

CYBERSPIRITUALITY: A NEW FORM OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE AND EXISTENTIAL PRESENCE IN THE DIGITAL REALM

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Abstract

The intensified use of technology has enabled religion and spirituality to establish a presence in the digital sphere through shifting the location of their enactment. Both religion and spirituality have undergone rapid transformations, particularly in the digital world. Religion and spirituality, which have sometimes been used interchangeably but were also occasionally treated as opposites before the advent of the digital world, have diverged from each other under the influence of postmodernism, globalization, secularization, new forms of belief, new religious trends, and New Age movements. With the introduction of social media applications, artificial intelligence, the metaverse, and transhumanism into our lives, the conceptual confusion between religion and spirituality has become more visible in the digital world. Religion and spirituality appear on the internet with concepts such as digital religion, virtual religion, e-religion, cyber religion,

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techno religion, digital spirituality, techno spirituality, cyberspirituality, cyberspace spirituality, and virtual spirituality. This study investigates whether the concept of cyberspirituality can be regarded as an independent category that clarifies the conceptual overlap between religion and spirituality within digital environments. Through a literature-based conceptual analysis, the definition of cyberspirituality, its relationship with spirituality, and its presence in digital religion research are explored in this article. It argues that cyberspirituality may serve as an alternative form of spirituality, specifically tailored to online contexts, and evaluates its distinct features in comparison with traditional understandings of spirituality.

Key Words: Psychology of religion, spirituality, internet, cyberspirituality, digital religion

Introduction

Due to globalization, secularization, and postmodernism, the scope of concepts related to religiosity and spirituality in the literature has undergone significant changes. The concepts of religiosity and spirituality, which we examined as encompassing and inclusive of each other, have become separated because of these effects. This separation process has led to the renaming of the psychology of religion to psychology of religion and spirituality by the American Psychological Association (Pargament, 1999, 3-16; Köse - Ayten, 2012, 107). In the 1980s and afterward, new forms of belief, religious tendencies, and New Age movements also opened a new field for spirituality. The increasing number of publications centered on the concept of spirituality has increased interest in this concept within the field of the psychology of religion (Emmons - Paloutzian, 2003, 377-402; Düzgüner, 2021, 25-75).

Alternative forms of spirituality have become increasingly visible in various aspects of life. The concept of spirituality, which was first considered an alternative form of spiritual care, spiritual counseling, etc., in the field of health by associating it with well-being and spiritual coping (Koenig, 2016, 15-29), later gained visibility with alternative forms in many different fields, such as business, education, and technology. Spiritual care, spiritual guidance, and counseling practices have been studied in hospitals, prisons, nursery schools, and nursing homes (Altaş, 1999; Ağılkaya Şahin, 2016; Ayten, 2020). Moreover, spirituality in the workplace in the field of business economy

(Giacalone - Jurkiewicz, 2003; Seyyar, 2009; Çakır Berzah - Çakır, 2015; Karagöz, 2023) and spiritual intelligence as a type of intelligence in the field of education (Emmons, 2000; Amram, 2007; Ronel - Gan, 2008; Şengül, 2025) are examples of alternative forms of using spirituality in such studies. This study examines an alternative form of spirituality that has emerged within the realm of technology. Specifically, the research explores cyberspirituality, a distinct mode of spiritual practice and experience that has developed in the digital environment.

The aim of this research is to introduce the concept of cyberspirituality into the Turkish language through a terminological and conceptual analysis of cyberspirituality. Through a review of the literature, this study examines the role of the concept of cyberspirituality in the literature and explores its similarities and differences with traditional spirituality. A nomenclature is proposed for the relationship between technology and spirituality.

1. Cyberspirituality: A Conceptual Analysis

In English literature, concepts such as cyber, online, digital, virtual, and techno articulate the nexus between the internet and spirituality. Among these concepts, the term “online” is the sole exception, as it does not serve as a direct nomenclature when the literature is searched using the phrase “internet and spirituality”. Although the concept of online is not a direct nomenclature, it is used in this context in almost every work on the relationship between the internet and spirituality. The concepts of cyberspirituality (George, 2003; Tobin, 2004; Campbell, 2005; Jackelen, 2005; McDonald, 2006; Hackett, 2006; Yust et al., 2010; Bertolotti - Cinerari, 2012; Zugermayr, 2013; Sokolow, 2014; Gálik, 2015; Servais, 2015; Eresso, 2015; Atalay et al., 2023; Magerstädt, 2024), digital spirituality (Lee, 2006), virtual spirituality (Dangwal - Singh, 2012; Ryan, 2012), and techno-spirituality (Garner, 2003) are the terms employed to describe this relationship.

In the Turkish literature, no study has examined the relationship between internet and spirituality in a conceptual dimension, and no such translation exists (*siber maneviyat*). By reviewing the studies in the literature, it was deemed preferable to translate the concept of cyberspirituality into Turkish to express the relationship between the internet and spirituality. The most commonly used concept to describe the relationship in question is cyberspirituality. This method has been

followed to preserve the terminological expression and prevent a narrowing of meaning. Other concepts can also be used in place of the term “cyber”, but the fact that cyberspirituality is the most commonly used term in Western literature has led to a preference for it. The reason for not preferring the concept of virtual, which is more widely used in our language instead of cyber, is the idea that the part of the definition of virtual that emphasizes “not existing in reality” narrows the boundaries of the relationship between the internet and spirituality. The reason for this is that people may not believe that the spirituality experienced or practiced on the internet is limited to online spaces. In his study on religion in cyberspace, Dereli notes that the concept of virtual was initially employed in early studies. Nevertheless, it was gradually replaced by the concepts of cyber and digital (2018, 111-113). Therefore, when the forms of spirituality emerging in the virtual world are referred to, it seems appropriate to use the term cyberspirituality for conceptual continuity and consistency with the literature.

