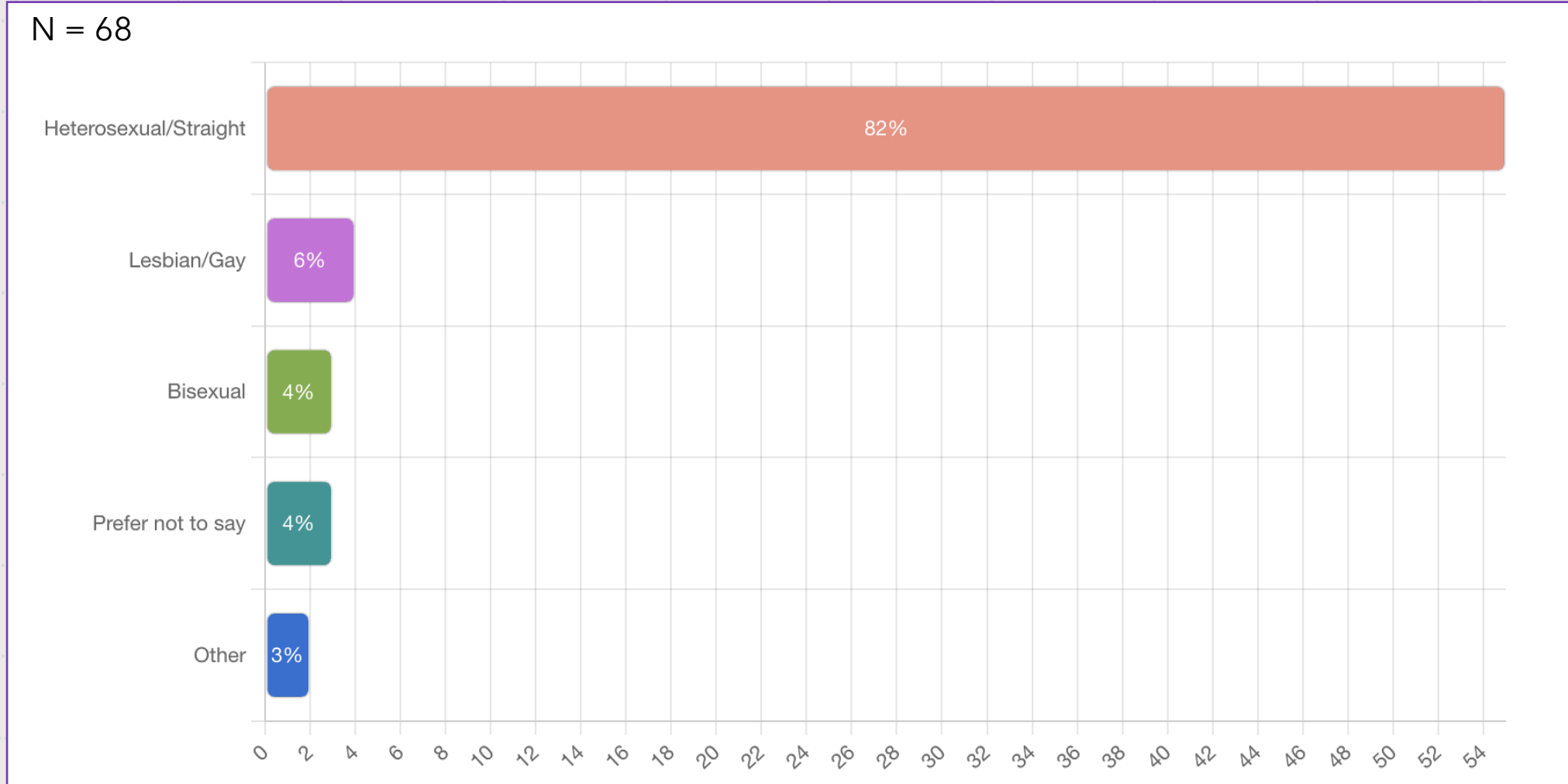


Which of the following best describes your gender identity?

