



# Emotional Intelligence and Spiritual Intelligence as Buffers against Anxiety and Depression in Digitally Connected College Students

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**Abstract:** *The digital era has transformed the learning environment and social lives of college students, strengthening connections but also contributing to rising levels of anxiety and depression. Emotional intelligence (EI) and spiritual intelligence (SI) are psychological constructs that enable individuals to understand and regulate emotions, derive meaning from life experiences, and maintain psychological well-being. This paper reviews theoretical and empirical work to evaluate how EI and SI may serve as buffers against anxiety and depression in digitally connected college students. Integrating global research findings, the study identifies mechanisms through which EI and SI foster resilience and proposes educational strategies to support student well-being.*

**Key Words:** *Emotional Intelligence, spiritual intelligence, learning environment, digital era.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The integration of digital technology into college students' lives has dramatically changed how they communicate, learn, and socialize. Digital platforms, social networking sites, and constant online engagement have increased access to information and connectivity but also intensified exposure to emotional stressors, social comparison, and academic demands. These digital pressures are correlated with elevated anxiety and depression among youth populations (Cho, Jung, Eisenberg, King, & Zheng, 2025). In response, psychological constructs such as emotional intelligence (EI) and spiritual intelligence (SI) have gained attention for their potential protective roles in mental health. **Emotional Intelligence (EI)** refers to the ability to perceive, understand, use, and regulate emotions in oneself and others. Originally popularized by Goleman (1995), EI is conceptualized as a set of competencies that can be cultivated and applied in personal and social contexts ("Emotional Intelligence," n.d.; Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test, n.d.). **Spiritual Intelligence (SI)**, as advanced by Danah Zohar and others, emphasizes existential meaning, self-transcendence, and higher-order reflective capacities that guide purposeful living ("Danah Zohar," n.d.). This paper synthesizes contemporary research on the relationships among EI, SI, anxiety, and depression among college students in the digital age. It proposes that EI and SI serve as psychological buffers—reducing the negative impact of digital stressors on mental health by enhancing adaptive coping, emotional regulation, and existential resilience.

## 2. DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY AND COLLEGE STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH:

The digital era has reshaped the social and academic landscapes of college education. Persistent digital engagement creates cognitive and emotional challenges, such as information overload, disrupted sleep patterns, academic overload, and continuous social comparison through social media. These factors contribute to chronic stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among college students (Cho et al., 2025).

Mental health concerns in this population are not new; however, digital technologies have amplified emotional stressors by providing constant streams of feedback and expectations. Barriers to accessing timely mental health services—such as stigma, time constraints, and privacy concerns—further complicate support (Cho et al., 2025). Understanding **buffers** that protect mental health in such environments is critical. EI and SI have emerged as constructs that may help students navigate emotional challenges and maintain well-being.



## 2. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: DEFINITION AND MECHANISMS:

### Conceptualization of EI:

Emotional intelligence is the capacity to recognize one's own emotions and those of others, use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior, and manage emotions to adapt to environments and achieve goals ("Emotional Intelligence," n.d.; Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test, n.d.). According to Goleman (1995), EI encompasses competencies such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. (Tripathi, I., & Mehrotra, R. 2021)

Empirical research supports that high EI is associated with greater psychological well-being, better interpersonal relationships, and improved academic performance. Importantly for this paper, EI correlates inversely with anxiety and depression symptoms, suggesting its protective function.

### EI and Stress Regulation

Studies indicate that EI enables individuals to appraise stressors adaptively, modulate emotional responses, and enlist coping strategies that reduce psychological distress. For example, research has found that emotional clarity and emotion regulation—key EI components—are linked to lower perceived stress and better mental health among college students (Calderón-Palacio, 2023). High EI students tend to interpret academic and social challenges more constructively, reducing the risk of anxiety and depression (Tripathi, I., 2024).

In digitally connected contexts, EI helps students manage emotional reactions to online interactions, academic pressures delivered through digital platforms, and social comparisons promoted by social media. Students with higher EI tend to interpret online feedback with less emotional volatility and adopt healthier coping strategies when faced with digital stressors.

## 3. SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE: DEFINITION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ROLE:

### Conceptualization of SI

Spiritual intelligence refers to the ability to apply spiritual values and inner resources to solve problems and create meaning in life. Danah Zohar described SI as "an aspect of intelligence that sits above traditional IQ and EI, at the level of meaning and purpose" (Zohar, n.d.). SI includes capacities such as existential reflection, personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and the ability to maintain inner peace.

### SI and Psychological Well-Being

Spiritual intelligence is associated with greater life satisfaction, a clearer sense of purpose, and enhanced resilience in the face of adversity. SI promotes a sense of connectedness and inner coherence, helping individuals interpret life challenges through broader existential perspectives.

