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STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR THE FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE INDIVIDUAL

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Abstract

The accelerating digitalization of social life has generated unprecedented demands on the psychological and moral capacities of individuals. While constructs such as digital literacy, media literacy, and digital ethics have addressed the competence and behavioral dimensions of digital engagement, they have largely neglected the deeper existential, meaning-making, and transcendent faculties that individuals deploy when navigating digital environments. This theoretical-conceptual article introduces and systematically develops the construct of digital spiritual intelligence (DSI)—defined as the individual's capacity to apply meaning-oriented, self-transcendent, and ethically reflective cognitive-affective processes to digital experience. Drawing on interdisciplinary synthesis from psychology, education, media psychology, and digital sociology, the article delineates DSI from adjacent constructs including spiritual intelligence, moral intelligence, digital literacy, media literacy, digital ethics, and psychological resilience. The socio-psychological mechanisms underlying the formation of DSI are analyzed through the lenses of self-determination theory, sociocultural theory, and moral identity theory. The article proposes an original multi-level conceptual model—the Integrative Ecological Model of Digital Spiritual Intelligence (IEM-DSI)—that identifies strategic directions for DSI development across personal, familial, educational, social, and institutional

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levels. The scientific novelty lies in the systematic conceptualization of a hitherto unarticulated construct at the intersection of spirituality and digitality, and in the provision of a theoretically grounded framework for empirical research and educational intervention. The practical significance extends to curriculum development, digital well-being policy, parenting guidance, and institutional design in an increasingly algorithmically mediated society.

Keywords: Digital spiritual intelligence, spiritual intelligence, digital literacy, media psychology, meaning-making, digital ethics, digital well-being, conceptual model, education, digital society.

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of contemporary society is not merely a technological phenomenon; it constitutes a civilizational restructuring of the conditions under which individuals construct meaning, relate to others, and orient themselves toward existential purpose (Floridi, 2014; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). The proliferation of digital platforms, algorithmic curation, immersive virtual environments, and artificial intelligence systems has created an ecology in which the individual's inner life—values, attention, identity, and sense of the sacred—is continuously solicited, fragmented, and reconstituted. This ecology demands not only informational competence or technical skill but also the capacity for reflective depth, ethical discernment, and existential coherence in digitally saturated conditions.

Existing theoretical and educational frameworks have responded to digitalization by elaborating constructs such as digital literacy (Gilster, 1997; Hague & Payton, 2010), media literacy (Potter, 2004; Hobbs, 2010), and digital ethics (Floridi, 2013; Vallor, 2016). Each of these captures important but partial dimensions of the individual's engagement with digital environments. Digital literacy addresses the skills for effective use; media literacy addresses critical interpretation; digital

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ethics addresses normative reasoning about technology-mediated conduct. Yet none of these constructs adequately addresses the deeper stratum of the individual's psychological life: the capacity for meaning-making, self-transcendence, and spiritually grounded reflection within and about digital experience.

Concurrently, the construct of spiritual intelligence (SI) has matured in psychological literature. Following foundational contributions by Emmons (2000), Zohar and Marshall (2000), and King (2008), SI has been conceptualized as the capacity to deploy spiritual resources—meaning, transcendence, heightened consciousness, sanctification of experience—in adaptive, problem-solving ways. Yet the literature on spiritual intelligence has developed almost entirely without reference to the digital context. This is a significant lacuna, because the digital environment poses distinctive challenges to precisely those capacities that SI describes: sustained attention is disrupted by notification architectures; meaning-making is complicated by information overload; ethical reflection is compressed by platform velocity; and self-transcendence competes with algorithmically reinforced narcissism (Twenge, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

The present article addresses this gap by introducing and theoretically developing the construct of digital spiritual intelligence (DSI). DSI is defined here as the individual's integrated capacity to engage in meaning-oriented, self-transcendent, and ethically reflective cognitive-affective processing within and in response to digital environments. The article pursues several objectives: (a) to establish the conceptual foundations and definitional boundaries of DSI; (b) to distinguish DSI from adjacent constructs while clarifying its relational structure; (c) to analyze the socio-psychological mechanisms of its formation; (d) to propose strategic directions for its development across multiple ecological levels; and (e) to present an original conceptual model that integrates these elements. The approach is theoretical-conceptual and interdisciplinary, drawing on psychology, social psychology, media psychology, education, and digital sociology.

