WSR Wellbeing Sciences Review

REVIEW ARTICLE

The psychology of digital legacy: Conceptual transformation, mechanisms, and implications for well-being

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ABSTRACT

Digital legacy refers to the digital traces individuals leave behind that continue to represent their identities, memories, and relationships after death. This review examines digital legacy from psychological perspectives, focusing on conceptual transformation, underlying mechanisms, and its impact on well-being. Drawing on traditional legacy motives, it integrates existential, relational, and narrative identity theories with digital contexts to explore how digital legacy shapes meaning for both individuals and communities. A temporal-relational framework comprising three phases (creation, co-existence, and reception) is proposed to conceptualize digital legacy as a dynamic psychological ecosystem in which the well-being of legacy creators and receivers is continuously constructed through interaction, reflection, and remembrance. The review highlights both benefits, such as symbolic immortality and emotional continuity, and risks, including anxiety, authenticity loss, and emotional entrapment. Finally, it outlines theoretical and practical directions emphasizing digital legacy, guided co-creation, and ethical design for psychologically healthy engagement with digital legacy in the digital age.

Key words: digital legacy, digital well-being, symbolic immortality, terror management, grief

INTRODUCTION

Digital legacy has emerged as a salient psychological and sociotechnical phenomenon in the digital age. It refers not only to the digital materials individuals leave behind but also to the ways in which identity, memory, and relational presence persist after death. The scale of this phenomenon is expanding rapidly. Projections suggest that by the end of this century, the number of deceased users on a single platform such as Facebook may exceed 4.9 billion, transforming it into one of the world's largest repositories of posthumous data (Öhman & Watson, 2019). At the same time, the global digital legacy industry, including memorial platforms, posthumous data services, and artificial intelligence (AI)-based identity reconstruction, is expected to grow from $22 billion in 2024 to nearly $80 billion by 2034. These developments indicate that individuals are undergoing profound changes in how they confront mortality, construct meaning, and maintain relational continuity through digital traces, which makes it both timely and necessary to examine digital legacy from a psychological perspective.

Over the past decade, scholarship on digital legacy has expanded across human-computer interaction, media and communication studies, and digital ethics. Existing research centers on three major themes. First, at the level of technology and platform design, scholars have examined how social media platforms shape online mourning through features such as memorial pages, account management policies, and algorithmic sorting,

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Received: 22 October 2025; Revised: 15 November 2025; Accepted: 20 November 2025
https://doi.org/10.54844/wsr.2025.1086

demonstrating that platform norms and interaction structures profoundly influence how people express grief, maintain memories, and sustain ongoing connections with the deceased in digital spaces (Brubaker *et al.*, 2013; Massimi & Baecker, 2010). Second, at the legal and ethical level, extensive literature addresses posthumous privacy, data ownership, consent, and platform governance, and notes that existing legal frameworks struggle to regulate the status and use of posthumous data (Cerrillo-i-Martínez, 2018; Erdos, 2021). Third, at the level of forms and practices, researchers have explored online memorials, virtual cemeteries, digital remains, and AI-driven forms of "digital immortality," showing how these practices reshape social imaginaries of death, memory, and identity continuity (Doyle & Brubaker, 2023; Öhman & Floridi, 2017).

Despite outlining this broad ecological landscape, however, this body of work remains primarily focused on technological, institutional, and sociocultural dimensions, while paying far less attention to the psychological mechanisms through which individuals generate, experience, and interpret digital traces. Scattered evidence indicates that digital materials may shape grief expression, facilitate continuing bonds, and support the reconstruction of identity continuity (Brubaker & Callison-Burch, 2016; Gibbs *et al.*, 2015), and earlier theoretical work on mortality and meaning suggests that such resources can foster self-continuity and symbolic immortality (Lifton, 1979; Neimeyer *et al.*, 2014). Yet links between digital legacy and core psychological constructs, such as death anxiety, meaning-making, and narrative coherence, as well as the motivational forces that drive engagement with digital legacy, remain underdeveloped. As AI-mediated interactions proliferate, digital selves also become increasingly editable, collaborative, and shaped by algorithmic processes, challenging long-standing psychological assumptions about identity, connection, and loss.

To address these gaps, the present review advances a psychologically grounded synthesis of digital legacy. It has three objectives. First, it consolidates existing conceptualizations and typologies across disciplines to provide definitional clarity in the context of increasingly diverse and interactive posthumous digital forms. Second, it examines the motivational and psychological dynamics that underlie why and how individuals construct, curate, and engage with digital legacies, including their roles as coping and meaning-making resources as well as potential sources of psychological risk. Third, it proposes a temporal framework that encompasses the creation, co-existence, and reception phases in order to analyze both the positive and negative pathways through which digital legacy influences the well-being of both creators and receivers. By doing so, this review offers a conceptual foundation for future empirical work and theoretical refinement, and clarifies how human beings negotiate the boundaries of life, death, and digital persistence.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF DIGITAL LEGACY

This section outlines the conceptual foundations of digital legacy, tracing its historical emergence and clarifying its core definitions and forms. It situates digital legacy within the broader discourse of inheritance and remembrance, and highlights how technological mediation has progressively reshaped the ways in which identity, memory, and continuity are constructed and sustained beyond death.