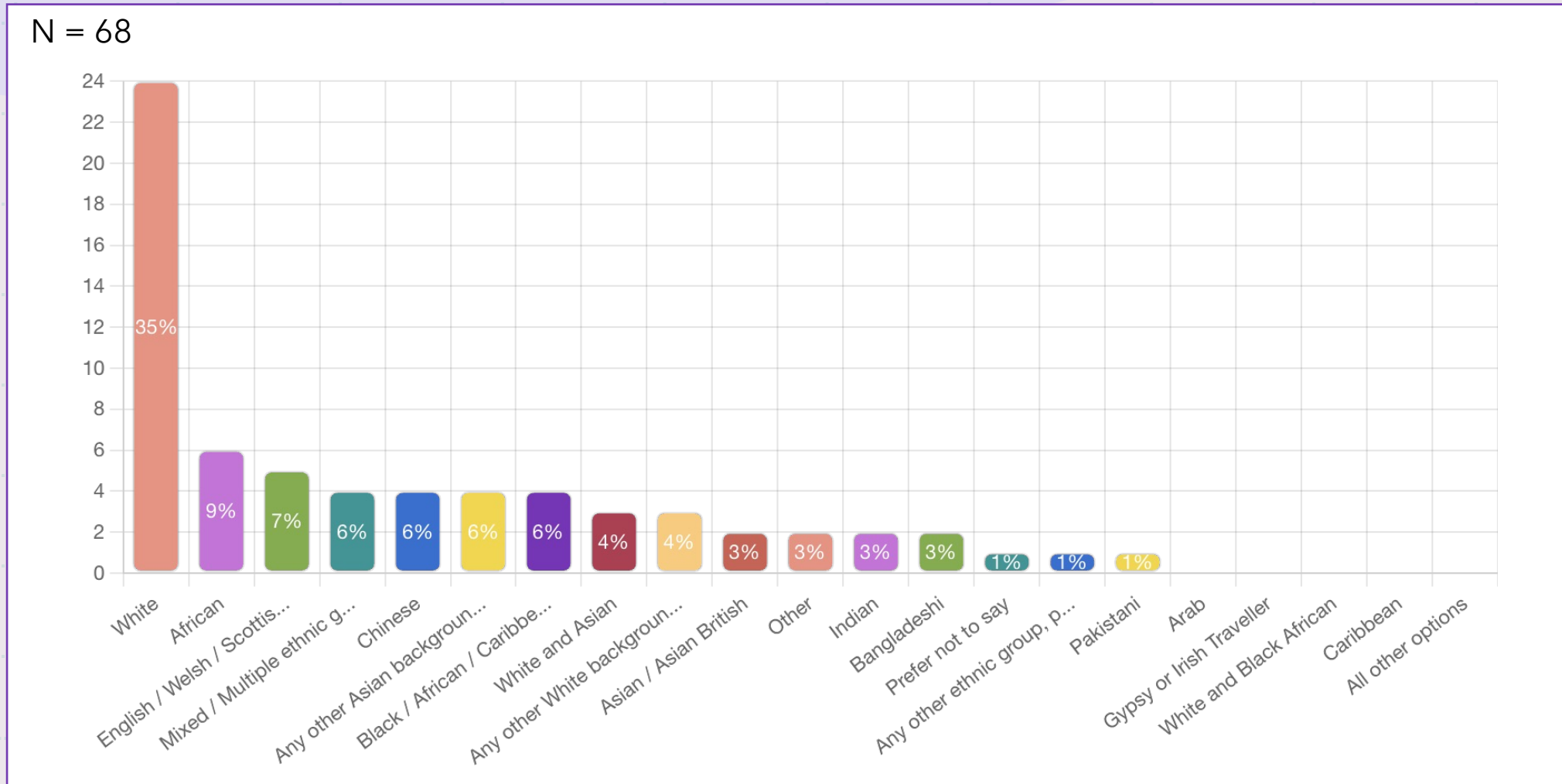




# Which of the following terms best describes your sexual orientation?



# Which best describes your ethnicity?



*32 unread messages. Jesse put down the phone, frustrated. How would Jesse get through the next few days? Looking for answers -- or distraction -- Jesse picked up the phone and started watching videos.*

*One video caught Jesse's eye. A remarkable individual, talking about something religious or spiritual. Jesse couldn't quite make it out, but Jesse was interested and found something impressive, maybe admirable, about the person. So, Jesse continued watching and . . . .*

# 5 Themes

The Divine  
Disillusionment  
Narrative

The 'Space  
Between'  
Narrative

The Self-help  
Narrative

The Lost-and-  
found  
Narrative

The Sunday  
School  
Narrative

# The Divine Disillusion Narrative

Theme 1 - Claire MacLeod

# The Divine Disillusion Narrative

Stories in which the protagonist encounters a religious or spiritual exemplar, but ultimately becomes disillusioned in some respect.

## Illustrative sub-themes / codes

- Suspicion
- Hope and disappointment
- Loss of control

\*"This guy," said Jesse, **full of disappointment**, ".. is a robber."

\*Hours flew by like minutes. It wasn't until he reached a subscription limit that he stopped. 'oh', he muttered, '\$39.99 a month'. He tossed his phone to the side; 'it **must be one of those scam things**'.

\*Jesse went to each event held by the individual, each talk, read each book they wrote. If their faith wavered toward their message, Jesse would not acknowledge it, for it was all she had. **Young and lost**, she had to keep moving forward, by holding on to what she had.