Cyberspirituality refers to the relationship between computer culture and spirituality. Studies on cyberspirituality have revealed that not all have included a definition of what cyberspirituality is. However, the concept of cyberspirituality was mentioned in all the studies. Definitions were provided by those who offered them, and an effort was made to understand what cyberspirituality meant on the basis of the content of other studies. Before moving on to the definitions of cyberspirituality, it is important to clarify the boundaries of how spirituality is defined in these studies. In the context of cyberspirituality, spirituality encompasses both religion and religiosity, as well as nonreligious or secular spirituality. This concept can include both traditional belief systems and a perception of spirituality that is entirely outside of belief systems. A belief, object, phenomenon, or concept that is sacred or ascribed sacredness in the eyes of the individual and society can be included within the spiritual boundaries of cyberspirituality.

Having defined the considerations of spirituality, it becomes feasible to discuss the concept of cyberspirituality. There are very few studies on cyberspirituality that offer a definitional framework. To view the definitions together, since there is no existing study in the field, all the definitions in question have been compiled in a table that includes

definitions taken from studies where the concept of cyberspirituality is mentioned in the title and content below. Although the idea of cyberspirituality is mentioned, studies that do not provide a definition have been evaluated using a content analysis approach, and the results have been added to the definition table.

Table 1: Meanings Given to Cyberspirituality in the Literature

YEAR	MEANINGS GIVEN TO CYBERSPIRITUALITY IN THE LITERATURE
2003	The Relationship between technology (internet) and spirituality (search) (George)
2004	A spirituality based on Christian spirituality experienced on the internet as an escape from the institution (Tobin)
2005	The perception of sacred space created on the internet (Campbell, H.) The presence of all religions on the internet, spirituality as techno-secularization (Jackelen)
2006	Spirituality on the internet through Christian spirituality (McDonald) The dimension of religion experienced on the internet (Hackett)
2010	The sense of connectedness, having a connection, is a kind of spirituality. (Yust, K. M. et. al.)
2012	The idea that 'I am cyber spiritual but not religious' (Bertolotti - Cinerari)
2013	The feeling of connectedness, of having a connection, is a kind of spirituality. (Zugermayr)
2014	A spirituality far from religion in the nonphysical world (Sokolow)
2015	The presence of spirituality in media (Gálik) Religion on social media and the internet (Eresso) Hidden religion and virtual worship on the internet (Servais)
2023	The use of technology in a spiritual context, with opportunities for spiritual experience within the framework of risks that may jeopardize digital security (Atalay et. al.)
2024	The mix of old beliefs about life after death and new technology is explored through science fiction stories that question what it means to be human, our consciousness, and the quest for eternal life in the digital world. (Magerstädt)

The earliest study where we encounter a definition of cyberspirituality was Ronan Tobin's research published in 2004. In his study, Tobin (2004, 591) defines cyberspirituality as "spirituality in which new media technologies, especially the internet, are used for religious or spiritual purposes". Tobin (2004, 593) states that cyberspace is the realm between human and digital information; rather than a digital source where all kinds of information are collected, it is a social space that develops over time, where knowledge is derived from experience, including tradition and culture. In line with the meaning he gives to cyberspace, Tobin addresses cyberspirituality by grounding it in Christian spirituality, a kind of religious spirituality.

Yust and colleagues (2010, 291-293) explored the concept of cyberspirituality, highlighting the idea of cyberspirituality through the perceptions of spirituality held by children and young people. According to them, technological developments shape the spiritual lives of young people. The time spent on Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms suggests that a form of spirituality is experienced there, allowing users to feel a sense of connectedness with other like-minded seekers. Such an idea was prompted by other studies in which children were asked to define spirituality, and some of them replied, "having a connection, feeling how other people feel when you have a connection, understanding their feelings and thoughts". Based on this research, the Centre for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence identified connection and belonging as a key theme for spiritual development. This paved the way for the concept of cyberspirituality. Researchers emphasize that "the sense of connectedness that children or adolescents experience on the internet and what they experience while being active on the internet may be a kind of spirituality", which can be expressed as cyberspirituality.

Sokolow (2014, 146) describes cyberspirituality as "spirituality experienced as a concept without religion by creating inauthentic religious, spiritual communities rather than a community engaged in physical, spiritual exercises". According to him, institutional Christianity has declined in the West with the rise of modern thought and technology. Nevertheless, this decline does not imply secularization or the loss of the sacred in society. At this point, the internet, as an unknown technological structure for religion, has given rise to the idea that the modern world is devoid of the sacred. The use

of the internet for religious purposes and the idea that the modern world can be desacralized by utilizing it have led to the view that cyber religious and spiritual communities and worship are not more real or less real than traditional religious and spiritual worship in physical communities are. However, members of cyber-religious and spiritual websites view their cyber communities as just as real and, in some cases, even more real than physical-world religious communities do.

The most recent study conducted by Gálík (2015, 6-7) addresses cyberspirituality as the presence of spirituality in the virtual world of digital media or the phenomenon of spirituality/experiencing spirituality in the media. According to Gálík (2015, 5), cyberspirituality exists in a different form than religion does. Even if cyberspirituality cannot reach the level of traditional spirituality, it will still be able to meet the spiritual needs of hypermodern people, even if it is not yet fully understood as a distinct new type of religion. Cyberspirituality is likened to mental immersion in the virtual world, offering an experience of a new, magical, and attractive world.

When the definitions of cyberspirituality are examined, two key commonalities emerge. First, the virtual realm of the internet serves as the primary channel through which cyberspirituality manifests. Second, cyberspirituality –whether religious or nonreligious– entails a sense of the sacred. Furthermore, it can be argued that cyberspirituality is predominantly expressed through online activities. Notably, Yust and colleagues' (2010) definition of spirituality as “commitment and belonging” underscores that cyberspirituality is often experienced more profoundly within the context of online engagement. This is attributed to the immersive nature of the cyber world, where involvement is fostered through time spent online.