Historical emergence and conceptual development

The evolution of digital legacy is deeply intertwined with the long history of how technology mediates death and remembrance. From early cave paintings and funerary art to printed obituaries and photo albums, successive communicative innovations have extended the social presence of the dead and shaped how lives are remembered. In the digital era, this mediation has reached an unprecedented level. The internet has been described as a new "space of death", in which symbolic and interactive dimensions of remembrance are interwined rather than merely reproducing older memorial forms (Beaunoyer & Guitton, 2021).

The late 1990s and early 2000s marked a turning point, as personal computing enabled new forms of online commemoration. Virtual cemeteries and memorial websites such as Remembered Forever or Forever-Missed provided dedicated spaces for mourning that transcended physical distance and temporal limits (Gibson, 2017). These emergent practices expanded the boundaries of community grief, bringing what had often been private and locally bounded into public, persistent, and networked environments. At the same time, online games introduced novel memorial rituals: Players' avatars were symbolically buried, retired, or transformed into non-playable commemorative characters, embedding remembrance within shared digital worlds and everyday play (Arnold *et al.*, 2017).

By the 2010s, the field began to formalize. Brubaker, Hayes, and Dourish (2013) described how Facebook profiles of the deceased evolved into hybrid sites of identity and mourning, while Odom *et al.* (2012) conceptualized "digital heirlooms" as family archives that span generations through photographs and data stored in the cloud. Scholars argued that these developments do not simply reproduce existing mourning practices; rather,

digital technologies actively transform social forms surrounding death, grief, and identity persistence (Beaunoyer & Guitton, 2021). Against this backdrop, the notion of digital legacy emerged as a way of capturing how personal digital traces continue to structure remembrance, relationships, and identity beyond biological death.

Definitions and forms of digital legacy

Traditionally, legacy has referred to both tangible and intangible elements, such as values, wishes, identities, physical objects, and personal artifacts that are passed on to others, often bereaved loved ones (Hunter, 2007). With the rise of digital technology, these materials have expanded into digital forms. Personal data and online accounts, including social media profiles, digital photo archives, emails, messages, and collections of passwords, now constitute a networked assemblage of information that can be transmitted across individuals and generations (Brubaker *et al.*, 2013; Doyle & Brubaker, 2023). As digital technologies have become embedded in everyday life, conceptualizations of digital legacy have evolved in parallel.

Early work in this area focused on the largely unintentional accumulation of digital traces created during a person's lifetime, such as browsing histories, geolocation data, purchase records, and social media interactions. Once the individual dies, these traces persist as digital remains, forming what has been described as a "data-based identity" that outlives the person, often regardless of personal intention (Odom *et al.*, 2012; Morley *et al.*, 2020).

Not all digital remains, however, qualify as digital legacy. Existing scholarship suggests that digital remains become digital legacy when they fulfil two core functions. First, they preserve traces of identity and personhood beyond biological death, through photos, posts, messages, and other digital artifacts that enable individuals to persist symbolically in networked spaces (Doyle & Brubaker, 2023; Estill, 2019). Second, they facilitate remembrance and emotional continuity for the living, as digital platforms support practices such as memorial pages, online tributes, and other mediated forms of commemoration (Brubaker & Callison-Burch, 2016; Pitsillides, 2019). In this sense, digital legacy simultaneously serves self-continuity and social continuity.

With continuing advances in technology, digital legacy is increasingly understood not as a static repository but as a dynamic sociotechnical process shaped by differing degrees of agency and interactivity (Lu *et al.*, 2025). Earlier forms of digital remembrance primarily involved one-way practices, such as viewing archived photos or messages as symbolic gestures of memory (Galvão *et al.*, 2021). As AI-mediated communication has developed, interactions with the digital remains of the deceased have become more reciprocal, involving conversational agents, voice reconstruction technologies, and immersive virtual memorials that allow mourners to engage in more dynamic ways with digital representations of the dead (Riggs, 2025). When such posthumous digital presence supports ongoing, two-way interaction between the living and technologically reproduced representations of the deceased, it is often described as digital immortality (Öhman & Floridi, 2017).

Taken together, this conceptual trajectory clarifies both the relationships among key terms and the main forms of posthumous digital presence identified in current research on digital legacy. Digital traces refer to data generated while a person is alive; after death, these traces persist as digital remains. When these remains support both the deceased's self-continuity and the social and emotional continuity of the living, they can be regarded as a digital legacy. Among these legacies, technologically intensive forms that enable sustained two-way interaction are more specifically referred to as digital immortality.

