

How can YWAM better support Gen Z DTS students considering longer-term missions?

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Purpose Statement:

This research essay investigates what motivates and demotivates Gen Z from joining missions following a Discipleship Training School. One hundred and fifty-five DTS students participated in the survey. The essay goes on to make recommendations based on these findings to help people working alongside DTS students better support them in their decision-making process.

Summary of Findings:

The survey found that top motivators for Gen Z considering longer-term missions were calling, feeling uniquely useful, making a difference alongside inspiring leaders and being part of a passionate community. Top demotivators for Gen Z choosing longer-term missions were financial instability, decision-making anxiety, discouragement from others, and the desire for further education or a career.

Summary of Recommendations:

This article recommends a *personalized* approach towards supporting Gen-Zers considering missions. Gen Z will be highly motivated as authentic YWAM leaders help them see how *their* unique passions and giftings can impact global missions. The Gospel lenses of the 'abundant life' and 'courageous devotion' can encourage Gen Zers overcome financial insecurities. Finally, a passionate Christian community with inspiring role-models that see a move of God coming will highly motivate Gen Zers considering stepping into longer-term missions.

Please note that this article reflects my personal thoughts and convictions. It does not represent any official position held by Youth With A Mission.

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Foreword

For YWAM locations to flourish globally, discipling young people and mobilising those God is calling into longer-term missions will be essential. Young leaders are life-giving to any location as they bring faith, innovation and enthusiasm to better reach an ever-changing society. Championing youth to spearhead vision and ministry is a core value for YWAM. The gateway for multiplying future mission leaders is through the 5-month-long discipleship training schools. Thousands of young people worldwide choose a Discipleship Training School (DTS) to grow in their relationship with God and serve Him in the nations. The DTS equips students to serve God's purposes, whether in or outside of YWAM. It is our privilege to champion DTS students towards God's calling on their lives, wherever that might be. However, this project focuses on how to better mobilise DTS students considering longer-term missions.

Part 1: Understanding Gen Z

Introduction

This project seeks to understand how YWAM can better mobilise Gen Z-ers from the 5-month Discipleship Training School (DTS) into longer-term missions. Understanding the Gen Z underlying narrative is necessary to support them in their decision-making process better. Part one provides an ethnographic description based on current research on 'Who are Gen Z?'. Next, data is presented from a survey on what motivates and demotivates Gen Z DTS students choosing longer-term missions.

Who are Gen Z?

Brief Profile

Gen-Z were born between 1996 and 2010. They are the most technologically connected, individually driven and diverse generation to walk the planet. Gen-Z author Riya Goel confirms that his generation are creative, holistic, embracing of others and want to make a difference.¹ Gen-Z believes they can change the world, want to be heard, but are open to support from other generations.²

¹ Goel, R. (2021). *The Gen Z Book* (New Degree Press: Washington), 237-239

² *ibid*

Social-Media Consumers

Gen Z are the first generation to have never known a world without smartphones and social media.³ Since childhood, Gen Z has been connected globally at the touch of a screen. In 2020, the average Gen Z-er touched their smartphone 2,617 times a day.⁴ In 2018, according to Barna, 57% of teenagers used social media four or more hours a day. Colm Hebblethwaite found that Gen Z-ers spent an average of ten hours surfing the web daily.⁵ A quarter of Gen Z-ers says they constantly go online scrolling platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok. Connectivity often stretches into the night as 91% of Gen Z-ers report going to bed with their devices.⁶ Many have heard of the acronym FOMO, which stands for fear of missing out, but what about the acronym FOLO? It stands for fear of living offline.⁷

Individual and Authentic

Gen Z sees social media as a place to be yourself and display the authentic you.⁸ Jolene White notes, "Gen Z wears once unflattering terms like 'nerd' as a badge of honour".⁹ Observing the number of memes with the caption "That's so me" reveals a generation that wants to be valued for what makes them different.¹⁰ Based on this personalised approach to life, Jean Twenge believes that Gen Z would be better described as 'iGen'.¹¹ A Barna Group survey revealed that 56% of potential Gen Z missionaries feel that seeing themselves as helpful would increase their interest in cross-cultural missions.¹²

Stressed and Depressed

Trying to meet unrealistic social media expectations leaves Gen Z-ers stressed.¹³ Gen Z-ers are under constant pressure to keep up by filtering out their flaws to create the ideal online image. Since 2010, hospital admission for self-harm has been up 189% for ten to fourteen-year-olds. Suicide is also up 151% for the same age bracket.¹⁴ Research directly links an increasing mental health pandemic with the

³ McPeak, T. E. (2019). *Gen Z Unfiltered: Facing Nine Hidden Challenges of the Most Anxious Population*. (Alpharetta: Poet Gardner)