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Spiritual Intelligence: Foundations and Limits

The notion that spirituality involves a form of intelligence was given systematic expression by Emmons (2000), who proposed five components: the capacity for transcendence, the ability to enter heightened spiritual states, the ability to invest everyday activities and relationships with a sense of the sacred, the ability to use spiritual resources to solve problems, and the capacity to be virtuous. Zohar and Marshall (2000) advanced a complementary framework grounding spiritual intelligence in the brain's integrative oscillations, arguing that SI enables individuals to address questions of meaning and value. King (2008) operationalized the construct through the Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SISRI-24), identifying four factors: critical existential thinking, personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and conscious state expansion.

Subsequent empirical work has associated SI with psychological well-being (Rooney & McKenna, 2008), adaptive coping (Mahmood et al., 2018), ethical leadership (Fry, 2003), and educational engagement (Sisk, 2016). However, the literature remains notable for its near-total absence of attention to the digital context. The environments in which contemporary individuals exercise meaning-making and transcendence have fundamentally changed, yet the theorization of SI has proceeded as if the medium of experience were irrelevant.

2.2 Digital Literacy and Media Literacy: Competence Without Depth

Digital literacy, as originally proposed by Gilster (1997) and subsequently elaborated by numerous scholars (e.g., Eshet-Alkalai, 2004; Hague & Payton, 2010), encompasses the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for effective participation in digital environments. Frameworks such as the European DigComp (Carretero et al., 2017) have codified these competencies across

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domains including information processing, communication, content creation, safety, and problem solving.

Media literacy extends this by emphasizing critical engagement with media messages, including the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using media in various forms (Hobbs, 2010; Potter, 2004). Both constructs have proven productive for educational practice and policy. Yet both remain fundamentally competence-oriented: they address what the individual can do and can critically assess in digital environments but not who the individual is becoming through digital engagement, nor how the individual sustains existential coherence, ethical depth, or spiritual sensitivity in these conditions.

2.3 Digital Ethics and Moral Intelligence

Digital ethics has emerged as a vibrant interdisciplinary field addressing the normative dimensions of technological development and use (Floridi, 2013; Vallor, 2016). Shannon Vallor's (2016) techno-moral virtue framework is particularly relevant, as it extends classical virtue ethics to the digital age and identifies virtues such as technomoral wisdom, self-control, empathy, and flexibility. Moral intelligence, as conceptualized by Borba (2001) and Lennick and Kiel (2011), similarly addresses the capacity for ethical reasoning and moral conduct.

These frameworks make important contributions but remain bounded by the ethical-normative domain. They do not systematically address the transcendent, meaning-making, and existential dimensions that constitute the spiritual stratum of psychological life. An individual may be digitally ethical without being digitally spiritually intelligent; the latter requires not only normative conduct but also the deeper capacity to locate digital experience within a framework of existential meaning and self-transcendence.

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2.4 Psychological Resilience in Digital Contexts

Psychological resilience—the capacity to maintain adaptive functioning in the face of adversity (Masten, 2001)—has been increasingly studied in digital contexts, particularly in relation to cyberbullying, online harassment, social comparison, and digital addiction (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017). While resilience is an important component of adaptive digital engagement, it is conceptually narrower than DSI. Resilience addresses the individual's capacity to withstand digital adversity; DSI addresses the individual's capacity to transform digital experience through meaning, purpose, and transcendence. The relationship is integrative rather than synonymous: resilience serves as a protective substrate upon which DSI builds its higher-order functions.

2.5 Identifying the Research Gap

The foregoing review reveals a structured absence in the literature. Spiritual intelligence theory does not account for the digital context. Digital literacy and media literacy do not address the spiritual-existential dimension. Digital ethics captures normative but not transcendent capacities. Psychological resilience addresses defense but not transformation. There is, accordingly, no existing construct that integrates the meaning-making, self-transcendent, and ethically reflective capacities of the individual specifically as they operate within and in response to digital environments. The construct of digital spiritual intelligence is proposed to fill this gap.

3. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

3.1 Methodological Approach

This article adopts a theoretical-conceptual methodology, following the tradition of construct development in psychology and education (Podsakoff et al., 2016). The approach involves (a) systematic analysis of adjacent constructs, (b) identification of conceptual boundaries and overlaps, (c) synthesis of relevant

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theoretical mechanisms, and (d) model construction through integrative reasoning. The epistemic orientation is interdisciplinary, combining insights from developmental psychology, social psychology, media psychology, educational theory, moral psychology, and digital sociology.

3.2 Theoretical Lenses

Three theoretical frameworks provide the principal lenses for analyzing the mechanisms of DSI formation:

Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Deci and Ryan's (2000) theory posits that psychological health depends on the satisfaction of three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the digital context, these needs are both facilitated and undermined by platform design. DSI involves the capacity to protect and actualize autonomy, competence, and relatedness in digitally mediated conditions—resisting algorithmic heteronomy, cultivating genuine competence rather than performative metrics, and sustaining authentic relatedness amid parasocial and superficial connectivity.

Sociocultural Theory. Vygotsky's (1978) framework, as extended by Wertsch (1991) and Lantolf (2000), emphasizes that higher psychological functions are socially mediated and culturally situated. Digital environments constitute a new stratum of mediating artifacts and cultural practices. DSI, from this perspective, is not simply an intrapsychic capacity but is co-constructed through digitally mediated social interaction, scaffolded by culturally available spiritual and reflective resources, and shaped by the affordances and constraints of digital tools.

Moral Identity Theory. Blasi's (1984) self-model of moral functioning, further developed by Hardy and Carlo (2011), posits that moral behavior depends on the centrality of moral concerns to the individual's self-concept. Extending this to

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DSI, the formation of digital spiritual intelligence involves the progressive integration of spiritual and ethical commitments into the individual's digital identity—the self as it is experienced and enacted online.

4. Main Analytical Section

4.1 Defining Digital Spiritual Intelligence

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, digital spiritual intelligence is defined as follows:

Digital spiritual intelligence (DSI) is the individual's integrated capacity to engage in meaning-oriented, self-transcendent, and ethically reflective cognitive-affective processing within and in response to digital environments, enabling the purposeful navigation of digital experience in ways that sustain existential coherence, promote moral depth, foster genuine connection, and resist the fragmenting, commodifying, and dehumanizing tendencies of digital ecosystems.

This definition encompasses several constituent capacities:

1. Digital existential reflection: the ability to critically examine one's digital experience in relation to life purpose, values, and the human condition.

2. Digital meaning-making: the capacity to generate and sustain a sense of meaning and significance through and despite digital mediation.

3. Digital self-transcendence: the ability to move beyond ego-centric and metric-driven orientations in digital spaces toward authentic concern for others, collective well-being, and higher purposes.

4. Digital ethical discernment: the capacity for nuanced moral reasoning about the complex ethical dilemmas characteristic of digital environments (privacy, attention, manipulation, representation).

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5. Digital contemplative awareness: the ability to maintain mindful, non-reactive, and reflective awareness in fast-moving, attention-competitive digital environments.

6. Digital relational depth: the capacity to cultivate genuine, empathic, and spiritually meaningful relationships through digital media.

4.2 Distinguishing DSI from Adjacent Constructs

DSI and Spiritual Intelligence. SI provides the broader psychological substrate; DSI specifies its deployment in digital contexts. The relationship is analogous to that between general intelligence and domain-specific intelligence: DSI inherits the core capacities of SI but requires their adaptation to the unique affordances, constraints, and pathologies of digital environments. An individual with high SI may nonetheless exhibit low DSI if unable to transfer meaning-making and transcendence capacities to digital experience.

DSI and Digital Literacy. Digital literacy addresses competence; DSI addresses depth. Digital literacy enables effective use of digital tools; DSI enables wise, meaningful, and spiritually grounded use. The constructs are complementary but non-reducible: digital literacy is a necessary but insufficient condition for DSI.

