



Spiritual formation and ‘Attention Economy’: Exploring facilitators’ awareness and approaches during Retreats and Recollections

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the intersection of the 'attention economy' and the religious/spiritual formation processes within retreats and recollections, focusing on facilitators' perspectives and practices. Employing an exploratory approach, the research incorporates focused-group discussion with select facilitators to analyze their awareness, roles, views, and methods for addressing attention-related challenges in face-to-face retreats. The findings highlight facilitators' acute awareness of attention challenges and their proactive efforts to enhance student experiences by minimizing distractions, incorporating reflective activities, and fostering an engaging environment. The study underscores that effective attention management is pivotal for deepening spiritual engagement. It also identifies the need for innovative pedagogical approaches tailored to contemporary cognitive demands. Facilitators believe adaptive strategies significantly improve attentional focus and enrich spiritual practices during retreats. The research calls for further exploration of student perspectives and interdisciplinary collaboration to deepen understanding of attention management in spiritual contexts. Recommendations include continuous professional development for facilitators and using larger, probabilistic samples to enhance the findings' generalizability. Addressing the challenges posed by the 'attention economy' has the potential to profoundly impact the holistic development of participants in spiritual formation programs.

Key Words: Attention economy, Facilitator, Formation, Recollection, Retreat.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary education, the 'attention economy' has emerged as a critical challenge, emphasizing the increasing scarcity of human attention in an information-saturated environment. With entities competing to capture and sustain attention, the ability to focus has become an invaluable yet endangered skill (Nishat Kazi, 2012; Falkinger, 2003; Terranova, 2012). This issue is further compounded by the pervasive influence of digital culture, which inundates individuals with constant stimuli, fragmenting focus and complicating the learning process (Constas, 2023). These challenges are particularly pronounced in formation settings, where sustained attention is essential for fostering meaningful encounters and deeper engagement.

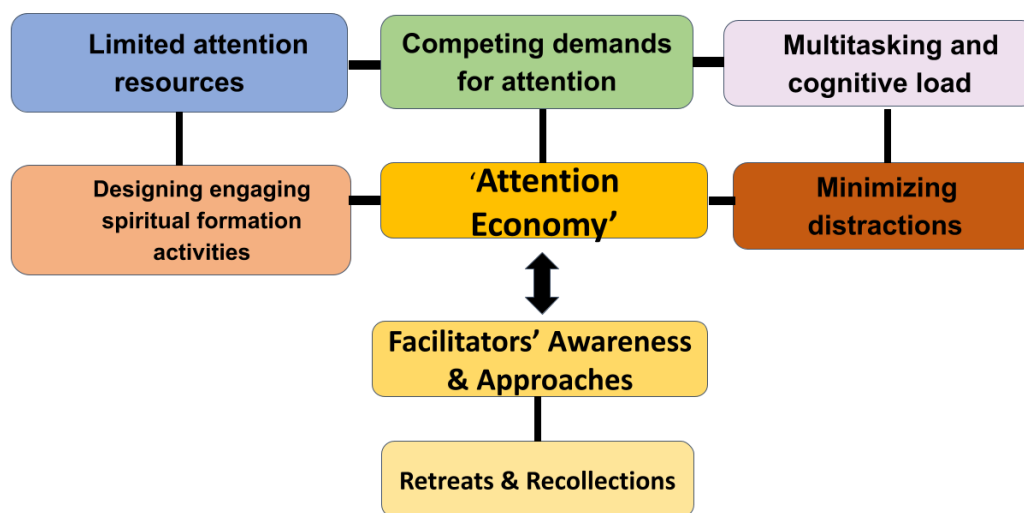
Traditional pedagogical approaches often fail to address the complexities of modern attentional dynamics, leaving educators to grapple with the competing demands of maintaining engagement while mitigating distractions. The commodification of attention, exacerbated by social media and digital technologies, underscores the urgent need for innovative strategies to address these challenges (Szuts, 2023; Guld, 2023). Within this context, contemplative pedagogy and mindfulness practices have emerged as promising frameworks capable of cultivating creative attention and enriching educational experiences (O'Donnell, 2015). Simone Weil asserts that "attention animated by desire is the foundation of religious practices" (1951), highlighting the transformative potential of focused engagement in learning and one's spiritual life.