⁴ Zuckerman, A. (May 29, 2020). "109 Technology Addiction Statistics 2020/2021 (*CompareCampe*)

⁵ Colm Hebblethwaite. (February 9, 2018.). "Gen Z engaging with 10 hours of online content (*Marketing Tech*)

⁶ Lenhart, A. (2015, April 9). *Teens, Social Media, and Technology Overview* (*Pew Research Center*)

⁷ White, J. E. (2022). *Mobilising Gen Z: Challenges and Opportunities for the Global Age of Missions* (Pasadena: William Carey Publishing), 85

⁸ (Goel, 2021), 135

⁹ (White, 2022), 185

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Twenge, J. (2017). *iGen*. (New York: Atria Books)

¹² Group, B. (2020). *The Future of Missions*. (Ventura: Barna Group), 55

¹³ (Goel, 2021), 52-54

¹⁴ <https://right.ly/our-views-and-opinions/why-is-everyone-talking-about-netflixs-the-social-dilemma/>

introduction of smartphones and the popularisation of social media for teenagers. Twenge found that eighth graders spending ten or more hours a week on social media are 56% more likely to be unhappy and 27% more likely to be depressed.¹⁵ Students entering college in 2016 were 95% more likely than 2009 entrants to report feeling depressed.¹⁶ Gen Z uses social media like a digital pacifier, but this leaves them feeling depressed and lonely.¹⁷ Tim Elmore explains how Gen Z lives in a paradox. Their lives are easier to navigate technically but more challenging to navigate psychologically and emotionally.¹⁸

‘Safetyism’

Millennials grew up with a 'hero' or 'chase your dreams' mentality believing they could change the world and that anything was possible.¹⁹ Gen-Zers have grown up through a global economic crisis (2009) and a global pandemic (2020). They are now seeing major layoffs in the tech sector.²⁰ Gen Z has become more cautious and pragmatic towards life.²¹ Lukianoff and Haidt argue that a cultural belief has grown that young people are emotionally fragile and now have “an obsession with eliminating threats”.²² This mindset has been coined as ‘safetyism’.²³ Gen Z teens are less likely to go out without their parents, date, have sex, drive, work, or drink alcohol than their predecessors.²⁴ This generation values feeling safe on all levels – financially, socially, and emotionally.

Diversity Embracing

Gen-Z are more ethnically diverse and all-embracing than any other generation. A YouGov survey in the UK revealed that 49 percent of people between eighteen and twenty-four identified as something other than 100 percent heterosexual, even though only 4 percent of the population is homosexual.²⁵ Gen Z does not want to be labelled but rather seen as unique and diverse. A positive upside is that Gen Z more easily embraces people from all walks of life.

¹⁵ (Twenge, 2017), 100

¹⁶ (Twenge, 2017), 103

¹⁷ <https://www.cigna.com/assets/docs/newsroom/lone-ness-sur-vey-2018-fact-sheet.pdf>

¹⁸ (McPeak, 2019), 28

¹⁹ (White, 2022), 96

²⁰ June 13, 2023, “Layoffs are Changing Tech’s Once Invincible Job Market”, Bloomberg, Businessweek section.

²¹ (Twenge, 2017), 53

²² Lukianoff, G (2018) *The Coddling of the American Mind* (London: Penguin Press), 32

²³ *ibid*, 157

²⁴ *ibid*, 158

²⁵ Horton, H. (August 17, 2015). Nearly Half of Young People Don't Think they are Heterosexual. (*Telegraph*)

Part 2: Survey on Gen Z DTS Students

Survey Content

Following basic profile questions, respondents selected their top three motivators and demotivators for going into longer-term missions. One qualitative question at the end asked respondents what they thought would keep a Gen-Zer in missions for the *longer* long-term. One hundred and fifty-five Gen Z-ers filled out the survey. They wrote four thousand eight hundred words for the final qualitative question.

Respondents Profile

99% of respondents were Gen Z-ers, 60% of these were seventeen to twenty-three, and 40% were aged twenty-three to twenty-six. 96% of respondents were current or former DTS students. 59% chose longer-term missions, and 13% did not.²⁶ 29% of respondents were still considering longer-term missions – these were most likely current DTS students still undecided on a future in missions.

Top Motivators for Gen Z Choosing Longer-Term Missions

1. God's calling

The highest motivator for respondents choosing longer-term missions was by far God's calling (79%).

2. Feeling uniquely useful

The second and third highest motivators for respondents joining longer-term missions were growing in their faith and giftings (34%) and using their personality and talents for God (29%). Following 'calling', these were also the next top two motivators for respondents still undecided on going into missions (35% and 28%, respectively). These categories point to Gen-Z's desire to grow and be used in their unique talents and giftings. 56% of all respondents chose at least one of these two categories. Respondents wanted to "use our talents for God's glory", "be recognised for the impact we can make" and "be encouraged that God can use us".