Building on these distinctions, Fa (2025) further differentiates forms of digital legacy along two dimensions: The degree of volition involved in creating posthumous materials and the level of interactivity afforded by the system (Figure 1). At one end of this spectrum is passive digital legacy, composed of unintentional remains such as browsing or purchase data that persist automatically and function largely as static archives. At the opposite end is curated digital immortality, in which interactive personae are intentionally designed through AI avatars or chatbots to sustain identity beyond death, exemplified by AI companions trained on a person's conversational history. Between these poles lie curated digital legacy, referring to static but deliberately managed archives such as organized photo libraries or carefully maintained memorial profiles, and passive digital immortality, in which interactive reproductions are generated without prior consent, for instance chatbots built from the data of public figures after their death. This typology makes explicit that digital legacy encompasses a continuum of forms, ranging from low-agency, low-interactivity traces to highly curated, interactive manifestations of digital immortality.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATIONS UNDERLYING THE CREATION OF DIGITAL LEGACY

Human beings have long been motivated to leave something behind—to be remembered, to transmit values, or to sustain a presence beyond death. Classical

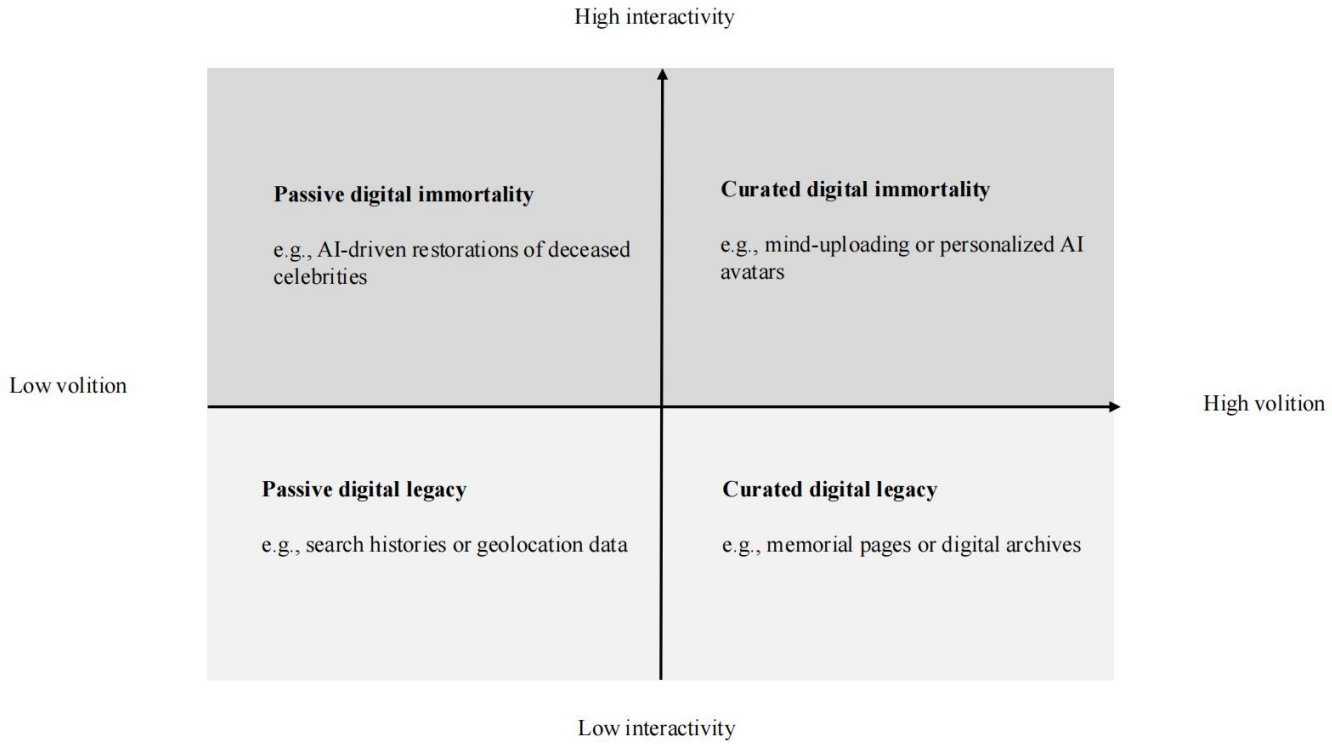

Figure 1. A classification framework of posthumous digital presence based on interactivity and volition (Fa, 2025).

studies describe legacy as a form of post-mortem reputation concern and symbolic continuity (Hunter, 2007; Wyatt-Brown, 1996). These motives are not confined to spiritual beliefs or material inheritance; even nonreligious individuals demonstrate a persistent desire for remembrance and symbolic survival (Waggoner *et al.*, 2023).

In the digital age, these enduring motives are being reshaped by technological mediation. Digital legacies—ranging from social media archives to AI-driven memorials—extend identity and memory beyond biological life, reframing how existence, relationship, and meaning are maintained.

This section outlines the theoretical foundations underlying the creation of digital legacy from three psychological perspectives: Existential, relational, and narrative. Each represents a fundamental motivational route for sustaining continuity and meaning, while jointly illuminating how digital technologies transform the human pursuit of legacy.