DSI and Media Literacy. Media literacy overlaps with DSI in the domain of critical evaluation but does not extend to existential reflection, meaning-making, or self-transcendence. A media-literate individual may critically decode a manipulative algorithm without being moved to reflect on what the experience means for human dignity or existential purpose.

DSI and Digital Ethics. Digital ethics addresses the normative dimension of digital conduct. DSI incorporates ethical discernment as one component but extends beyond it to include meaning, transcendence, and contemplative

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awareness. One can be digitally ethical without being spiritually engaged; DSI requires both.

DSI and Psychological Resilience. Resilience addresses the capacity to withstand adversity; DSI addresses the capacity to transform experience. Resilience is protective; DSI is generative. DSI subsumes a resilient orientation but adds the dimensions of purpose, meaning, and spiritual growth.

4.3 Socio-Psychological Mechanisms of DSI Formation

The formation of DSI is theorized to proceed through several interrelated socio-psychological mechanisms:

Reflective internalization. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) concept of internalization and Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, DSI develops as individuals internalize externally scaffolded reflective practices into autonomous inner capacities. A child who is guided by a parent to reflect on the meaning of a digital encounter gradually internalizes this reflective capacity. An adolescent who participates in classroom discussions about digital ethics and purpose develops internal dialogical structures for independent existential reasoning.

Moral-spiritual identity integration. Following Blasi (1984) and Damon and Hart (1988), DSI formation involves the progressive centrality of spiritual and moral commitments within the individual's digital self-concept. As individuals come to view their online selves as continuous with their deeper values and existential commitments, they become more likely to act in spiritually intelligent ways online.

Autonomous motivation and need satisfaction. From the standpoint of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), DSI develops when individuals' basic psychological needs

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are met in digital contexts in ways that support intrinsic motivation for meaning-seeking and self-transcendence, rather than extrinsic, metric-driven engagement. Educational and institutional environments that support digital autonomy, competence, and relatedness create conditions conducive to DSI.

Contemplative capacity development. Empirical evidence supports the role of mindfulness and contemplative practices in developing attentional control, emotional regulation, and meta-cognitive awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Brown et al., 2007). These capacities are foundational for DSI, as they enable the individual to resist the attentional capture and emotional reactivity characteristic of many digital environments.

Narrative identity construction. McAdams's (2001) narrative identity framework suggests that individuals construct identity through the creation of integrative life stories. DSI involves the incorporation of digital experiences into a coherent narrative that sustains existential meaning. When digital experiences are fragmented and unintegrated—as is often the case in algorithmic media consumption—narrative identity is undermined, and DSI is correspondingly weakened.

4.4 Strategic Directions for DSI Development

The development of DSI requires coordinated intervention across multiple ecological levels. Following Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, the following multi-level strategic directions are proposed.

4.4.1 Personal Level

At the individual level, DSI development involves the cultivation of intrapersonal practices and dispositions. These include digital contemplative practice—regular engagement in mindfulness-based practices adapted for digital contexts,

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including deliberate attention to one's inner states during and after digital interaction, digital sabbaths, and contemplative pauses before online engagement (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). They also include existential journaling and digital self-audit—structured self-reflective practices in which individuals examine their digital habits, the emotional and existential quality of their online experience, and the alignment between their digital behavior and deeper values (Frankl, 1985). Finally, intentional digital curation—the deliberate selection of digital content, communities, and platforms that support meaning, growth, and genuine connection rather than distraction, comparison, or nihilism—constitutes the exercise of spiritual agency in the digital ecosystem.

4.4.2 Family Level

The family is the primary context for the formation of DSI in childhood and adolescence. Guided digital co-engagement involves parents and caregivers engaging with children in shared digital activities accompanied by reflective dialogue about meaning, values, and purpose, extending the concept of parental mediation (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008) into the spiritual-existential domain. Family digital rituals—regular family practices around digital use such as shared discussion of online experiences and the creation of technology-free sacred spaces—reinforce the spiritual dimension of digital life. Modeling of digital spiritual intelligence by parents, demonstrating reflective, purposeful, and ethically grounded digital engagement, serves as a primary mechanism of observational learning (Bandura, 1986).