3. Making a difference in the nations alongside inspiring leaders

26% of all respondents highlighted the desire to 'make a difference' as a top three motivator for choosing longer-term missions. Gen Z has faith this can happen as 19% are motivated to 'see a move of God'. 19%

²⁶ This figure reflects a survey mostly distributed within YWAM networks.

of all and 26% of undecided respondents wanted to 'see different nations'. 18% of all and 21% of undecided respondents were motivated to 'grow alongside inspiring leaders'.

4. Being part of a passionate community

17% of all and 21% of 'undecided' respondents included 'being part of a passionate Christian community' within their top three motivators for longer-term missions. Nineteen respondents mentioned community as a reason why they would remain in missions for the *longer* long term. Respondents desired an understanding, supportive, truthful, active, strong, godly, passionate, welcoming, encouraging, and challenging community with young people. Community was mentioned more times than 'calling' (which was cited eighteen times) as a reason to remain in '*longer*' long-term missions.

Top Demotivators for Gen Z choosing Longer-Term Missions

1. Financial Instability

57% of all respondents chose financial instability as a top-three demotivator for choosing longer-term missions. This was 32% higher than any other single category. Though much lower, financial instability was also the highest demotivator for undecided respondents choosing longer-term missions (33%).

2. Decision-Making Anxiety

Three high demotivators for respondents were 'fear of the unknown' (25%), 'being scared of making a wrong decision' (25%) and being 'uncertain it was God' (23%). These categories are grouped as they all convey anxiety over decision-making. 37% of undecided respondents selected at least one of these demotivators, and 23% selected two.

3. Discouragement from Others

25% of respondents cited discouragement from family, friends and church as a top three demotivator for longer-term missions. Barna Group found that only 35% of 'engaged' Christian parents in the USA would encourage their children to serve in missions.²⁷

²⁷ (Group, Generation Z: The culture, beliefs, and motivations shaping the next generation, 2018), 34

4. Education and Career

23% of respondents saw pursuing higher education as a top-three demotivator for missions. 17% of respondents desired to pursue another professional career. Of respondents that did not choose missions after their DTS, 53% wanted to pursue further education.

PART 3: CONTEXTUALISED PLAN

Research Overview

The research in part one reveals that Gen Z DTS students are talented, innovative, embracing of others, and ready to make a difference. Beyond a sense of God's calling, what motivates Gen Z into missions is knowing how their unique personality, giftings and talents can be part of a move of God. The survey also found students are motivated to grow alongside authentic and inspiring mission leaders and be part of a vibrant Christian community. Financial instability was the highest demotivator for Gen Z DTS students joining missions longer-term. Other high demotivators were anxiety in decision-making, discouragement from others and furthering their education.

Prayer and Guidance

A sense of calling to missions was the top motivator for Gen Z choosing longer-term missions. Jesus asked us to pray and ask God to send workers into the harvest (Matt 9.38, Luke 10.2). One strategy to mobilise longer-term missionaries will be to pray them into DTSs and onto longer-term missions afterwards. However, evidently, Gen Z does not find discerning God's calling on their lives easy. 23% of Gen Z DTS students are uncertain God is calling them, 25% fear making a mistake, and 25% fear the unknown of choosing missions. One way to support Gen Z-ers suffering from decision-making anxiety would be to help them see how *they* could fit into a mission's context.

Personalised Decision-Making

Gen Z DTS students want to make a difference (26%) but want to be shown how *they* can make a difference. The survey revealed that 34% are highly motivated to grow in *their* giftings and 29% to use *their* personality and talents in missions. Mobilising Gen Z-ers will be more effective if it is *them*-centred. Jesus modelled asking questions by doing it three hundred and seven times in his ministry.²⁸ Asking questions in a safe space to draw out what is 'within' a DTS student will help them see how their

²⁸ Copenhaver, M (2014) *Jesus is the Question* (Nashville, Abingdon Press)

passions and giftings could align with missions. As Katy White writes, instead of bluntly asking Gen Z, "Is God calling you to missions?", better questions are "What are *you* passionate about?" and "What talents and giftings do *you* have that you think God could use to further his purposes on earth?"²⁹ Gen Z are used to algorithms providing them content that meets their desires. Personalised questions relieve Gen Z from knowing if God is calling them by helping them see missions as a tailor-made fit.