Existential motives: Digital legacy as symbolic continuity

Death anxiety, defined as the awareness of one's inevitable mortality, has long been recognized as a fundamental source of psychological distress. According to terror management theory (TMT, Greenberg *et al.*, 1986), this awareness threatens the self's sense of meaning and coherence, motivating individuals to defend against existential terror through the pursuit of symbolic immortality (Lifshin *et al.*, 2021). Cultural worldviews and self-esteem function as central defense mechanisms, enabling people to perceive their lives as part of a coherent, enduring social order (Burke *et al.*, 2010). By meeting culturally valued standards, such as moral integrity, professional achievement, or social contribution (Solomon & Thompson, 2019), individuals affirm their self-worth and reduce death anxiety.

With this framework, creating a legacy represents one of the most powerful strategies for managing existential fear. It provides reassurance that one's identity, values, and achievements, whether tangible or intangible—including biological descendants—will persist beyond physical death. Empirical research supports this mechanism. For instance, individuals experiencing heightened mortality salience report stronger reproductive motivations (Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005) and demonstrate greater creative output when their actions are framed as legacy-relevant (Sligte *et al.*, 2013), illustrating how mortality awareness can elicit generative, enduring contributions.

In the digital age, the pursuit of symbolic immortality is increasingly shaped by technological mediation. Digital environments allow individuals to preserve traces of existence with unprecedented ease and accessibility,

without the substantial time, labor, or resources traditionally required to create enduring works or descendants. A single post, account, or data archive can now serve as a lasting marker of presence, offering a form of technological continuity that narrows the psychological distance between life and death. This convenience makes digital legacy an efficient yet ambivalent defense against death anxiety (Fa, 2025). While it simplifies the pursuit of symbolic immortality, whether such digital traces can carry the same existential and moral weight as traditional legacies remains an open and significant question.

Relational motives: Maintaining bonds through networked presence

Beyond existential concerns, the motivation to create a legacy is deeply rooted in social and relational needs. Human beings seek not only to survive symbolically but also to remain connected—to continue being recognized, respected, and included within their social works. According to sociometer theory (Leary *et al.*, 1995), self-esteem functions as an internal gauge of social acceptance: When individuals perceive belonging and acknowledgment, their sense of worth is affirmed. Similarly, the hierometer model (Mahadevan *et al.*, 2016) highlights that self-evaluation is shaped by perceived standing within social hierarchies. Legacy creation thus extends both mechanisms by projecting one's social presence beyond life, allowing individuals to secure ongoing inclusion in communal systems of value and recognition. Empirical studies indicate that the anticipation of posthumous evaluation motivates reputation-enhancing and prosocial behaviors such as philanthropy, mentorship, or public service initiatives (Greenwood *et al.*, 2013).

Moreover, legacy building carries not only symbolic but also tangible social consequences. A positive legacy can enhance the collective reputation of one's family or social group, fostering pride, solidarity, and preferential treatment, while a negative legacy can impose stigma and social costs on descendants or affiliated communities (Waggoner *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, legacy creation functions not only as an individual expression of continuity but also as collective reputation management, preserving the moral and symbolic capital of the social units that one represents.

In digital contexts, these relational motives are amplified and transformed through networked visibility. Social media metrics—such as likes, shares, comments, and follower counts—serve as real-time signals of belonging and social validation (Burke & Kraut, 2016), allowing individuals to monitor and extend social recognition temporally. Memorial pages, digital archives, and algorithmically maintained profiles transform networks of remembrance into durable forms of connection, while AI-driven commemorative agents and chatbots introduce new modes of reciprocal interaction between the living and the deceased (Brubaker *et al.*, 2013; Doyle & Brubaker, 2023). These practices embody what Klass *et al.* (1996) describe as continuing bonds—the maintenance of emotional ties with the dead as an adaptive process of grief and relational reconstruction. Through these technologies, digital legacy transforms remembrance into an ongoing negotiation of connection, making relational continuity not merely symbolic but operational within networked spaces of human and nonhuman interaction.

Narrative motives: Meaning reconstruction and generativity in digital environments

Narrative identity theory (McAdams, 1993; McAdams, 2008) posits that individuals sustain coherence and purpose by integrating past, present, and future experiences into a continuous life story. Within this framework, generativity represents a core psychological need in later life—the motivation to create, guide, and transmit value to future generations (Erikson, 1963; McAdams *et al.*, 1998). This cross-generational process of meaning construction allows individuals to maintain continuity and moral orientation in the face of finitude and chance (Thornham & McFarlane, 2011). Narrative identity and generativity jointly constitute the foundation of meaning-making, helping people preserve coherence and direction when confronted with mortality or existential uncertainty.

From this perspective, legacy creation can be understood as an extension of narrative work. By constructing a legacy, individuals weave their life stories into collective memory (Hunter & Rowles, 2005; Wade-Benzoni *et al.*, 2010). The process enables reinterpretation of past events, affirmation of self-identity, and the transmission of personal values and experiences to future others. Legacy creation thus serves both as a mechanism of narrative coherence and as a generative act through which individuals transform private experiences into social meaning (Newton *et al.*, 2014).