Given the growing demand for approaches that effectively navigate the complexities of the 'attention economy,' this study seeks to address a critical gap: how facilitators in formation settings adapt their practices to foster attentional focus and enhance spiritual engagement. By exploring the intersection of attention management and religious/spiritual formation, this research contributes to the urgent task of rethinking formation practices to meet the challenges of contemporary cognitive and cultural realities (Sieglová, 2020; Trautman, 2023).

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of 'attention economy' is used as a theoretical framework vis-a-vis spiritual formation programs. Drawing on William James' four general aspects of attention (Lane & Atchley, 2021), the attention economy can be interpreted through several key principles. Attention is recognized as a valuable yet limited resource, requiring careful management to optimize cognitive and behavioral functions. Secondly, the cognitive processes that govern human thought, emotion, and behavior are subject to bottlenecks and regulatory constraints, which are significantly influenced by the limitations of attention. Thirdly, while attention can be exercised through self-control, it is also susceptible to external forces that may undermine individual agency. Finally, how attention is allocated evolves, shaped by prolonged exposure to various influences, particularly during critical developmental stages.

- *Limited attention resources:* attention is a limited resource, especially under limitless access to attention-getting information
- *Competing demands for attention:* Lasallian formation programs also find themselves competing for participants' attention during recollections and retreats
- *Multitasking and cognitive load:* participants come to the recollections or retreats with cognitive overload
- *Designing engaging spiritual formation activities:* these activities must be designed towards meaningful engagement given those attentional issues
- *Minimizing distractions:* how are attentional distractions minimized during recollections or retreats



3. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The intersection of the 'attention economy' and spiritual formation is critical, especially for college students navigating distractions or competing demands. The 'attention economy,' which commodifies attention as a limited resource, poses challenges to educational and spiritual development (Terranova, 2012). Maintaining focus on spiritual growth amidst digital distractions (Schuett, 2024) is increasingly complex.

Ergas (2017) highlights the need to center mindful attention in curriculum and pedagogy, emphasizing its relevance in spiritual formation, where deep engagement is essential. Spiekermann (2008) suggests educational environments must

minimize distractions to enhance sustained attention. Lang Hearlson (2019) discusses how consumer culture and information overload affect attention and spiritual memory formation, while Habito et al. (2021) explore how digital technology reshapes Filipino youth's intimate relationships. Spiritual formation is cultivating intimacy with the Divine.

To address these challenges, scholars propose innovative frameworks aimed at enhancing educational practices. One approach involves shifting from an 'attention economy' to an ecology of attending, as Bombaerts et al. (2024) suggest, prioritizing meaningful engagement over the capture of fleeting attention. The importance of nurturing students' inner lives through college experiences is highlighted by Cotter (2011), who emphasizes the transformative potential of such practices. Similarly, Montgomery-Goodnough and Gallagher (2013) and Baker (2024) call for higher education institutions to adapt to the realities of the 'attention economy' by supporting spiritual growth. Silence and attentiveness, often overlooked in today's distraction-heavy environments, are championed by Lewin (2014) and Conostas (2023) as vital elements in education. Additionally, contemplative pedagogy and mindfulness are proposed by O'Donnell (2015) as strategies to deepen student engagement with spiritual formation.

The literature calls for studying how the 'attention economy' affects spiritual formation in college students, emphasizing innovative approaches that promote meaningful engagement.

4. METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study aims to gather insights from a small sample size of respondents selected using a non-probability sampling method. The primary consideration of the non-randomized choice of facilitator respondents is the experience of facilitating recollections and retreats. Respondents have years of experience, with 69% of the sample having had a minimum of four (4) years in their professional portfolio and others beyond ten (10) years. Another consideration is they belong to a cohort of facilitators within the university who implements the same retreat and recollection programs. The respondents' homogeneity through common membership within the campus ministry arm of the university and their 'similar experiences' justify the choice. In qualitative exploratory studies, a smaller sample may be sufficient to capture key themes without requiring a large, statistically representative sample (Young and Casey, 2018; Boddy, 2016). It aims to understand how they adapt to the presuppositions of the 'attention economy' within the context of retreats and recollections. It addresses the implications of the 'attention economy' on the design and execution of these programs on the need for methodologies that resonate with students and enhance formation programs (Adhikari & Timsina, 2024). Respondents participated through an open invitation selection process, answering survey questions and engaging in an online focus group discussion via Zoom (Greenspan et al., 2021; Al-Mazroa Smith et al., 2023). The data collected reflect facilitators' awareness of the 'attention economy' in formation, their approaches and practices in navigating related issues, and their potential for enhancing and implementing spiritual formation programs, particularly retreats, and recollections. While this study initially included both survey and qualitative data, the survey results were excluded in the final draft. This decision was made to focus on the richness of insights from the qualitative focus group discussion, which aligns more closely with the exploratory nature of the study. Data saturation, which is almost second nature in qualitative studies, does not apply to this study for three (3) reasons. First, no study has yet linked the 'attention economy' to spiritual events such as retreats and recollections. Second, a small sample size is enough for an exploratory study to generate initial patterns. Data saturation is apt only when there are already established patterns. Third, respondents did provide meaningful insights on this topical intersection. The non-probability sampling and small size of 29 survey respondents considered quantitatively could only further delimit the non-generalizability of the study. Paring off the weak and non-generalizable quantitative data and its possible analysis is a decision favoring depth and focus over breadth. Slekar (2005) maintained that qualitative research with small samples in education remains valid, despite criticisms from a quantitative standpoint, as it allows for the exploration of complex issues in unique ways. The following are the guide questions used during the focus group discussion:

1. Are you familiar with the ‘attention economy’? What is your understanding of the ‘attention economy’?
2. What attention-related issues have you encountered? How do you handle those issues?
3. What practices and strategies do you implement to capture and maintain students’ attention during retreats and recollections? Can you name some?
4. Have you found any specific techniques or approaches particularly effective? If so, can you please describe?
5. What is the value of addressing attention-related issues in the spiritual formation of retreats and recollection participants?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add or share regarding the ‘attention economy’ theme in facilitating retreats and recollections?

The thematization and coding of responses from the online focus group discussion were conducted in collaboration with ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2023). ChatGPT was fed with the prompt for generating themes and codes from the transcribed data. Large language models (LLMs) in general, and ChatGPT in particular, among others, are now utilized for coding and data analysis (Lee et al.,2023; Morgan, 2023; Zhang et al.,2023; Şen et al.,2023; Theelen & Rutten, 2024). Admittedly, generative AI systems like the ChatGPT face issues, including reproducibility and researcher bias. Reproducibility is the tendency of generative AI systems to generate different answers to the same prompt because the models they use could explore different valid possibilities. Likewise, researchers can also manipulate the prompts they can feed to generative AI systems. In a recent article by Kim (2024), major databases were scoured for common problems authors faced using nonacademic AI platforms in research. The study identified eight major issues related to using nonacademic AI systems such as ChatGPT. Most issues revolved around authorship, where ‘researcher bias’ can be categorized. Reproducibility is not explicitly listed, although the accuracy category could cover it. Reproducibility, which entails the repeatability of research, is crucial in ‘exact sciences.’ In social sciences, however, insights are more fluid or nuanced. Zambrano et al. (2023) examined the possibility of using ChatGPT (GPT-4) to assist with coding procedures in quantitative ethnography research. They examined how ChatGPT and nCoder, the most popular automated coding tool in the QE community, are employed on a dataset of public speeches and press releases given by political leaders in seven nations between late February and late March 2020. The study evaluated the accuracy of the two tools’ automated coding processes and the potential contribution of ChatGPT’s coding decision-making explanations to enhancing the construct validity and consistency of human-generated codes. The findings imply that depending on the situation, type of data, and objectives of the researchers, ChatGPT and nCoder each have benefits and drawbacks. ChatGPT can more accurately capture a range of linguistic patterns, although nCoder is helpful for simple coding systems expressed using regular expressions. ChatGPT can improve construct validity, spot ambiguity in code definitions, and help human programmers reach high interrater reliability by offering justifications for its choices. Similarly, generating social science themes and codes out of AI systems with a set of data should not be ethically arbitrary. The transcribed data from the focus group discussion was manually extracted and categorized according to the relevant codes generated by ChatGPT.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Familiarity with the ‘Attention Economy’

Themes	Codes
<i>Understanding attention management</i>	Minimize distractions Engage students Sustainability beyond sessions Response 1: <i>“I give them a simple tip when they get distracted.”</i> Response 2: <i>"Through an approach in terms of strategies and</i>

	<i>methodologies, so they will be engaged not only with the facilitator but also with the module itself."</i>
<i>Strategies for capturing attention</i>	<p>Hooking students Maintaining attention</p> <p>Response 1: <i>"I think it's about our ability or faculties and how we can engage others—not just in capturing their attention but in sustaining it, which is essential."</i></p> <p>Response 2: <i>"We're looking at a certain point, from a specific perspective, where both aspects complement each other. At the same time, it's about engaging and sustaining attention."</i></p>

Explanation: Participants discuss various methods for managing and sustaining student attention, highlighting the importance of engagement beyond just individual sessions.