Faith in Finances

Financial insecurity was the most selected demotivator for Gen Z DTS students going into longer-term missions. Over half of the respondents selected financial insecurity as a top three demotivator for longer-term missions. YWAM practices dependence on God for financial provision. Raising personal support may feel uncertain for a generation preferring safety. Firstly, YWAM could strengthen Biblical teaching on faith and finances and remind visiting speakers to include testimonies of God as a faithful provider (Phil 4.19, Matt 6.26, 2 Cor 8.1-9). Secondly, encouraging generosity in the community can help better support those in need (Acts 4.34-35). Thirdly, Gen Z is talented and innovative. Some DTS students may have the potential to creatively generate income in a way that does not conflict with their ministry.

Inspirational Role Models

Fear about making a mistake (25%) and fear of the unknown (25%) are two big barriers for DTS students choosing missions. In-person, open and authentic role models can help diffuse decision-making anxiety for Gen Z. Barna Group found that "a close relationship and regular interactions with a missionary will do more to rouse [people] for global ministry than just about anything else."³⁰ Our recent DTS students shared that their favourite teacher "did not have better content, but they hung out with us". The two characteristics they loved about that teacher were that they were 'joyful' and 'vulnerable'. The teacher was not their age; they were a Baby Boomer. The point is this, Gen Z values connection over content and wants to learn from older generations. Perhaps it is Gen Z's inclination towards 'safetyism' that causes them not to want to walk alone and feel unprotected. Gen Z wants to be accompanied. They want to grow alongside authentic, faith-filled older leaders (21%). Gen Z is looking for spiritual parents that will walk alongside them as Paul did his disciples (1 Thess 2.1-12). By doing this, leaders can narrow the 'fear gap' and help Gen Z-ers considering longer-term missions take a step of faith.

²⁹ White, J. E. (2022). *Mobilising Gen Z: Challenges and Opportunities for the Global Age of Missions* (Pasadena: William Carey Publishing), 156

³⁰ Group, B. (2020). *The Future of Missions*. (Ventura: Barna Group), 98

Authenticity and Unconditional Love

Current research reveals that social media is a direct source of mental and emotional strain on Gen Z. Relentless online comparisons produce FOMO in Gen Z.³¹ To keep up with others, Gen Z-ers curate multiple online personas to 'fit in' and increase their 'likes'. These pressures mean more Gen Z students are arriving with mental and emotional struggles. Special care will be required to help these students. However, these struggles may allow them to encounter Jesus more deeply. Authentic and unconditional love can help free these Gen Z-ers into their God-given calling.

Supportive Community

Gen Z is a lonely generation that lacks deep friendships, face-to-face interactions and community. 21% of undecided Gen Z-ers consider being part of a passionate Christian community a top three motivator for missions. Gen Z cited a supportive community more often than calling in their response to why they would remain in missions longer. Locations that foster a supportive and welcoming community have better probabilities of Gen Z choosing *and* remaining in longer-term missions.

'Move' over Vision

Gen Z is five times more likely to connect with 'seeing a move of God' (19%) than with an 'attractive vision' (4%). Perhaps this is because vision statements feel somewhat distant, top-down and impersonal. Gen Z prefers hearing about a move of God that feels more organic, dynamic, and people-orientated. The YWAM vision statement to 'know God and make him known' is powerful as it is broad and inclusive. Communicating what God is currently doing and what is coming will increase Gen Z's motivation to join arms with that vision.

Conclusion

The young people arriving on DTSs have already overcome many obstacles to get there. Many will develop a heart for the nations and missions during their DTS. They are perfectly positioned to make a difference and be part of a move of God in missions. Helping them choose missions will take prayer, a personalised approach, breathing faith into finance, inspiring role models and a supportive community.

³¹ FOMO: Fear of missing out.

Gospel Lenses

Introduction

'Courageous Devotion' and 'Abundant Life' are two gospel lenses that may encourage Gen Z-ers into longer-term missions.

Courageous Devotion

Gen Z needs a gospel that encourages them towards courageous devotion. In the story of Jesus being anointed by the woman, she leaves her comfort zone to enter a room full of rejection (Mk 14.1-11). For Gen Z living in an online world where you can be rejected and cancelled in a second, it is comforting to find Jesus embracing and defending her unconditionally. Jesus will never reject Gen Z-ers, no matter their past or the shame their addictions may bring. Jesus will not label any Gen Z-er unworthy that steps out of their comfort zone to risk it all for him. Gen Zers fearing making a mistake as they step into the unknown can be comforted that Jesus treasures risk-takers with courageous devotion.