Campbell (2005, 118), who looks at various aspects of the internet, defines it as a sacred space but does not distinguish between religion and spirituality. This definition highlights two common points in definitions of cyberspirituality. According to Campbell, using the internet as a sacred space reshapes one's online activities and experiences as part of one's spiritual life, whether for individual, communal, or informational purposes. Many religious traditions actively use the internet as a sacred space in personal, organizational, and community contexts. While this may appear to be a religious use of the internet, the idea that the internet is changing religious practices

that are transferred online also suggests a form of cyberspirituality. In modern society, some individuals often feel separated and disconnected. In such a process, for people who experience spiritual experiences and feelings online, the internet provides an otherworldly space that allows them to reconnect with spirituality.

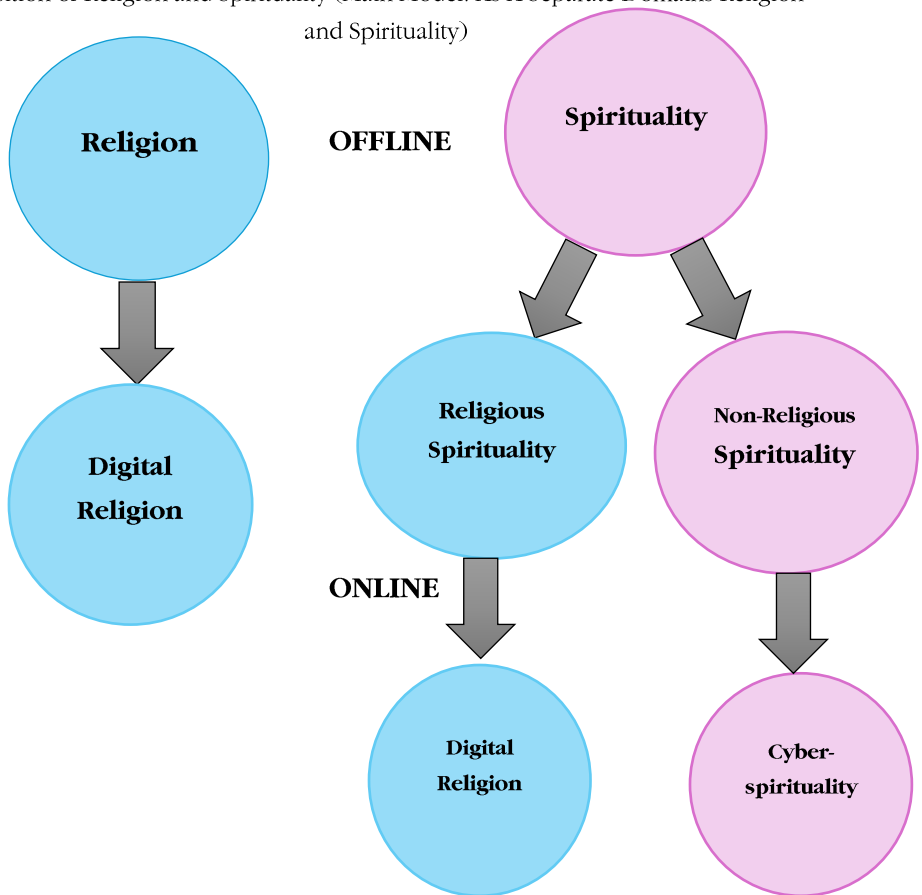
On the basis of definitions and analyses in the literature, this study redefines the concept of cyberspirituality as follows: cyberspirituality is an autonomous subcategory of digital religion that differs from traditional religions; draws on pluralistic understandings; and encompasses SBNR (Spiritual but Not Religious), nonreligious, or secular forms of spirituality; new forms of sacredness; the search for personal meaning, feelings of identity and belonging; and technology-centered experiential spirituality. In this sense, cyberspirituality refers not only to “religion on the internet” but also to technology-mediated spiritual orientations and practices that can be institutionally traditional, hybrid and multireligious, or entirely beyond tradition and secular. What unites these different tendencies is that the spiritual experience is structurally coproduced by digital infrastructures, such as platforms, algorithms, avatars, and virtual environments, as well as by the activities of meaning-making and belonging of individuals and communities.

On the basis of the definition of the concept of cyberspirituality, models addressing the relationship between digital religion and cyberspirituality have been developed (Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4). These models aim to clarify the boundaries and scope of cyberspirituality. This study develops its models on the basis of definitions of religion and spirituality in the psychology of religion literature, as well as classifications related to these concepts (see Düzgüner, 2021, 63-75). By taking the relational positions of religion and spirituality as a starting point, the study theoretically structures the place of cyberspirituality within this framework and clarifies its relationship with digital religion. By using these models, the study emphasizes that the manifestations of religion and spirituality in the virtual/digital realm take different forms depending on their theoretical positions, which allows their boundaries to become more visible. In this regard, the study argues that the term cyber distinctions.

Figure 1 was developed on the basis of an approach in the psychology of religion literature that treats religion and spirituality as

separate concepts. According to this model, religion and spirituality are evaluated analytically as independent of each other. Religion represents traditional and institutional religious structures, whereas spirituality is divided into two subcategories on the basis of the perception of the sacred: religious spirituality and nonreligious spirituality.

Figure 1: Classification of Cyberspirituality and Digital Religion According to the Position of Religion and Spirituality (Main Model: As A Separate Domains Religion and Spirituality)



Religious spirituality focuses on the spiritual experiences of individuals who belong to a traditional and/or institutional religion. The experience of this type of spirituality in virtual and online environments is evaluated under the heading of digital religion within the scope of the model. Nonreligious spirituality, on the other hand, refers to a spiritual understanding that develops outside the traditional

and institutional understanding of the sacred; it emerges in a secular, SBNR (Spiritual but Not Religious) context and encompasses new searches for sacredness, personal meaning, and a sense of belonging.

According to Figure 1, the experience and practice of nonreligious spirituality in technology-based digital environments should be addressed within the scope of cyberspirituality. The main reason for designing this model as the primary model is that this classification, which is based on the treatment of religion and spirituality as separate concepts in the field of psychology of religion, makes conceptual confusion in the field more visible and understandable. Furthermore, in the face of the conceptual uncertainty created by technology-based religious and spiritual experiences, the spiritual quests positioned in the nonreligious sphere are expressed through the concept of cyberspirituality to prevent the boundaries of the concept of religion from becoming blurred and its content from being emptied.