5.2 Attention-Related Issues and Handling Them

Themes	Codes
<i>Recognizing physical and psychological states</i>	<p>Physical condition Sleepiness Distractions</p> <p>Response 1: <i>"At the beginning, I ask them to hold off their sleepiness until at least the morning break. After that, they can rest during lunch break. I also suggest that, after eating, they could take a power nap. This helps address the sleepiness concern, especially when they're hungry."</i></p> <p>Response 2: <i>"Attention-related concerns also include their phones and gadgets. If they have their phones or gadgets with them, personally, I don't ask for them to be confiscated. I see the value in allowing them to have their devices, as it sets them up not to be distracted by physical gadgets. However, I do recognize the importance of managing this."</i></p>
<i>Strategies for attention</i>	<p>Commitment table Hand signals Humor and smiles Surrendering phones</p> <p>Response 1: <i>"It really helps a lot when I ask them to smile first thing in the morning. Then, with their phones, I usually ask them to commit to the cell phone commitment table."</i></p>

	<p>Response 2: <i>"I keep reminding them that I have a hand signal. Now, I don't need to call their attention all the time—just the hand signal is enough."</i></p>
<i>Inclusive approach</i>	<p>Non-Catholic participants Understanding and considerate approach</p> <p>Response 1: <i>"This recollection is not only for the believers, not only for the Catholics, not only for the pious, but for every Lasallian."</i></p> <p>Response 2: <i>"We welcome other belief systems as well, because being Catholic means being universal. We welcome everyone and respect their beliefs."</i></p>
<i>Building rapport</i>	<p>Movement around the room Connection with students Centering prayer</p> <p>Response 1: <i>"After giving them instructions, I need them to move, group themselves, and go to a certain place in the room as directed."</i></p> <p>Response 2: <i>"They can have some sort of connection with the rest of the activities and with the experience itself."</i></p>

Explanation: Strategies to address attention-related issues include recognizing students' states using humor and hand signals and building a connection to maintain focus.

5.3 Practices and Strategies for Maintaining Attention

Themes	Codes
<i>Creating a meaningful environment</i>	<p>Heart-to-heart connection Sacred space Psychological masks</p> <p>Response 1: <i>"Like creating that sacred space for them, which this particular platform is."</i></p> <p>Response 2: <i>"Establish a heart-to-heart connection by giving an introduction on why they are here and the purpose of the recollection."</i></p>

<p><i>Encouraging reflection and engagement</i></p>	<p>Reflective questions Safe environment Personal rating of participation</p> <p>Response 1: <i>"Reflective activities, if we can make them more experiential—experiential in nature—and simply provide space for sharing."</i></p> <p>Response 2: <i>"So, it's just that—again, this is for me to create a safe environment, as it is at the beginning of the session ..."</i></p>
<p><i>Adaptation to needs</i></p>	<p>Addressing concerns Recognizing needs Self-awareness</p> <p>Response 1: <i>"Attention-related concerns that we have—addressing them effectively would enhance the holistic experience for the students."</i></p> <p>Response 2: <i>"In addition to skills training or facilitation skills, the recollection for facilitators should focus on self-awareness, self-management, and self-mastery."</i></p>

Explanation: Participants emphasize creating a supportive environment that encourages reflection, connection, and effective facilitation tailored to student needs.

5.4 Value of Addressing ‘Attention Economy’

Themes	Codes
<p><i>Enhancing student experience</i></p>	<p>Holistic experience Recognizing needs Flexibility for facilitators</p> <p>Response 1: <i>"Attention-related concerns that we have—addressing them effectively would enhance the holistic experience for the students."</i></p> <p>Response 2: <i>"Spiritual formation starts with the premise that we are spiritual beings having a human experience. The value of this understanding provides the flexibility we need to approach it in a way that works for us."</i></p>
<p><i>Promoting presence and engagement</i></p>	<p>Being present Attention assessment</p> <p>Response 1:</p>

	<p><i>"Facilitate their silence, as they're not used to slowing down, so they can truly connect with the present moment. This will also help them be compassionate towards themselves and others. Though they may have a lot on their minds, you can see it in their eyes."</i></p> <p>Response 2: <i>"Giving them our full attention means we respect them."</i></p>
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Explanation: Addressing the attention economy is crucial for improving student experiences by promoting presence, engagement, and flexibility for facilitators.