In digital environments, these narrative motives are technologically mediated. Social media collectively form a distributed autobiography (Estill, 2019), where fragmented traces of the self—texts, images, and interactions are algorithmically curated into dynamic self-narratives. Meanwhile, AI-driven tools strengthen narrative synthesis, helping individuals reorganize life experience and sustain a sense of coherence (Chan *et al.*, 2025). Through such practices, digital legacy becomes a living narrative interface, integrating one's life story into networked memory and enabling both personal meaning reconstruction and intergenerational value transmission.

DIGITAL LEGACY AND WELL-BEING: A TEMPORAL FRAMEWORK OF CREATION, CO-EXISTENCE, AND RECEPTION

Legacy creation is not only a response to the awareness of mortality but also a psychological process that sustains social connection and reconstructs meaning. With the involvement of digital technologies, digital legacy has acquired new dimensions of autonomy and interactivity, enabling individuals to construct and extend their experience in more flexible ways.

To better understand its psychological effects, this section conceptualizes digital legacy as a temporal continuum of interaction between creators and receivers, comprising three interrelated phases: (1) Creation phase, when individuals construct their legacy through self-reflection; (2) co-existence phase, when creators and receivers simultaneously experience and interpret the legacy; (3) reception phase, when the creator has passed away, yet the legacy continues to influence other's emotions and cognition.

Through this framework, the making and transmission of digital legacy are redefined as a dynamic psychological ecosystem, whose influence extends beyond the boundary of life and continues to shape the well-being of both individuals and society. This section will examine how each phase uniquely affects the well-being of both creators and receivers.

Creation: Legacy-making as existential regulation

In the creation phase, digital legacy functions as a means of existential regulation—a process through which individuals confront mortality by organizing, curating, and preserving traces that represent their lives. At this stage, well-being outcomes are primarily experienced by the creator rather than the receiver. The act of consciously planning a digital legacy, such as managing one's social media presence, curating personal archives, or training an AI-driven avatar, invokes deep self-reflection on identity, continuity, and meaning. Existing research suggests that this process can yield both positive and negative psychological consequences (Brubaker *et al.*, 2013; Doyle & Brubaker, 2023; Odom *et al.*, 2018).

For individuals, consciously creating and organizing a digital legacy can help mitigate death anxiety while reinforcing one's sense of agency and self-coherence. According to TMT, crafting a legacy provides symbolic immortality that helps buffer existential fear by allowing individuals to perceive their lives as part of a continuing cultural or relational order (Burke *et al.*, 2010). From the perspectives of narrative identity theory, the structured organization of personal data and life narratives not only restores a sense of control over how one will be remembered but also embeds the self within a broader social story that affirms purpose and continuity across life stages (Neimeyer *et al.*, 2014). Through this process, individuals reaffirm the meaningfulness of their existence and sustain an internalized sense of direction. Furthermore, the act of transmitting personal values and experiences to others fulfills generative motivations that are closely linked to life satisfaction and perceived meaning (Hofer *et al.*, 2008). For older adults or those experiencing health decline, such digital life reviews can enhance self-esteem and emotional relief, echoing the therapeutic benefits observed in traditional life-review interventions (Allen *et al.*, 2014; Ando *et al.*, 2010).

Despite these benefits, there are also psychological risks when one's sense of meaning and worth becomes overly tied to digital legacy. A central concern lies in the authenticity of the identity being constructed. Online environments make it easy to curate an idealized persona, yet this representation often fragments or distorts the lived self (Gibbs *et al.*, 2015). The pressure to "stay" present through digital platforms can compel individuals to maintain a polished image for posterity, resulting in chronic self-monitoring, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Studies have shown that excessive self-presentation and impression management online are associated with increased depressive symptoms, higher perceived stress, and lower life satisfaction (Heffer *et al.*, 2019; Reinecke & Trepter, 2014). In this context, legacy creation may amplify such effects by extending self-monitoring beyond daily interactions to one's anticipated posthumous image, sustaining anticipatory stress about how one will be remembered.

Moreover, digital legacy creation may foster externalized validation: Digital platforms often equate legacy with visible metrics—likes, followers, and shares—rendering self-worth contingent upon continuous online approval (Sabik *et al.*, 2020; Schreurs *et al.*, 2024). Empirical evidence links dependence on social feedback to fluctuations in mood, perceived stress, and reduced subjective well-being (Kross *et al.*, 2021; Verduyn *et al.*, 2017). When self-esteem relies on algorithm-driven feedback, individuals risk experiencing a fragile sense of self that is easily disrupted by online disengagement or lack of recognition. In such cases, the pursuit of being perpetually remembered through data can paradoxically erode authentic engagement with the present, substituting performative preservation for lived experience and reinforcing cycles of anxiety and diminished psychological well-being.

Co-existence: Mediated connectedness and shared presence

The coexistence phase marks a transition from

individual creation to shared engagement, where digital legacy becomes a medium of mediated connectedness between creators and receivers. In this stage, both parties—living creators and their loved ones—interact with the evolving digital identity. Unlike the initial creation phase, which is concerned with personal coping, this phase emphasizes relational well-being and shared presence. Through collaborative reflection and curation, participants negotiate meanings of continuity, loss, and remembrance in real time.