The woman's courageous devotion is radical and complete. As she approaches Jesus, she breaks open her alabaster jar of expensive perfume and pours its entire contents at Jesus' feet. For those in the room, the woman had wasted her wealth. But Jesus is worthy of her sacrifice; she had done a beautiful thing in His eyes. Gen Z-ers can be inspired that, as with the woman, Jesus honours those that take risks and surrender all, including financial gain, out of love for Him. Christ displayed courageous devotion for Gen Z when he poured himself out on the cross for them. He did not hold back. Jesus counted the cost and paid the full price joyfully. A gospel lens of courageous devotion could inspire Gen Z to abandon 'safetyism', step into the risk zone and surrender all to Christ. There they will find no greater joy than being in the centre of God's will, for in Christ, there is always abundance of life.

Abundant Life

A gospel reframe of the 'abundant life' could release Gen Z-ers from fearing missing out and seeking security in finance. Jesus promised life in abundance (John 10.10), which in Greek refers to something that 'exceeds, is supreme to, more excellent, and better than anything we can imagine'. Jesus promises Gen Z that there is no need for FOMO in him. Jesus offers something beyond any Instagram, TikTok or Snapchat post. In an online frenzy of 'best moments', likes, food and appearances, Jesus gently leads Gen Z to a place of refuge and peace away from the noise. Jesus offers Gen Z a reframe of the 'abundant life'.

The abundant life that Christ offers does not depend on riches, material things, social popularity, lavish living, fashion, food, or your number of views. Christ, the Good Shepherd, wants to lead Gen Z to a place of refreshment and peace (Ps 23.1-4). Jesus invites Gen Z to lay down their emotional burdens and rest their weary souls as his yoke is easy and his burden light (Matt 11.28-30). The abundant life in Christ includes surrender (Mark 10.21), but the rewards outweigh the costs (Mark 8:34-38). Jesus offers Gen Z safety in his love and freedom from fear (Heb 13.5, 1 John 4.18). Gen Z-ers can trust God as a faithful provider (Matt 6.32), offering them life with meaning, joy and eternal reward (Matt 5.12, Rev 22.12). John Newton would encourage Gen Z-ers considering missions: "If the Lord be with you, you have no cause of fear. His eye is upon you, His arm over you, His ear open to your prayer – His grace sufficient."³² The abundant life in Christ may look different, but it is true life in its fullest form.

Conclusion

This subsection proposed 'Courageous Devotion' and 'Abundant Life' as contextualised gospel lenses appropriate to Gen Z.

Final Word

A Generation Worth Investing

Gen Z is the largest, most diverse, strongest multitasking, and most adaptable generation ever. They are ready to make a difference and play their part in a global move of God. We are privileged to prepare Gen Z to serve God, whether in the workplace or on global missions. I hope you, too, have been filled with hope to see the potential Gen Z DTS students have to be world-changers.

A Future Worth Modeling

If you are not a Gen Z-er, I want to highlight your important role in raising a generation. Where trust is built, Gen Z is glad to be inspired and learn from you. Gen Z-ers considering missions struggle with financial insecurity and decision-making anxiety. What an opportunity for those in longer-term missions to lead them towards 'Courageous Devotion' and model the 'Abundant Life' from the other side.

With love in Christ,

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³² Newton, J. (2015) *The Works of John Newton* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth), 272

About Luke Harniess:

Luke and his wife Christina have three boys (William, Zachary and Jacob) and have been serving in YWAM since the year 2000. They have pioneered multiple YWAM locations globally and contributed to various leadership structures. They are currently pioneering a new YWAM location in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