Figure 2: Classification of Cyberspirituality and Digital Religion Where Religion and Spirituality Intersect

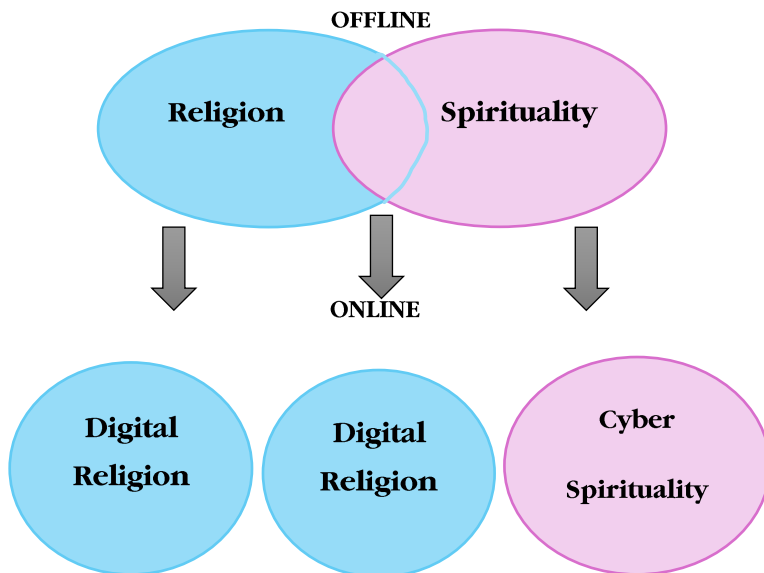
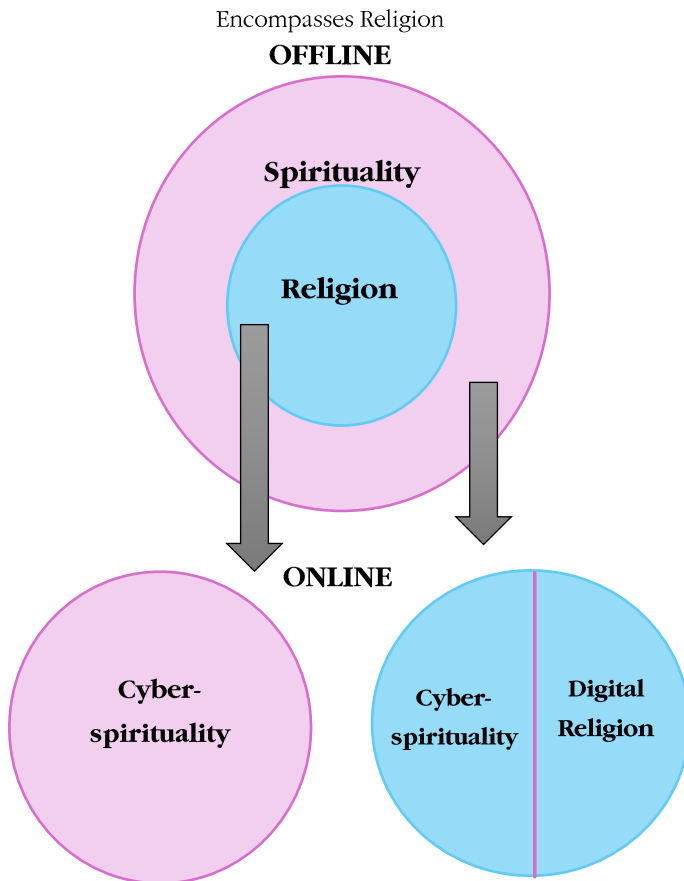


Figure 2 builds on the idea that religion and spirituality, while distinct, share overlapping areas. The model identifies two scenarios within this intersection. First, when individuals experience spirituality as part of or as a reflection of religion, the study treats this experience

as a form of digital religion in the virtual realm. Second, when individuals draw spirituality from a religious structure or tradition without adopting a religious belief as such, the study still evaluates this experience within the scope of digital religion when it occurs in virtual environments. This distinction is visually represented in Figure 2. In contrast, when individuals experience spirituality independently of religion in the virtual realm, this experience is classified under the concept of cyberspirituality.

Figure 3: Classification of Cyberspirituality and Digital Religion When Spirituality



How spirituality manifests in the virtual world in cases where it encompasses religion is shown in Figure 3. Within this framework, the concept of cyberspirituality over digital religion is preferred to describe forms of spirituality that do not originate from religion but adopt a

pluralistic approach and include the search for meaning, a perception of the sacred independent of religion, and expectations of belonging when these forms appear in virtual or digital environments.

In the model, the concept of digital religion refers to individuals without religious affiliation engaging in specific religions in a virtual environment for the purpose of having a spiritual experience. Therefore, even individuals without religious affiliation can be considered within the scope of the digital religion field if they experience a sacred experience in a virtual environment through a religion of their own choosing.

Figure 4: Classification of Cyberspirituality and Digital Religion When Religion Encompasses Spirituality

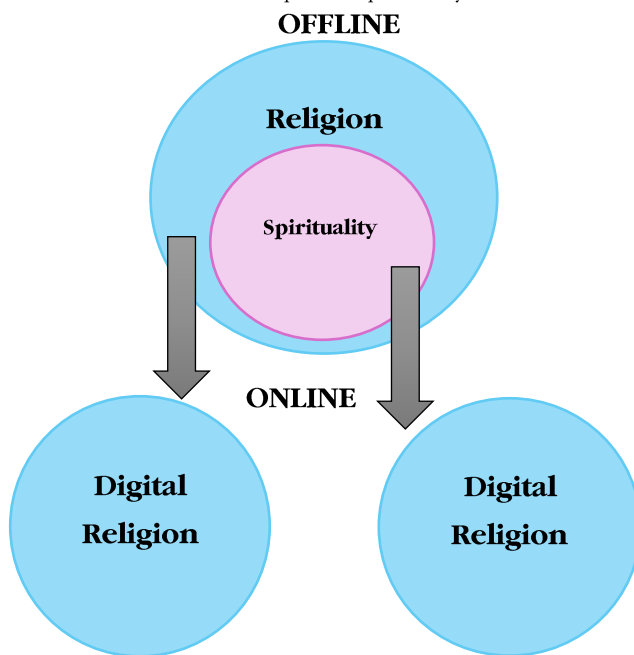


Figure 4 shows how the model developed in the psychology of religion literature –which conceptualizes religion as encompassing spirituality– translates into the virtual/digital world. In this context, the figure addresses an understanding of the spirituality that individuals experience within a named, institutional, and traditional religion or within a new religious movement and that derives its meaning from these structures. In accordance with this classification, the study evaluates the manifestations of this form of spirituality in virtual or