Co-creation transforms legacy-making into a collaborative identity practice that benefits both sides. When creators and receivers jointly curate and refine digital materials, they engage in shared authorship that fosters mutual understanding and emotional bonding (Sokol *et al.*, 2020). This collaboration not only maintains relational closeness but also enhances authenticity in digital identity construction. Studies show that when a digital self is formed under mutual feedback and supervision, it reflects the individual's "true self" more accurately than an idealized image (Coop & Marlow, 2019. Such shared validation promotes self-congruence for the creator and offers receivers a psychologically authentic basis for memory and grief.

Empirical evidence illustrates how this co-creative process unfolds. In families affected by motor neurone disease, patients have co-produced autobiographical video legacies with relatives, forming reciprocal bonds that extend beyond death and provide comfort for both sides (Clabburn *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, web-based storytelling programs allow terminally ill children and their parents to co-curate texts, photos, and voice recordings, transforming distress into shared meaning and emotional resilience (Akard *et al.*, 2020). Through these practices, digital legacy becomes a living bridge between self and others, enhancing relational well-being and reducing existential isolation.

However, this process can also amplify emotional strain. Continuous engagement with legacy content may heighten death awareness and evoke anxiety for both creators and receivers (Coop & Marlow, 2019). Some experience anticipatory grief fatigue—emotional exhaustion from prolonged engagement with impending loss (Sri Takshara & Bhuvaneswari, 2025). Digital mediation can also introduce subtle pressures: Creators may feel obliged to produce a "final version" of themselves, while receivers struggle between authentic interaction and performative documentation. As Sokol *et al.* (2020) caution, excessive focus on recording may "impede the natural process of life moving forward", undermining spontaneous motivational connection. Moreover, the lack of professional or emotional guidance leaves many families to navigate these experiences alone, risking confusion and psychological overload (Coop & Marlow, 2019).

Reception: Grief, meaning and the continuing bond

When the creator has passed away, the digital legacy transitions into artifacts of remembrance sustained solely by receivers. This reception phase shifts the focus from co-creation to interpretation, where bereaved individuals engage with digital legacies to reconstruct meaning and maintain a sense of connection. In this phase, digital media become both therapeutic tools and potential sources of distress, shaping how grief is expressed, negotiated, and prolonged.

Digital mourning spaces such as Facebook memorial pages, online tribute sites, and griefbots enable mourners to sustain continuing bonds—an ongoing sense of presence that helps integrate loss into everyday life (Bassett, 2021; Riggs, 2025). Rather than detachment, grief in the digital age is characterized by interaction and circulation. Nansen *et al.* (2017) note that online memorials "extend the sociality of the funeral", transforming mourning into a shared public ritual where posting, commenting, and sharing become new gestures of remembrance. Such practices allow mourners to reframe loss within a supportive network, promoting collective coping and meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer, 2001).

Riggs (2025) further observes that griefbots, which are AI chatbots trained on a deceased person's digital footprint, offer bereaved individuals a mediated space to "speak" with the dead. For some, these simulated dialogues provide closure, continuity, and relief from abrupt loss, aligning with the therapeutic model of continuing bonds (Field *et al.*, 2005).. Similarly, Santi and Bianchi (2023) argue that digital environments reintroduce death into daily life, normalizing emotional expression and offering flexible rituals that can be revisited and reshaped over time. In this sense, digital legacy functions as a living memorial, sustaining identity and belonging beyond death.

However, digital grief also risks emotional entrapment. Constant exposure to memorial feeds or algorithmic reminders may hinder detachment, reinforcing persistent grief loops (Lingel, 2013). The ubiquitous presence of the deceased in online spaces collapses the temporal boundaries between life and death, potentially exacerbating rumination and anxiety. Bassett (2021) warns that while digital commemoration supports emotional continuity, it may also commodify grief through platform logics that encourage visibility and engagement. Riaz and Mustrafa (2025) similarly highlight the emotional fatigue induced by continuous online mourning, where the performative nature of sharing may blur private sorrow and public display.

The emergence of griefbots intensifies these dilemmas. The capacity to "converse" with the dead raises profound ethical tensions around consent, authenticity, and psychological dependency (Hollanek & Nowaczyk-Basińska, 2024; Riggs, 2025). Overreliance on AI-mediated presence can distort memory, creating an artificial sense of continuity detached from the natural progression of mourning. Thus, while digital technologies can soften the boundary of loss, they also demand new forms of literacy and emotional regulation to prevent the technologization of grief from becoming a source of existential burden.

DISCUSSION

This review has examined the concept of digital legacy, including its psychological motivations and its impacts on well-being across three temporal phases for both creators and receivers. As digital legacy practices are related to industries that are gradually maturing, they are reshaping how people understand existence, memory, and mourning. However, before such transformations become fully integrated into everyday life, it is crucial to recognize the potential psychological and societal risks they entail. Addressing these challenges requires both theoretical refinement and empirical exploration.