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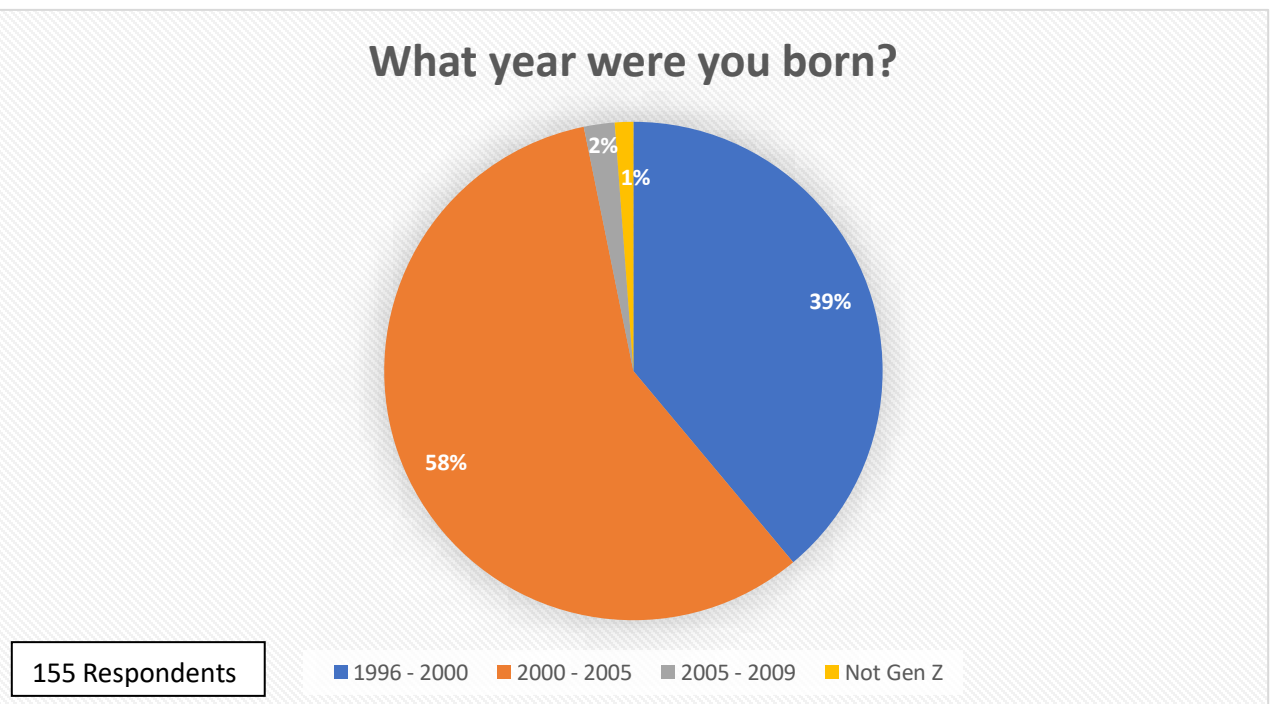
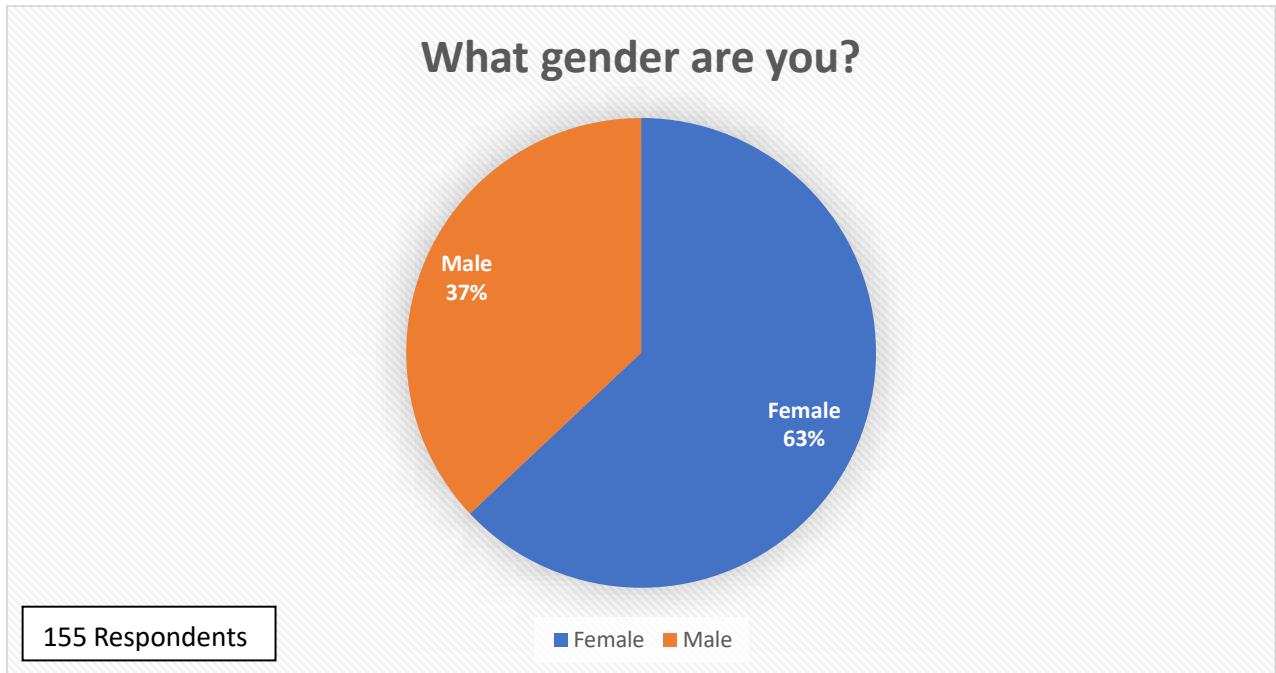
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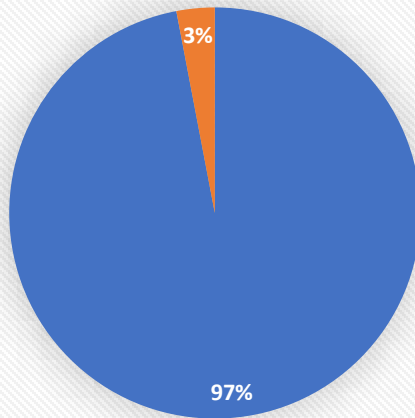
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APPENDIX:

Survey findings on factors affecting Gen Z DTS students choosing longer-term missions.