digital environments under the concept of digital religion, since it draws its source directly from religion.

Cyberspirituality is encountered in VR-based worship and ritual environments, digital games and virtual worlds, social media and algorithmic spirituality, meditation and mindfulness practices, AI-mediated spirituality, and digital mourning and remembrance rituals. In games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Second Life*, *Sky: Children of Light*, and *Journey*, avatars visit virtual places of worship and participate in rituals such as kneeling, lighting candles, praying, group prayer, gathering light, rescuing souls, and attending funeral ceremonies. VR places of worship in the metaverse, virtual worship and rituals (VR Hajj, symbolic communion, etc.) demonstrate that spiritual, symbolic, and emotional experiences occur in the digital realm. Furthermore, prayer chains, intention rituals, and affirmation activities on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter show that users attribute a kind of spirituality to these platforms. Internet-based meditation and mindfulness applications are also considered individualized cyber-spiritual rituals that incorporate traditional meditation practices. AI-based chat applications, astrology, and tarot bots can also be categorized under the heading of cyberspirituality, as they serve as providers of spiritual support to their users.

Campbell (2004, 114) uses the term “Net Generation” to describe the young generation that uses the internet the most in the context of cyberspirituality, stating that the Net Generation are experiential spiritual seekers. Klenke (2007, 234-268) explores the role of spirituality and emotions in cyberspace and notes that spiritual seekers search for soul mates and spiritual dialog partners online. For this purpose, they form spiritual partnerships and build cyber communities, cyber churches, and virtual temples. The internet provides a new home for individuals seeking a higher purpose in their lives, offering them access to diverse spiritual communities that cater to their spiritual searches and aspirations. The idea that the internet creates a new sense of home for spiritual seekers is one of the points Campbell emphasizes (Yust, 2014, 134).

Two approaches, positive and negative, have been identified in studies dealing with cyberspirituality. According to the positive perspective, spirituality and spiritual feelings on the internet, whether

religious or nonreligious, whether they reflect the spirituality experienced in reality or whether it is a kind of spiritual orientation utterly different from the spirituality experienced in reality and even created on the internet, are considered to be positive tools that enable individuals to turn to spirituality and have spiritual experiences. Kinast (2000, 222-232) suggested that computer technology cannot replace traditional spiritual life but can be a valuable aid in preparing and creating authentic/real spiritual experiences. According to him, the virtual reality of cyberspace can be an awakening to a new value for man and the spiritual reality of sacred space. Another positive aspect is that the speed of technology can instantly provide a rich source and guide for spiritual seekers.

According to those who take a negative view of cyberspirituality, it carries risks. According to Klenke (2007, 259), spirituality and technology have a dark side that triggers negative emotions such as fear and anxiety. Therefore, cyberspirituality does not always evoke positive emotions among people. In addition, spirituality experienced on the internet can sometimes turn out to be a form of pseudospirituality, masquerading as authentic spirituality, which is harmful. Yust and colleagues (2010, 292) examined Facebook in the context of cyberspirituality from this perspective. They reported that children who define spirituality as “connecting and belonging” and use Facebook in this way can sometimes put themselves in dangerous situations by interacting with strangers to have spiritual feelings and experiences. This is a kind of pseudospirituality. In addition, according to some scholars, cyberspirituality distances society from the sacred and reduces individuals’ sociability (Sokolow, 2014, 19).

The characterization of cyberspirituality as either positive or negative is derived from a comparative analysis of spirituality and cyberspirituality. To gain a more nuanced understanding of cyberspirituality, it is essential to examine the differences between these two concepts. This comparison enables a more precise evaluation of the potential implications and effects of cyberspirituality in contemporary contexts.

2. Cyberspirituality and Spirituality: Differences and Similarities

Questions such as “Are cyberspirituality and spirituality similar or

different, and if different, does cyberspirituality replace real spirituality, or is cyberspirituality real?" are asked in almost every study (Cobb, 1999, 393; Yust et al., 2010, 291-293; Gálik, 2015, 6). Since it exists in a virtual environment, it is a matter of curiosity whether cyberspirituality is genuine or whether it can replace authentic spirituality.

Since cyberspirituality is emerging as an alternative form of spirituality, it is not entirely accurate to say that it is entirely different from spirituality. Studies on the subject have clearly shown that some differences exist between the spirituality experienced in cyberspace and the spirituality experienced (Cobb, 1999, 393-407; Jacobs, 2007, 1103-1121; Gálik, 2015, 9-11). When discussing these differences, it is emphasized that cyberspirituality is unique. This uniqueness comes from the nature of the cyber spiritual realm and the environment of cyberspace. This uniqueness emphasizes that cyberspirituality is experienced through technological tools with internet capability and takes place in the cybernetic world of the internet, which is far from reality. Tobin (2004, 593), discussing cyberspirituality in religious use, notes that the loss of traditionally valued institutionalization along denominational boundary lines within the unregulated environment of cyberspace gives cyberspirituality a unique characteristic. There is no institutional structure or boundary for spirituality experienced in cyberspace. An example of this uniqueness can be found in Christian cyberspirituality, as seen on the guided prayer website (www.sacredspace.ie). It has an Orthodox structure but an expanded understanding of denomination. There is two-way communication based on dialogue. There are no time or space limitations. Spirituality is brought into the work environment. There is a spiritual space where identity can be kept private. Participants are active, not passive (Tobin, 2004, 593-594).