Therefore, this section pursues two complementary goals: To identify the theoretical implications of embedding traditional psychological frameworks within digital environments, and to propose practical directions for real-world interventions and the promotion of well-being.

Theoretical implications

Building on prior legacy research, this review extends the psychological foundations of legacy motivation into digital contexts. While existential regulation, relational-generativity, and narrative identity have long accounted for individuals' desire to be remembered, these frameworks face conceptual limitations in technologically mediated contexts. Digital media fundamentally alter the temporal, social, and symbolic assumptions underlying these theories, requiring their reformulation to address how meaning, continuity, and connection are now constructed through data and algorithmic systems.

First, existential regulation, grounded in TMT, posits that individuals cope with death anxiety by maintaining cultural worldviews and self-esteem derived from socially valued standards. However, in digital environments, these meaning systems risk becoming fragmented (Fa, 2025). Social media platforms promote individualized, rapidly shifting norms of value that are reinforced through metrics such as likes, shares, and comments. This algorithmically mediated validation system turns self-esteem into a function of external feedback rather than collective cultural belief, thereby weakening the "shared" dimension of meaning that TMT presupposes. Consequently, digital legacies may preserve traces of one's presence without necessarily transmitting the symbolic meanings that sustain existential security.

Against this backdrop, future research should examine how TMT's dual defense system operates when validation of self and worldview is partly provided by algorithmic and AI-based agents rather than by human communities, especially in the context of creating and engaging with digital legacies and griefbots. A key question is whether cultural worldview defense still functions as a shared, collective buffer, or whether existential defenses increasingly collapse into individualized self-esteem regulation when chatbots and other AI companions can offer on-demand praise, reassurance, and emotional repair. Clarifying these shifts would help to specify how traditional TMT processes are modified in AI-mediated contexts and whether symbolic immortality is sustained more by collective worldviews or by personalized, always-available sources of validation.

Second, relational and generative motives require further theoretical validation in the digital era. Traditionally, legacy creation driven by these motives involves leaving something of tangible or moral value, such as wealth, property, or a good reputation, for one's descendants, thereby maintaining relational bonds and symbolic standing within an in-group (Wade-Benzoni *et al.*, 2010). However, as legacy practices migrate into digital spaces, the definitions of "value" and "connection" become increasingly ambiguous. Digital remains, data assets, and algorithmically sustained profiles lack clear criteria for evaluating their benefit or significance to future generations and are embedded in proprietary platforms and opaque systems. From the perspective of relational and continuing bonds theories, this also raises the question of what it means to "be in relation" when key interactions with the deceased are mediated by non-human agents, such as griefbots or AI avatars.

In such contexts, future research must examine not only how algorithms, archives, and AI technologies reshape the moral and relational capital that legacy creation once secured through direct human transmission, but also whether ties with AI-based representations can provide regulatory benefits comparable to human-to-human bonds, or instead introduce novel risks of dependence, confusion, and relational dissonance.

Finally, narrative identity theory, which treats life stories as sources of coherence and meaning (McAdams, 2008), faces new challenges in digital environments where self-

presentation is continuous, editable, co-created, and often curated by algorithms. Digital tools not only enable individuals to record and share their lives, but also shape how these stories unfold through templates, filters, and recommendation systems that encourage idealized, optimized self-narratives rather than more ambivalent or mundane accounts. The persistent and revisable nature of digital identity further makes narrative "closure" difficult: Once personal legacies are left online, they can be repeatedly edited by relatives, friends, or even strangers, blurring authorship and potentially undermining the coherence of the deceased's digital self. From a narrative identity perspective, the "story" one leaves behind thus becomes a jointly authored, open-ended digital construct, raising questions about whose voice and values it primarily reflects.

Future research should investigate how digital tools and platform architectures can be designed to support more authentic life narration and protect self-continuity under conditions of co-creation, for example, by enhancing transparency of authorship, tracking major revisions, or providing narrative scaffolds that foreground the deceased's own perspective. Clarifying these issues will be crucial for understanding how narrative identity processes operate in technologically mediated contexts and how digitally co-created legacies can maintain a psychologically meaningful sense of identity unity.

Practical implications

Building on the temporal-relational framework proposed in this review, practical directions for research and application can be outlined across the three phases of creation, co-existence, and reception. The focus lies in promoting individual psychological well-being and encouraging the responsible use of digital legacy.

At the creation phase, practice should focus on fostering both digital literacy and existential reflection among individuals who actively curate their digital legacy. From a terror management perspective, early-life education on digital legacy may be integrated into broader death education and public mental health initiatives to help people understand the persistence of their online presence and its long-term existential implications. Concretely, this could include school- or community-based programs that teach how digital traces endure beyond one's lifetime, encouraging value-consistent and prosocial online behavior (*e.g.*, reducing cyberbullying or the sharing of harmful content) by highlighting that such traces may become part of one's legacy. Clinical and counseling settings might also incorporate structured "legacy planning" interventions in which individuals are guided to create reflective, value-oriented digital archives rather than fragmented or purely performative self-presentations.