5.5 Additional Insights on ‘Attention Economy’

Themes	Codes
<i>Spiritual and reflective preparation</i>	<p>Chapel time for facilitators Reflective activities Grounding in purpose</p> <p>Response 1: <i>"I allow my students to gather, center themselves, and engage in grounding prayer."</i></p> <p>Response 2: <i>"I think it's a big help for us to come prepared, but more than that, to arrive early. This way, we can feel the ground and spend some moments of solitude and silence in the chapel, allowing us to ask for the grace of the Spirit. I believe this is more than just normal teaching or coaching."</i></p>
<i>Role of facilitators</i>	<p>Preparedness Personal faith Experiential sharing</p> <p>Response 1: <i>"Telling Bible stories in a conversational tone is important. Being able to share Bible stories, the stories of the Lord, or even my personal experiences is one of the ways I engage with them, especially during the last part."</i></p> <p>Response 2: <i>"If we are grounded in our purpose, in ourselves, and in our content—meaning our faith—then we are truly anchored. Being grounded in purpose, in ourselves, in our skills, and in content will also help us manage our focus."</i></p>

Explanation: Participants highlighted the importance of spiritual grounding and preparedness for facilitators, emphasizing personal faith and reflective practices as essential components.

5.6 Summary of Findings

The survey results and thematic analysis of the online focus group discussion reveal several key insights into how educators and facilitators manage and sustain student attention in the context of a spiritual and educational setting:

Themes	Descriptions
<i>Attention management and engagement</i>	Effective attention management involves understanding, minimizing distractions, and engaging students through meaningful connections and sustained focus.
<i>Handling distractions</i>	Strategies include recognizing physical and psychological conditions, using humor, building rapport, and ensuring inclusivity.
<i>Creating meaningful experiences</i>	Facilitators emphasize creating a supportive, engaging environment that encourages reflection and self-awareness tailored to student needs.
<i>Value of 'attention economy'</i>	Addressing 'attention economy' enhances holistic student experiences and promotes presence and engagement.
<i>Facilitator preparation</i>	Facilitators' role is crucial, emphasizing spiritual preparedness, personal reflection, and experiential sharing to create a meaningful learning environment.

This analysis highlights the importance of a holistic approach to managing attention that incorporates practical strategies and spiritual preparation.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the intersection of the 'attention economy' and spiritual formation, particularly within formative environments characterized by technological exposure surplus. A significant challenge in such contexts is the commodification of attention, which Roffarello and Russis (2022) describe as "dark patterns" that manipulate user engagement and can detract from genuine learning experiences. This phenomenon mirrors the findings of Rosen (2017), who emphasizes the pervasive distractions that compromise student focus and engagement. The implications of these distractions are contextually pronounced in spiritual retreats, where facilitators strive to cultivate an environment conducive to meaningful reflection and connection. The facilitators' responses underline the importance of creating sacred spaces and immersive encounters that capture and sustain students' attention.

The necessity of adapting formative methodologies is echoed in the literature. Palalas (2018) discusses the integration of mindfulness in mobile and ubiquitous learning environments, emphasizing the importance of designing learning engagements that harness attention rather than overshadow it. This principle holds particularly true for spiritual formation programs, which aim to impart knowledge and facilitate spiritual growth. Moreover, the research illustrates that effectively managing distractions during retreats is vital for enhancing participants' spiritual engagement. Matthew (2012) highlights that diverse cohorts face unique engagement challenges, suggesting that understanding individual needs and backgrounds can inform more effective facilitation strategies. The facilitators' emphasis on building rapport and recognizing the multifaceted nature of attention aligns with this perspective, advocating for practices tailored to the participants' psychological states and needs. Bradbury (2023) raises important questions about attention and engagement, underscoring that educators, or formators, strategically capture and channel student focus. In this context, the findings reveal that facilitators implementing diverse strategies—such as reflective activities and creating safe environments—are more likely to foster sustained engagement. They are more keen on not just capturing attention

but sustaining it. Equally important are facilitators building rapport with participants, noticing physical manifestations of discomfort from getting hungry or out of sleep deprivation. A narrative approach with Bible stories and facilitators' skills is cited as a significant attention-sustaining intervention. This multifaceted approach allows students to navigate distractions and achieve meaningful engagement during retreats and recollections.