4.4.3 Educational Level

Educational institutions are critical sites for systematic DSI development. Curricular integration involves incorporating DSI-relevant content into existing curricula as a transversal competence woven into ethics, social studies, literature, philosophy, psychology, and information technology education. Pedagogical

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innovation entails the use of dialogical, problem-based, and experiential pedagogies that invite students to engage with digital-ethical-existential dilemmas. Teacher formation requires that educators receive preparation for DSI-related instruction, including modules on digital well-being, spiritual dimensions of technology use, and reflective facilitation skills.

4.4.4 Social-Community Level

Broader social and community structures shape the conditions for DSI development. Community-based digital wisdom circles hosted by faith communities and civic organizations can create spaces for intergenerational dialogue about meaning and technology. Public media and cultural production—documentaries, podcasts, public intellectual discourse—that addresses the spiritual and existential dimensions of digital life with intellectual seriousness can counteract the trivialization of these concerns. Peer support and mentoring networks provide communities of practice in which individuals share strategies for meaningful and spiritually grounded digital engagement.

4.4.5 Institutional and Policy Level

Institutional and policy frameworks create the macro-level conditions for DSI. Regulatory design—policies mandating transparency in algorithmic systems, protecting attentional autonomy, and supporting digital well-being—creates structural conditions conducive to DSI. Institutional digital well-being standards can protect not only safety and privacy but also attentional health, relational depth, and meaning-supportive design. Research infrastructure, including funding for interdisciplinary research on DSI, the development of psychometrically valid measurement instruments, and longitudinal intervention studies, is essential for advancing the field.

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5. Author's Conceptual Model:

The Integrative Ecological Model of Digital Spiritual Intelligence (IEM-DSI)

5.1 Core Architecture

The Integrative Ecological Model of Digital Spiritual Intelligence (IEM-DSI) synthesizes the foregoing analysis into a coherent theoretical framework organized around three concentric layers and one dynamic axis.

Layer 1: Intrapersonal Core. At the center of the model are the six constituent capacities of DSI: digital existential reflection, digital meaning-making, digital self-transcendence, digital ethical discernment, digital contemplative awareness, and digital relational depth. These capacities interact dynamically and are mutually reinforcing.

Layer 2: Socio-Psychological Mechanisms. Surrounding the intrapersonal core are the five mechanisms of DSI formation: reflective internalization, moral-spiritual identity integration, autonomous motivation and need satisfaction, contemplative capacity development, and narrative identity construction. These mechanisms describe the processes through which the core capacities are formed and strengthened.

Layer 3: Ecological Contexts. The outermost layer comprises the five ecological levels of strategic intervention: personal, familial, educational, social-community, and institutional-policy. These contexts constitute the environments that support or hinder DSI development.

Dynamic Axis: Digital Environment Affordances and Pressures. Cutting across all three layers is the dynamic axis of the digital environment itself—its affordances (connectivity, access to knowledge, creative tools) and its pressures (algorithmic manipulation, attention capture, commodification of identity,

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informational overload). DSI is exercised in the continuous negotiation between the individual's spiritual-existential capacities and the structuring forces of the digital environment.

5.2 Functional Dynamics of the Model

The model operates through bidirectional influence across layers. Ecological contexts shape the mechanisms of formation, which in turn develop the core capacities. Conversely, individuals with developed core capacities reshape their ecological contexts through advocacy, modeling, and community building. The digital environment axis modulates all interactions: as digital environments evolve—toward greater algorithmic control, greater immersive capacity, or greater AI mediation—the demands on DSI change, requiring ongoing adaptation of both individual capacities and contextual supports.