A recent cross-cultural study involving emerging adults in higher education reported that both EI and SI are negatively correlated with anxiety and depression and positively correlated with life satisfaction, although the strength of these relationships varies across cultures (BMC Psychology study, 2024). Specifically, EI correlated inversely with anxiety and depression among Israeli students, whereas components of SI correlated positively with life satisfaction indicators among Indian students (BMC Psychology study, 2024). These findings highlight the distinct yet complementary roles of EI and SI in supporting psychological well-being across diverse contexts.

## 4. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: EI AND SI AS BUFFERS AGAINST ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION:

### EI and Mental Health:

A multitude of studies demonstrate that higher levels of EI are linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression. For example, research indicates that EI enables better stress management, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping strategies that mitigate psychological distress in collegiate populations. Emotional clarity and regulation are particularly important components that help students interpret and manage emotional responses to academic stressors, significantly reducing anxiety and depressive symptoms (Calderón-Palacio, 2023).

### SI and Mental Health:

Although literature on SI is less extensive than that on EI, existing research supports its role in enhancing psychological resilience. SI encourages reflective coping, meaning-making, and value-based responses to life stressors. Research has shown significant positive associations between SI and life satisfaction, as well as inverse associations with anxiety and depression, particularly when students engage in existential reflection and meaning production—core elements of SI (BMC Psychology study, 2024). Although direct studies of SI specifically within digitally connected college populations are limited, the broader psychological literature supports that SI can buffer against depressive and anxious states by providing students with internal frameworks that reframe challenges as opportunities for meaning and growth rather than threats.



### **Synergistic Effects of EI and SI:**

EI and SI are interrelated constructs that may synergistically enhance psychological resilience. Research investigating the relationships among EI, social intelligence, and SI found significant positive correlations among these constructs (Pal & Banik, 2025). This suggests that students with higher EI may also develop greater SI, supporting integrated psychological resources that enhance mental health.

Together, EI and SI may reduce vulnerability to anxiety and depression by promoting emotional regulation as well as existential coherence. EI helps students manage the immediate emotional challenges linked to academic demands and digital stressors, while SI offers deeper meaning frameworks that support long-term psychological resilience.

### **Digital Stress, EI, SI, and College Students**

Digital stressors include excessive screen time, online peer pressures, cyber bullying, social media comparison, and academic demands mediated through digital platforms. College students often experience heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms when confronted with continuous online evaluations and virtual academic environments.

### **EI, Digital Literacy, and Stress**

Emerging research shows that digital literacy—understanding and effectively using digital tools—intersects with emotional intelligence to influence stress outcomes. For instance, studies found that higher digital literacy and EI together support better management of digital stressors, suggesting that EI helps students interpret digital emotional cues and regulate responses, while digital literacy enables more effective navigation of online environments (BMC Medical Education study, 2024).

### **SI in Digital Environments**

While digital environments may seem at odds with traditional notions of spirituality, SI can still be fostered online through reflective practices, mindful use of technology, and engagement with digital communities that support meaning and connection. Such practices may help students maintain psychological grounding despite constant digital engagement.

## **5. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS:**

### **Integrating EI and SI in Curriculum**

Given their protective roles, higher education institutions should consider integrating EI and SI development into student support programs. Workshops on emotional self-awareness, stress management, mindfulness, and reflective practices can enhance students' emotional and spiritual competencies.

### **Mental Health Programs and Campus Support**

Universities can develop blended mental health programs that incorporate digital tools, counseling resources, and experiential learning modules to strengthen EI and SI skills. Embedding these competencies within academic advising and orientation programs may foster resilience before stress symptoms intensify.

### **Digital Literacy and Healthy Technology Use**

Promoting healthy digital habits—such as mindful social media use, digital boundaries, and digital self-care practices—can reduce the overwhelm that contributes to anxiety and depression. Combining digital literacy with EI and SI training would provide a holistic approach to navigating digital life.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although evidence supports the buffering roles of EI and SI, several limitations exist. Much of the research on SI is cross-sectional, limiting causal inferences. Future studies should examine longitudinal effects of EI and SI development on mental health outcomes among diverse digital populations. Additionally, research should explore culturally sensitive models of SI and how digital practices shape spiritual meaning.

## **6. CONCLUSION:**

Digitally connected college students face unique psychological challenges that contribute to rising levels of anxiety and depression. Emotional intelligence and spiritual intelligence emerge as valuable psychological buffers that enhance emotional regulation, meaning-making, resilience, and overall well-being. Integrating EI and SI development within educational systems—alongside digital literacy initiatives—can equip students with the internal resources needed to navigate digital stressors effectively and maintain mental health.

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