At the level of platform design, a practical direction is the development of user-facing dashboards that make posthumous settings visible and manageable (*e.g.*, specifying what happens to accounts after death, which contents are preserved, and who may access them), thereby giving users concrete tools to align their digital legacy with their values.

During the co-existence phase, when both creators and receivers participate in digital legacy construction, future research and practice should emphasize guided co-creation and emotionally informed support. Drawing on narrative identity theory, collaborative legacy editing can be used as a structured life-review process for older adults, terminally ill patients, and individuals living with chronic illness—groups that often experience heightened mortality awareness. Practically, this may involve facilitated sessions in which patients and family members work together to select, annotate, and contextualize digital materials, with prompts that focus on values, key relationships, and turning points rather than only "highlight reels". Empirical research is needed to examine how such joint practices may transform anticipatory death anxiety into emotional acceptance and social connectedness, integrating mortality into one's life narrative in more constructive ways. Interdisciplinary collaboration among psychologists, designers, and healthcare providers could further support the development of grief-informed digital tools and co-design frameworks that scaffold safe and meaningful legacy creation (*e.g.*, built-in pause functions, emotion check-ins, or referrals to professional support when intense distress is detected).

At the reception phase, when digital legacies become the primary medium through which survivors engage with the memory of the deceased, research and practice should focus on promoting receivers' well-being through digital grief literacy and the cultivation of healthy continuing bonds. In line with relational and continuing bonds theories, digital mourning spaces such as memorial pages and AI-based griefbots need to be designed so that they support adaptive integration of loss rather than emotional entrapment.

Future studies should clarify how specific design elements—such as notification frequency, algorithmic reminders (*e.g.*, "memories" resurfacings), and different levels of interactivity—shape grief trajectories and psychological adaptation. On the educational side, psychoeducational resources on platforms could help users understand the potential benefits and risks of interacting with digital legacies and griefbots, encouraging them to use such tools as one coping resource among others rather than as a sole or escalating source of attachment. For practitioners, guidelines are needed on when and how to recommend digital memorial practices in bereavement care, and when to

caution against intensive use (for example, in early acute grief or among highly vulnerable individuals).

Finally, the practical implications of digital legacy cannot be separated from their ethical implications. Ethical concerns surrounding digital legacy have received increasing attention, and emerging debates converge on several core principles: Respect for posthumous privacy and autonomy, data minimization and proportionality, and transparency about how posthumous data are processed and to what ends (Lindemann, 2022; Morris & Brubaker, 2025). Viewed through the three-phase framework, these principles can be translated into more concrete requirements. In the creation phase, good practice involves explicit, informed consent for posthumous data use and simple, accessible options to opt in or out of AI-based services. In the co-existence phase, clear rules are needed about who may edit or curate a person's legacy, how conflicts with the deceased's stated preferences are handled, and how collaborative consent is documented. In the reception phase, particular care is required for AI-mediated agents representing the dead, including clear disclosure that users are interacting with an AI system, conservative default settings for the frequency and intensity of contact, and easy "off" or "sunset" options, especially for children and highly vulnerable mourners. Embedding such phase-specific norms into policy, design, and clinical or community practice can help ensure that digital legacy initiatives support, rather than undermine, psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION

Digital legacy represents a new frontier for understanding how humans negotiate mortality, continuity, and connection in the digital age. As discussed in this review, digital legacy extends beyond the technological afterlife of data: It constitutes a socio-psychological phenomenon through which identity, memory, and meaning are continually reconstructed. The conceptual foundation established in earlier sections highlights that digital traces—once passive by-products of online behavior—have evolved into intentional, communicative, and relational artifacts that bridge personal and collective continuity.

Building on this foundation, the review integrated existential, relational, and narrative perspectives to explain how digital legacy functions as an active psychological process linking creators and receivers across time. The proposed temporal-relational framework encompassing the phases of creation, co-existence, and reception, situates digital legacy as a dynamic ecosystem in which well-being is continuously shaped through interaction, reflection, and remembrance.

Theoretically, this review connects traditional models of mortality management with emerging digital realities, suggesting that symbolic mortality, social bonding, and narrative coherence must be reconsidered within algorithmic and networked contexts. Practically, it provides a foundation for designing interventions that promote digital literacy, guided co-creation, and adaptive mourning—encouraging both individuals and institutions to approach digital legacy as an ethical and psychological responsibility.

As the boundaries between life, death, and data continue to blur, future research must explore how technological mediation reshapes emotional regulation, identity continuity, and moral agency. Digital legacy thus invites a broader rethinking of what it means to live and to be remembered when our traces, rather than our bodies, become the enduring vessels of self and meaning.

DECLARATION

Acknowledgement
None.

Author contributions
Fa H: Conceptualization, Writing—Original draft preparation, Writing—Reviewing and Editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Source of funding
None.

Ethical approval
Not applicable.

Informed consent
Not applicable.

Conflict of interest
The author declare no competing interest.

Use of large language models, AI and machine learning tools
GPT-5 was used to polish the English expressions and improve the readability of the text. The author takes full responsibility for the content and interpretations.

Data availability statement
No additional data.

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