In discussing the differences between cyberspirituality, Gálik (2015, 9-11) notes that it differs from spirituality in two ways. First, the existence and limitations of the human body are the main differences between it and spirituality. This is because the human body keeps humans in reality and provides time-space coordination. Through their bodies, human beings experience emotions and sensations, such as pain and relaxation, which they cannot reach in cyberspace. In contrast to cyberspace, traditional religions and spiritualities, which are grounded in reality, view the human body as a component that keeps

the human being rooted in reality and provides opportunities for a broad range of spiritual experiences, including direct communication with others. Additionally, traditional spirituality involves physical contact with the body and auric emanation. These elements are absent in online communication. There is no use of human body language in the virtual world. This is because the human body is also represented virtually. Therefore, cyberspirituality differs from traditional spirituality.

In this context, Cobb (1999, 393-407) argues that the body cannot participate in cyberspace but functions as a tool separate from the body. For him, cyberspace has given us hope by separating the mind and body in our desire to escape the mortal side of the body. However, at the same time, it also brings fear in the sense that it takes us step by step away from the world we were born into. Rather than seeing cyberspace as a veil for the experience of the disembodied mind/spirit, seeing it as part of a more extensive, integrated sacred experience of the world can expand and enrich our latent spirituality.

The second difference between cyberspirituality and spirituality is related to individuals' spiritual development. The sense of spiritual growth in cyberspace is not random but somewhat shaped by the examples of spirituality that are set. It is an artificial and calibrated experience. That is why it is different from spirituality. In addition, in traditional religions, it is argued that spiritual development occurs through self-knowledge. In cyberspirituality, especially within gaming, this development is achieved through structured images and stories. This is another difference. Despite these differences, Vallikatt (2014) states that there is no significant difference between traditional spirituality and cyberspirituality on the basis of his studies and interviews with gamers.

According to Jacobs (2007, 1103-1121), who discussed the similarities and differences between cyberspirituality and spirituality by analyzing two websites, the design of sacred spaces and the practice of rituals are transferred from offline to online, yet cyberspirituality and spirituality are not entirely similar. He focused on participation in virtual prayer services at a virtual Christian church and a virtual Hindu temple. He suggested that such individual participation in cyberspace can be a private spiritual experience for people who are unable to participate in collective worship. Both the church and the temple in

cyberspace largely reflect tradition and reality, but it is also emphasized that there is no substitute for the real. Therefore, spirituality and cyberspirituality are not entirely similar. According to Baudrillard (1994, 1-6), the simulacrum is “the appearance that wants to be perceived as reality.” Simulation is “the artificial reproduction of a tool, a machine, a system, a way of functioning specific to a phenomenon through a model or a computer program to be studied, shown or explained”. Thus, spirituality in the virtual world of the internet can be considered a form of simulation because it encompasses spirituality and spiritual practices that are generally experienced.

Baudrillard's (1994) classification of the simulacrum order comprises three categories:

1. Natural, naturalistic simulacra grounded in imagery, imitation, and replication, aiming to emulate the harmonious, optimistic, and ideal nature conceived by God.
2. Simulacra aiming at worldwide human development, with a constant tendency to expand and liberate unlimited amounts of energy,
3. Simulation simulacra consisting of information, models, and cybernetic games, aiming for purely transactional, hyperreal, and absolute control.

Cyberspirituality can be evaluated through the lens of Baudrillard's theoretical framework. An analysis of spiritual practices within cyberspace reveals three distinct patterns manifested in religious and spiritual websites and games. The idea that people find and practice spirituality on the internet as closely as they experience reality can be interpreted as a naturalistic simulacrum. The tendency of individuals to congregate with like-minded others online to form specialized groups and websites can be seen as a form of second-order simulation akin to the concept of simulacra. Furthermore, the spiritual experiences offered by games, which construct a virtual and modified order, can be regarded as a third type of simulation. Similarly, Campbell (2005, 119) discussed spiritual attitudes toward computer networks in three distinct ways:

1. The God Project: Technology as a crude proxy for spiritual forces
2. Technology as empowerment in the search for the True *Machine God*.
3. Sacramental Cyberspace: Technology that sees the internet as a

digital environment that offers the spiritual life activities of traditional religions.

On the basis of what people mean by spirituality and on the perspective from which they evaluate the internet, we can classify all kinds of virtual activities we study under the concept of cyberspirituality in different ways. The reality of spiritual life or virtual experiences can be questioned by examining individuals who have first-hand experiences and analyzing the data they collect. Among recent studies, Demirtaş's (2024, 77) qualitative research on digital games and gamers in the context of cyberspirituality revealed that gamers, regardless of their religious beliefs or how they define themselves spiritually, believe that there is a kind of spirituality in the internet environment and that this spirituality meets the needs of the individual.

In summary, cyberspirituality differs from spirituality because it occurs in a virtual environment, independent of the human body, in an artificially structured virtual longitude away from fundamental time-space elements. Therefore, whether cyberspirituality can satisfy the needs of traditional spirituality should be investigated through necessary studies on the experiences of people who engage in cyberspirituality.

Since cyberspirituality emerged as an alternative form of spirituality, it would not be correct to consider it as a phenomenon completely different from spirituality. Studies in the literature reveal that there are similarities and differences between cyberspirituality and traditional spirituality (Cobb, 1999, 393-407; Jacobs, 2007, 1103-1121; Gálík, 2015, 9-11). In this context, the first similarity between them is that cyberspirituality, like spirituality, is related to the individual's search for existential meaning, inner orientation, and need for spiritual fulfillment. Given the subjective nature of spiritual experience, both traditional spirituality and cyberspirituality can be perceived as meaningful and authentic experiences for individuals (Vallikatt, 2014).