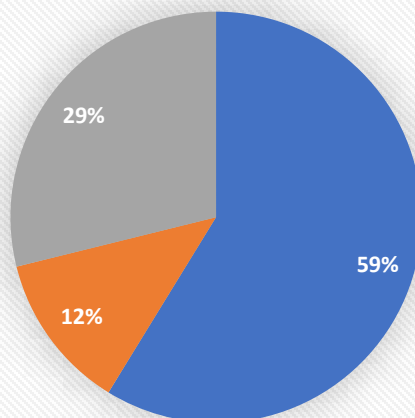
Have you ever done (or currently doing) a Discipleship Training School with YWAM?



155 Respondents

■ Yes ■ No

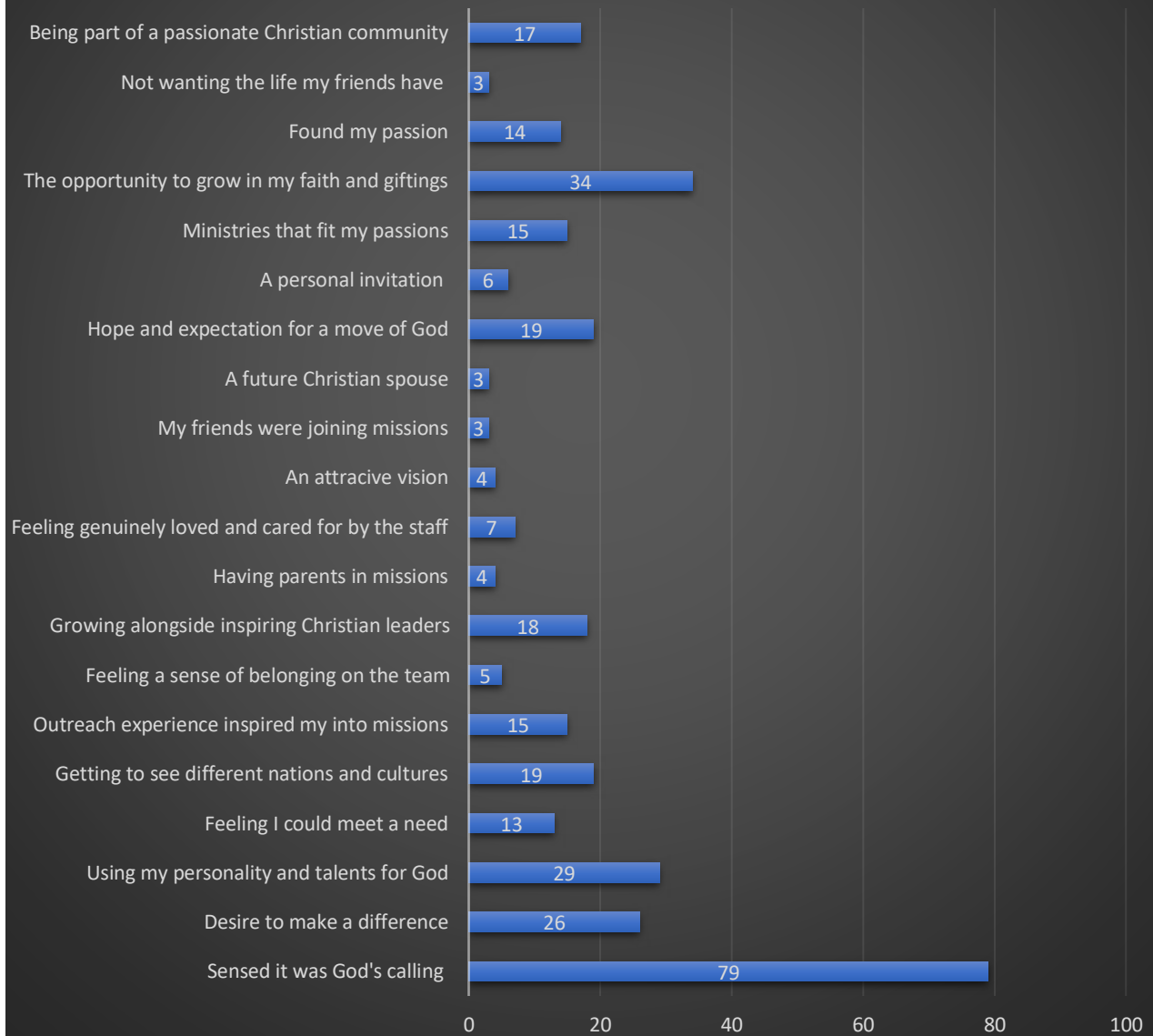
Did you choose longer-term missions after your DTS?