\*Jesse belonged to a wealthy family so he decided to go all in but his **friends started to feel suspicious** and worry about him. The more Jesse talked about this center the more his friends realized they were **scamming him**, and they decided to confront him. As Jesse realized that he had been scammed he left the center and **joined a counseling center that helped him fix his issues.**

# The 'Space Between' Narrative

Theme 2 - Kalen Spatcher

# The 'Space Between' Narrative

Stories in which the protagonist encounters a R/S exemplar and subsequently enters a 'space between', having an ambiguous relationship with R/S ideas.

## Illustrative sub-themes / codes

- Meaninglessness
- Spiritual floating
- Nothingness and/or nihilism

\*'So, she put down her [phone] and **spoke to God**. She waited a few seconds, minutes, hours. **But, the sky was empty.**'

\*As she exhaled noticed that, in contrast to her initial thoughts, it was not \*despite\* these mysteries that she found peace - but because of them. The formless figure, passing boundaries, provided an escape from the fervent lines drawn by her modern-day life: of messages, of emails, of labels and obligations. For a brief moment, **she caught a glimpse into the space between all things** - into the great unknown, where **nothing makes sense**, and **nothing needs to.**



# The Self-help Narrative

Theme 3 - Phoebe Kelly

# The Self-Help Narrative

Stories in which the protagonist encounters a R/S exemplar, engages with the exemplar, and uses their advice for self-help purposes.

## Illustrative sub-themes / codes

- Mental health
- Individual focus
- Professional, personal development
- Materialist lens

\*saw as this person spoke about their own experiences with similar **mental health issues** as Jesse was struggling with currently. They offered reassurance, a promise that things not only could, but would get better with time, and described how they coped through the dark times.

\*After a quick rest. Jesse back to her desk and started to finish his task. Again and again, she repeats the powerful words. With his powerful mindset emotionally and spiritually, **she becomes strong as an individual.** The result she can finish her task in just two hours and after that she packs the stuff in her task and prepares to go home.

\*She was also drawn by the eloquence and calmness of the speaker too, a great orator who had gone onto related topics of real-life examples of people acting on this hadith. Jesse had a eureka moment here; **instead of seeing this piling up around her life, she now wanted to take a firm grip** on how she could first easily work around her piling tasks, and most importantly, to be present in whatever it is she does so she could appreciate it more.

# The Lost-and-found Narrative

Theme 4 - Saadadeen Monajed

# The Lost-and-Found Narrative

Stories in which the protagonist encounters a R/S exemplar, engages with the exemplar, and finds purpose and meaning in some respect.

## Illustrative sub-themes / codes

- Secular versions and religious versions
- From isolation to connection
- Flexible R/S experience
- Artificial reality to reality

\*Jesse decided to get more involved, and learn more from others, rather than from mere observation. And there it was, shaping up all around - **Jesse's meaning, found in a community** steeped in it. Looking up often at the tabernacle, Jesse started to understand - He also struggled, He also fought temptation, He also had responsibilities, He also laughed with and cried for others. **And He was there for Jesse.**

\*Something was stirring within. Something that was hidden in the depths of depths, and was long forgotten was being awakened again at the sounds of Mr. X's voice. **Something that was dead inside was slowly coming to life**, a life which Jesse had never experienced before, but somewhere – deep within his heart - he knew that he had always longed for.

# The Simple Faith Narrative

Theme 5 - Edward David

# The Simple Faith Narrative

Stories in which the protagonist encounters a R/S exemplar and immediately follows them or embraces their R/S teaching.

## Illustrative sub-themes / codes

- Idealised religious experience
- Obedience
- Simplicity in narration
- Little, if any, psychological tension

\*the video seemed like nothing she had ever seen or heard of before! The individual in the video talked about an incredible love that no one could ever give on this earth. **The individual said following Jesus was not just about a set of rules but rather a relationship where there was a 2 way communication.** Jesse felt a burning desire to know this love, to have this relationship.

\*After he heard the sermon from the pastor, he felt something present in him which was uncertainty. So Jesse came to meet the pastor and asked "**Pastor, I have long left the church and the teachings of the Lord Jesus** , do I deserve forgiveness". and the pastor replied "look where you are now you have dared to come to church again, that is where you have answered the call of the heavenly father to come back to him" and Jesse cried and realized that **God is very good to her.**

# Discussion & Conclusion

- **Limitations**

- Sample size
- Sampling, recruitment
- Us as researchers

- **Strengths**

- Us as researchers
- Sample size
- Sampling, recruitment
- 'Layered' methods





- **Vocabulary to understand**

- Gen Z *mentalité*
- Religious and spiritual role modelling
- Narratives told about these phenomena

- **Future research**

- Participatory research design
- Global, much larger version