The research's implications extend beyond spiritual formation; they resonate with broader educational practices that face similar challenges in a fast-paced, digitally driven learning environment. Haroutunian-Gordon (2009) stresses the importance of recognizing the implications for educators, noting that transformative learning environments require a foundational understanding of attention dynamics. Such implication is revealed through self-reflexive spiritual preparation by facilitators as simple as spending chapel time before a retreat or recollection starts or doing 'grounding prayer.' The facilitators emphasized creating safe and inclusive spaces during retreats and recollections. Fife (2017) highlights the necessity of shaping attentional environments that consider social media and digital influences, further complicating the attention landscape in educational settings. The intersection of 'attention economy' and spiritual formation presents challenges and opportunities. As educators, formators, and facilitators navigate these complexities, a commitment to employing mindful strategies like humor, hand signals, or silence at the most opportune segment of the retreat and recognizing the multifaceted nature of attention will be essential for fostering meaningful student engagement and spiritual growth in a digital age. The findings of this study offer several implications for retreat and recollection facilitators. First, the need to acknowledge attention management as integral to spiritual formation, not a peripheral concern. Second, the intentional design of retreat activities and the need to incorporate engagement strategies that align with contemporary cognitive challenges (Sargeant & Yoxall, 2023). Such strategies can also employ technology (Rakhmatova Mekhrinoz Majitovna, 2024; Paz, 2024) that enhances retreats and recollections engagement. Third, continuous professional development for facilitators can enhance their ability to navigate attention-related issues effectively.

The exclusion of survey data, initially part of the research design, limits the ability to triangulate findings quantitatively. However, this adjustment enhances the study's emphasis on in-depth, qualitative exploration of facilitators' experiences. Future research could address several limitations of this study, particularly the absence of student perspectives, which leaves a gap in understanding how retreat participants perceive challenges related to the 'attention economy.' A more student-centered investigation could offer deeper insights into how attention-related interventions impact spiritual formation. Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaborations, such as those involving nutrition science (Evelyn et al., 2023), could enhance our understanding of attentional mechanisms in retreat settings. Interdisciplinary studies integrating insights from psychology, neuroscience, and education could provide a more nuanced understanding of attentional mechanisms in spiritual contexts. Investigating the long-term effects of attention-focused interventions on spiritual growth and well-being would also be valuable. Additionally, while this study primarily relied on data from a small sample size, the generated insights and the transparent methodology should validate the study. This should not diminish, however, the importance of future studies with larger, randomized samples that utilize statistical methods, such as correlation tests, to offer more comprehensive insights and generate new hypotheses, especially within science-based approaches to studying attention.

7. CONCLUSION

As the world continuously reshapes attentional capacities, individuals simultaneously contribute to this transformation by striving to maximize this increasingly *scarce resource*. To address the evolving challenges of the 'attention economy,' spiritual formation practices must adapt to remain relevant and impactful. Facilitators are encouraged to integrate strategies that foster sustained attentional engagement, such as designing retreats and recollections that incorporate interactive, reflective, and experiential activities tailored to participants' cognitive needs. Continuous professional development for facilitators is essential to equip them with tools and methodologies for managing attentional challenges effectively. Training programs should focus on enhancing skills in creating distraction-free environments, using technology judiciously to support engagement, and fostering mindfulness and contemplative practices.

Moreover, institutions offering spiritual formation programs should prioritize research on student perspectives and engagement patterns, ensuring that interventions are evidence-based and participant-centered. Collaboration with interdisciplinary fields, such as psychology and neuroscience, could yield innovative approaches to attention management. At the same time, partnerships with technology developers could explore tools that facilitate deeper spiritual engagement without contributing to distraction. Finally, future efforts should include expanding the diversity of participant groups and employing larger, randomized samples in studies to strengthen the generalizability of

findings. By addressing the challenges of the 'attention economy' through proactive and innovative strategies, spiritual formation programs can significantly enhance the holistic development of participants, empowering them to navigate modern distractions while cultivating more profound connections with their faith and purpose.

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