

A dark grey circle with a thin gold outline, positioned in the upper right area of the dark blue background.

Spiritual Meaning-Making and Validation

in the Context of Digital Influence

Ashley Arthur

Franklin University Switzerland

PSY 496: Senior Capstone

Supervisor: Prof. Heidi Toivonen, PhD

May 2026



Overview

01

Background and Literature

02

Research Questions

03

Methods

04

Findings: Five Themes

05

Discussion

Research Questions

RQ 1

How do individuals interpret and validate difficult-to-explain spiritual experiences?



RQ 2

How do individuals negotiate the role of digital spaces in their spiritual experiences?

Methods

10

Participants

30

Minute Interviews

5

Themes Identified

Design

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews

Sampling

Purposive snowball via personal network and faculty referrals

Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Five Themes

1 Personal Belief Systems

2 Scientific and Rational Framing

3 Selective Digital Use

4 Authenticity Tensions

5 Embodied Validation

Personal Belief Systems

01

Interpretation was anchored internally, not through digital content

"My own religious beliefs and faith since I was a child"

P9

"I prefer to turn inward through yoga and self-reflection"

P10

Digital exposure prompted curiosity but did not replace personal interpretation

Scientific and Rational Framing

02

Science and spirituality were drawn on side by side

Concepts like quantum physics and energy made experiences feel coherent

"You can find meaning in everything if you really want to"

P10

Scientific language served to legitimize belief without abandoning rationality

Selective Digital Use

03

A clear line was held between encountering ideas and adopting them

Apps were used as prompts for reflection, not as belief systems

"I engage with zodiac content, but not in a serious manner"

P10

Online content served as exposure, not as authority

Authenticity Tensions

04

Digital spirituality was perceived as trend-driven and commodified

"It has become a trend"

P10

"Digital content becomes white noise"

P8

Participants felt something essential is lost when spirituality becomes a product

Embodied Validation

05

Offline, lived experience was the most meaningful source of validation

"Online feels less real. In person you can feel more"

P8

"To become more spiritual: go on a walk, not online"

P10

Embodied presence carried a certainty that digital content could not replicate

Discussion

Internally guided

Meaning-making is anchored in personal history and reflection, not external authority

Flexible coherence

People shift situationally between spiritual, rational, and experiential frames

Exposure versus belief

Digital content can open a door, but validation is constructed through internal understanding

Embodied anchoring

Lived, sensory experience carries a certainty that digital mediation cannot replicate

CONCLUSION

Meaning-making is internal, embodied, and flexible.

- Digital spaces expose, they do not validate
- Authenticity is tied to depth and lived presence
- Holding ambiguity without resolving it is the key

References

- Braud, W. G. (2002). Thoughts on the ineffability of the mystical experience. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 12(3), 141–160.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Hussain, T., & Wang, D. (2024). Social media and the spiritual journey: The place of digital technology in enriching the experience. *Religions*, 15(5), 616.
- Jackelén, A. (2021). Technology, theology, and spirituality in the digital age. *Zygon*, 56, 6–18.
- Kala, P., Kala, S., & Gautam, A. (2025). Importance of spirituality in human lives: A modern-day approach. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 2(5), 2160–2164.
- Mattis, J. S. (2002). Religion and spirituality in the meaning-making and coping experiences of African American women: A qualitative analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26, 309–321.
- Rabeyron, T., & Loose, T. (2015). Anomalous experiences, trauma, and symbolization processes at the frontiers between psychoanalysis and cognitive neurosciences. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 1381.
- Steffen, E., & Coyle, A. (2011). Sense of presence experiences and meaning-making in bereavement: A qualitative analysis. *Death Studies*, 35(7), 579–609.
- Wortmann, J. H., & Park, C. L. (2009). Religion/spirituality and change in meaning after bereavement: Qualitative evidence for the meaning making model. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 14(1), 17–34.

Thank You

Questions and Discussion

Ashley Monique Arthur Salceda

Franklin University Switzerland

PSY 496: Senior Capstone in Psychology

Supervisor: Prof. Heidi Toivonen, PhD

May 2026