5.3 Developmental Trajectory

The model implies a developmental trajectory from externally scaffolded, context-dependent DSI (in childhood and early adolescence, primarily mediated by family and education) toward internally regulated, context-flexible DSI (in late adolescence and adulthood, characterized by autonomous meaning-making and self-transcendence in diverse digital contexts). This trajectory parallels established developmental progressions in moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984), identity formation (Erikson, 1968), and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

The construct of digital spiritual intelligence and the IEM-DSI model make several contributions to existing scholarship. First, they address a documented gap at the intersection of spiritual intelligence theory and digital society research. While scholars have separately advanced understanding of spiritual capacities

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and digital competencies, the present article provides the first systematic integration of these domains. Second, the multi-level ecological approach avoids the reductionism of purely individualistic accounts of digital well-being, situating the individual's spiritual-digital capacities within the social, cultural, and institutional conditions that shape them. Third, the identification of specific socio-psychological mechanisms provides a theoretically grounded account of how DSI develops, not merely what it is.

6.2 Relation to Existing Frameworks

The IEM-DSI model extends rather than replaces existing frameworks. It builds upon King's (2008) operationalization of spiritual intelligence by specifying its digital-contextual dimensions. It extends Vallor's (2016) techno-moral virtues by incorporating the transcendent and existential capacities that virtue ethics alone does not fully capture. It complements Hobbs's (2010) media literacy framework by adding the spiritual-existential layer that media literacy lacks. In each case, the contribution is additive and integrative rather than antagonistic.

6.3 Potential Criticisms and Responses

Several potential objections warrant anticipatory response. First, the concern that "spirituality" introduces religious bias: the construct of DSI, like SI before it, employs "spiritual" in its broader psychological sense—pertaining to meaning, transcendence, and existential purpose—without commitment to any specific religious tradition. The construct is intended to be culturally inclusive. Second, the concern that DSI conflates distinct phenomena: the article has taken care to delineate DSI from adjacent constructs and to specify its unique conceptual territory. Third, the concern that a theoretical-conceptual article lacks empirical grounding: this is acknowledged as a limitation and a call for subsequent empirical work, including instrument development and validation.

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6.4 Implications for Research

The IEM-DSI model generates testable propositions. For example: individuals with higher DSI should exhibit greater well-being, more ethical digital behavior, and more resilient identity integration in digital contexts. Family environments characterized by guided digital co-engagement and reflective dialogue should produce higher DSI in children. Educational programs incorporating existential-reflective pedagogies should increase DSI more effectively than programs focused solely on digital literacy. These propositions invite operationalization through scale development—potentially extending King's (2008) SISRI-24 or constructing a new measure—and empirical testing through cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental designs.

6.5 Limitations

This article is a theoretical-conceptual contribution and does not include empirical data. The construct of DSI, while theoretically grounded, requires psychometric operationalization and empirical validation. The model's multi-level structure, while conceptually comprehensive, poses challenges for parsimonious empirical testing. Furthermore, the cultural generalizability of the construct requires investigation across diverse societal contexts.

7. Conclusion

The digital transformation of contemporary society has created a profound need for psychological constructs that capture the deeper dimensions of human engagement with technology. Digital spiritual intelligence—the integrated capacity for meaning-oriented, self-transcendent, and ethically reflective processing in digital environments—addresses this need by bridging the gap between spiritual intelligence theory and digital society research. The construct is distinct from yet relationally connected to spiritual intelligence, digital literacy,

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media literacy, digital ethics, moral intelligence, and psychological resilience, occupying a unique conceptual space at their intersection.

The Integrative Ecological Model of Digital Spiritual Intelligence (IEM-DSI) provides a multi-level framework for understanding how DSI is formed and how it can be strategically developed across personal, familial, educational, social, and institutional contexts. The model's identification of specific socio-psychological mechanisms offers a theoretically grounded account of DSI development that can guide both research and practice.

The scientific novelty of this article lies in three contributions: (a) the first systematic conceptualization and definition of digital spiritual intelligence as a distinct psychological construct; (b) the identification of socio-psychological mechanisms specific to its formation; and (c) the development of an original multi-level ecological model that integrates individual capacities, formation processes, and contextual conditions. The practical significance extends to curriculum design, parenting education, organizational policy, digital well-being practice, and the broader project of ensuring that the digital transformation of society does not proceed at the expense of the individual's deepest capacities for meaning, connection, and transcendence.

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