Vallikatt (2014), on the basis of spiritual experiences primarily through games and interviews with players, states that there is no meaningful experiential difference between cyberspirituality and traditional spirituality. Similarly, in his analysis of examples of virtual Christian churches and virtual Hindu temples, Jacobs (2007, 1103-1121) shows that sacred space designs and ritual practices have been

transferred from offline contexts to online environments. Although these practices carried out in virtual environments do not replace reality, it is accepted that they offer individuals special and meaningful spiritual experiences.

Second, on the basis of Baudrillard's theory of simulation, cyberspirituality resembles traditional spirituality in terms of content and origin. The source of cyberspirituality is actually lived spirituality. Although cyberspirituality has emerged as an alternative form of spirituality, it is not considered a completely new phenomenon that is entirely disconnected from spirituality.

When evaluated within this framework, the relationship between cyberspirituality and spirituality cannot be reduced to simple similarity or absolute difference. Cyberspirituality shares common ground with spirituality in terms of the search for meaning, the claim to sacred experience, and the function of producing subjective spiritual experiences; however, it differs from it in terms of the body, space, time, and the way experience is structured (Cobb, 1999; Gálik, 2015; Jacobs, 2007). This situation shows that cyberspirituality is neither a phenomenon that completely replaces spirituality nor an experience that is entirely detached from it. In contrast, cyberspirituality can be considered a specific spiritual experience that draws on the content and origins of traditional spirituality but is reshaped within the unique structural conditions of the digital environment.

3. The Concept of Cyberspirituality as a Nomenclature Proposal

Technology is expected to surround religion and transform it from traditional to digital. In addition to the positive effects of religion in terms of technology and taking shape in our lives in the form of digital religion, side effects arise. Side effects such as the weakening of religious authority, the destruction of the sacred, the distortion of religious knowledge, and the shifting of the meaning of certain religious concepts can be mentioned (Işıklı - Gölbaşak, 2021, 105-145). The distinction or unity between religion and spirituality, which was mentioned before the digitalization of religion, is believed to mitigate the side effects of digitalization on religion. Shaping the meanings attributed to the concepts of religion and spirituality according to the unity or distinction between them will help mitigate

these side effects. The boundaries and scope of religion in the digital world can be determined by the concepts and terminologies that are reformulated in response to the digitalization of religion. Cyberspirituality is one concept that can be used to define the boundaries of digitalized religion in the context of the dilemma between religion and spirituality.

The relationships between religion and spirituality and technology, digital religion, virtual religion, e-religion, cyber religion, techno-religion, cyberspirituality, cyberspace spirituality, virtual spirituality, etc., are studied in the literature under different names (George, 2003; Tobin, 2004; Campbell, 2005; Jackelen, 2005; Hojsgaard, 2005; McDonald, 2006; Hackett, 2006; Lee, 2006; Bertolotti - Cinerari, 2012; Campbell, 2012; Ryan, 2012; Zugermayr, 2013; Sokolow, 2014; Gálík, 2015; Servais, 2015; Eresso, 2015). The intertwined and, at the same time, contradictory situation of the concepts of religion and spirituality is often mentioned in the Turkish and foreign literature. When the relationships between religion/spirituality and the internet, virtual world, digital world, artificial intelligence, metaverse, etc., are added to this dilemma with the supertitle of technology, it is necessary to create a nomenclature to express these relationships so that the studies can proceed in a healthier way.

The new concept of spirituality created by postmodernism is differentiated from religiosity in cyberspace in a way that supports “all kinds of individualistic orientations, private sources of pleasure, tools for material satisfaction, and even the search for resources in harmony and self-development in spiritual relaxation” (Alıcı, 2018, 15). Therefore, it is recommended that forms of spirituality that cannot be included within the boundaries of traditional religion, which we refer to as digital religion because of their existence in cyberspace, be incorporated into a new nomenclature.

First, the definitions of religion and spirituality should be clarified in studies that address the relationship between technology and religion/spirituality. To this end, researchers should seek answers to the following questions:

1. Does the definition in the study include religion or spirituality?
2. Does it refer to an institutionalized religion in the context of any religion?
3. If it is spirituality, is it religious spirituality or nonreligious

spirituality?

4. If it is religious spirituality, is it a spirituality formed from a mixture of religions in the context of religious pluralism or a spirituality belonging to a single religion?

5. If it is nonreligious spirituality, what is the sacredness attributed to it?

Suppose we are discussing a particular religion and its associated spirituality. In that case, using the definition of religion may be preferable. However, when a nonreligious perspective on spirituality or spirituality within the context of religious pluralism is considered, it is more appropriate to use a definition of spirituality tailored to this framework. Correctly applying the definitions of religion and spirituality in relation to technology will facilitate the studies conducted in this area. The results of this research revealed that nonreligious spirituality, spirituality in the context of religious pluralism, and spirituality experienced through things, objects, events, and situations, which are the means of a spiritual quest by attributing sacredness, were evaluated within the definition of cyberspirituality. In line with the definitions, cyberspirituality can be preferred as a subtitle to express the relationship between technology and spirituality.

In a study by Kızılgeçit and colleagues (2023, 164-165), an artificial intelligence (AI) robot was asked questions about belief and nonbelief. In these questions, the robot mentioned the distinction between religion and spirituality. It also stated that the sacred can be found through a secular search outside of religion, that belief is a useful tool, and that other beliefs should be explored. The robot also suggested that institutional religions will be replaced by individual beliefs in the future and that this will provide an opportunity for atheism. The answers provided by the AI robot indicated that it would be more accurate to use the title spirituality in the context of technology rather than cyberspirituality.

An understanding of the sacred that moves away from religion and toward spirituality embraces religious pluralism by recommending that multiple beliefs be tried simultaneously or separately, and individual knowledge of spirituality and atheism may emerge as different forms or pursuits of cyberspirituality (Kızılgeçit et al., 2023, 164-165). If the AI in question operates within such an infrastructure, it would be more

appropriate to use the term “spirituality” rather than “religion” for these issues in this digital space. It is believed that the nomenclature of cyberspirituality effectively captures the boundaries and scope of the subject.