155 Respondents

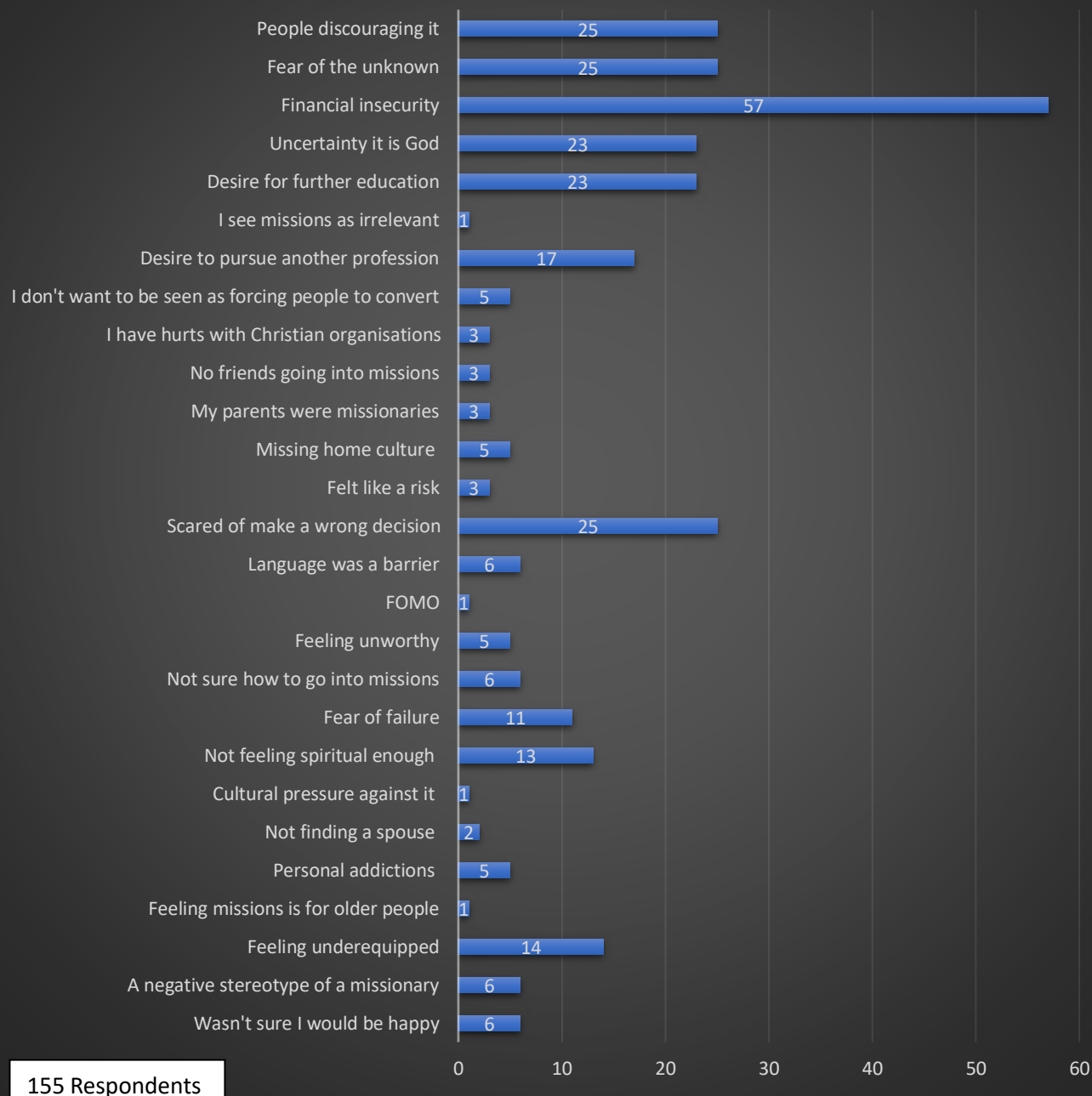
■ Yes ■ No ■ Undecided

Choose the **THREE** highest motivators for you considering joining a long-term missions team?
(EVEN if you NEVER joined)



155 Respondents

Choose the **THREE** highest de-motivators for you considering joining a longer-term missions group? (EVEN if you still JOINED)



Qualitative Question:

What do you think could keep a Gen Zer in missions for the *longer* long-term? (4800 words of feedback).