It is considered more appropriate to include studies that clearly define religion, examine the principles of belief and worship within that religion, discuss the practice or life of that religion, and explore the spirituality experienced within that religion under the title of “religion” within a nomenclature such as “digital religion”. The term “cyberspirituality” also avoids confusion, especially in cases where religion and spirituality are seen as opposing concepts. Using the nomenclature of cyberspirituality, which views religion and spirituality as inclusive and intertwined, will facilitate classification in the context of religion and technology, as well as the relationship between spirituality and technology.

All types of spirituality that we can include in the spiritual but not religious (SBNR) group fall under the nomenclature of cyberspirituality. It seems more appropriate to consider spiritual orientations such as experiencing a kind of spirituality by receiving spiritual benefits from a specific religion without belonging to any religion, experiencing spirituality from more than one religion at the same time, and experiencing a kind of spirituality by perceiving the sacred from another religion while belonging to a religion or without any religious structure in the context of spirituality rather than religion. Cyberspirituality may be preferred for those who experience spirituality in the virtual world of the internet.

Digital spaces offer individuals the opportunity to live their spirituality independently of religious structures. In many countries, actual religious structures are being used less and less by people (Kaewkitipong et al., 2023, 5). Gálik and Gálikova Tolnaiová (2023) argue that new digital media and audio-visual technologies cannot provide authentic personal spirituality but can, at best, support genuine spirituality and its development. According to them, the digital ecosystem, by its nature and character, interrupts quiet, focused spirituality and access to the mystical depths of spirituality to some extent. Therefore, nontraditional spirituality cannot be fully equivalent to traditional offline spirituality. With the shift in the cultural paradigm toward digital media, nontraditional online spirituality is gaining

traction. In contrast, traditional spirituality appears to be slowing down. This can be seen as a challenge for conventional religions (Gálik - Gálikova Tolnaiová, 2023, 357). For the above reasons, to avoid confusion in the field, it may be preferable to use the concept of cyberspirituality as an autonomous part of digital religion rather than as a subset of digital religion. The interaction between human behavior and technology will trigger significant changes in how spiritual experiences occur and in how they will be understood by future generations (Kaewkitipong et al., 2023, 5). Therefore, the boundaries of religion and spirituality in cyberspace must be clearly defined.

In academic studies, cyberspirituality was first explored through social media tools, including Facebook and Twitter, as well as online forums, blogs, and computer games. The introduction of the concept into the literature has been achieved through research in these areas. Given the breadth of meanings attributed to spirituality, these areas provide valuable data for contemporary studies of cyberspirituality. In addition, the concepts of artificial intelligence (AI), metaverse and transhumanism, which have recently entered our social and individual lives, have also taken their place among those that need to be evaluated in the context of cyberspirituality (see Alıcı, 2022; Seppälä, 2023; Acar, 2023; Yamaç, 2023; Cambroner, 2023; Puzio, 2023; Yılmaz, 2023; Bingaman, 2023; Kızılgeçit et al., 2023). Religion and spirituality are increasingly present on the aforementioned platforms. In this context, it has also gained a place in theoretical and applied academic studies. In the hope that a more systematic and comprehensible classification will contribute to the literature, the study data were evaluated to determine whether the concept of cyberspirituality can be used in conjunction with the idea of digital religion

Conclusion

This study aimed to introduce the concept of cyberspirituality into the Turkish literature, particularly in the field of the psychology of religion, as a proposed solution to the complexity arising from the transfer of religious and spiritual concepts into the digital environment. Cyberspirituality, which we consider an autonomous subform of spirituality in the distinction between religion and spirituality, is a technology-centered, experiential form of spirituality that differs from

traditional religions; it is nourished by pluralism, encompasses nonreligious/secular and new forms of sacredness, and aims to find personal meaning, identity, and a sense of belonging. From the perspective of the psychology of religion, cyberspirituality represents a new experiential domain in which meaning-making, sacred perception, and spiritual coping are structurally mediated by digital environments. Rather than evaluating spiritual experiences produced, shaped, and sustained in the digital environment within offline religion or digital religion, the terminological and conceptual framework has been discussed to understand the nature of these spiritual experiences.

This study has two original contributions. The first step is to introduce the concept of cyberspirituality into the Turkish literature systematically. The second goal is to propose a new autonomous naming and classification system to clarify the complexity surrounding the positioning of concepts related to religion and spirituality in the digital environment. This framework clarifies the conditions under which the idea of cyberspirituality can be used, providing a more precise conceptual boundary for future empirical and theoretical studies. The proposed approach emphasizes that the concept of cyberspirituality cannot be entirely subsumed under the idea of digital religion. On the basis of a model that treats religion and spirituality as separate concepts, it is argued that cyberspirituality represents an alternative form of spirituality experienced in the digital world, encompassing not only the experiences of traditional religions but also nonreligious, innovative, and secular beliefs and lifestyles. In this respect, cyberspirituality is not merely a matter of technological innovation; it is an emerging field of study that requires methodological, theoretical, and interdisciplinary research.

A systematic examination of religious and spiritual experiences mediated by technology, whether individual or communal, is necessary to clarify the theoretical framework of cyberspirituality. It is believed that the concept of cyberspirituality, which we have attempted to examine at a conceptual and theoretical level, will provide a foundation for future studies. Many research questions and topics can be built upon the foundation presented in this article:

- It is essential to reflect the concept we address from the perspective of the psychology of religion on individuals in scientific studies. In this context, VR-based places of worship, virtual rituals,

digital games, social media applications, and artificial intelligence-supported applications, as mentioned in the study, should be explored in practical and experimental dimensions through user participation.

- A scale development study can be conducted for cyberspirituality.
- Studies can be conducted on the concept of cyberspirituality in laboratories offering virtual reality experiences.
- Comparative studies can be conducted to examine how different religious traditions, cultural contexts, and technological ecosystems prepare the ground for cyberspirituality.

These research suggestions aim to determine the role of cyberspirituality in the psychology of religion and to understand the spiritual experiences that arise in technological environments more systematically.

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