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Modern Progress and Psychological Well-Being in Malaysia: Understanding the Paradox

Mohamad Murad Mahyudin Muheji (Ph.D)

Universiti Malaya Centre for Continuing Education (UMCCed), Universiti Malaya

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ABSTRACT: Economic, technological and digital advancement is commonly associated with improvements in quality of life. Recent mental health trends in Malaysia, however, suggest a more complex reality. Material progress has not necessarily been accompanied by comparable improvements in psychological well-being. This study examines the paradox of modern progress and its implications for psychological well-being in the Malaysian context. A qualitative document analysis was conducted using peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy documents and selected Islamic primary sources published between 2000 and 2026. Content analysis, thematic analysis and conceptual synthesis were employed to identify recurring patterns across the literature. The analysis identified three interrelated manifestations of the paradox, namely lifestyle stress, digital social comparison and declining social relationship quality. These findings suggest that such challenges emerge when economic and technological development advances more rapidly than the capacity of individuals and social institutions to adapt. Contemporary sociology and Islamic spiritual ethics are employed as complementary analytical lenses to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this relationship. The principal contribution of the study is the development of an integrated conceptual framework that brings together social, psychological and spiritual dimensions to explain the relationship between modern progress and psychological well-being in Malaysia. The findings also suggest that assessments of national progress should extend beyond economic and technological performance to include psychological and social well-being.

KEYWORDS: digital society; Islamic spiritual ethics; Malaysia; modern progress; psychological well-being

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Malaysia has experienced rapid economic, technological and digital transformation. Household internet access reached 96.8% in 2024, reflecting the widespread integration of digital technologies into everyday life (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024). The Malaysian Internet Users Survey further reported that 11.7% of internet users spent more than 18 hours online each day, with young people accounting for the largest proportion of this group (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2024). Advances in artificial intelligence, rapid urbanisation and innovation-driven public policies have further reshaped the ways Malaysians work, communicate and participate in society. Such developments are generally associated with improvements in quality of life. The Malaysian experience, however, points to a more complex reality. Continued economic growth and expanding digital connectivity have not necessarily been accompanied by comparable improvements in psychological well-being. Persistent stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, loneliness and fear of missing out associated with social media have become increasingly visible alongside these developments. This apparent contradiction forms the basis of the paradox of modern progress, which is defined in this article as a condition in which rapid economic and technological advancement is not matched by comparable gains in psychological well-being. Recent national evidence illustrates this concern.

The 2023 National Health and Morbidity Survey reported that 4.6% of adults experienced depressive symptoms, while 16.5% of children and adolescents were affected by mental health problems (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2023). These figures indicate that psychological well-being remains a significant public health concern despite continued material progress. Similar trends have also been observed internationally, where mental health has become one of the leading public health challenges worldwide (World Health Organization, 2022). Existing scholarship has examined many aspects of this issue, although most studies have focused on individual dimensions in isolation. Some have investigated the relationship between social media use and mental health (Hasbie et al., 2024), whereas others have examined loneliness in contemporary society (Kassim et al., 2026). Although these studies provide valuable insights, they do not explain how different dimensions of modern progress interact within a single conceptual framework to influence psychological well-being. A further limitation concerns the theoretical perspectives adopted in previous research. Contemporary sociological approaches, including Durkheim's concept of *anomie* and Bauman's notion of *liquid modernity*, have provided important explanations of social change. Far less attention has been given to Islamic spiritual concepts, particularly *sakinah* (inner tranquillity) and *tawazun* (balance), as complementary analytical perspectives. The paradox of modern progress is not treated here as an independent theory. Instead, it serves as a conceptual framework for explaining the complex relationship between economic, technological and material development and the challenges affecting psychological well-being.

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Against this background, the present study examines the paradox of modern progress and its relationship with psychological well-being in Malaysian society. It develops an integrated conceptual framework by synthesising contemporary sociological perspectives with Islamic spiritual ethics. Building on this synthesis, the study proposes strategies for strengthening psychological well-being while supporting sustainable development in an increasingly modern society. The research adopts a qualitative document analysis based on peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy documents published between 2000 and 2026 and selected Islamic primary sources. Its principal contribution lies in offering a broader conceptual understanding of the relationship between modern progress and psychological well-being in Malaysia. The proposed framework also provides a foundation for future public policy discussions and contributes to the growing body of scholarship on psychological well-being in the context of rapid social transformation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed in this article is organised into six interrelated sections. It begins by examining contemporary sociological perspectives on modern progress, followed by major approaches to psychological well-being. The review then discusses contemporary challenges to psychological well-being and evaluates previous studies on the paradox of modern progress. Building on these discussions, the review introduces Islamic spiritual ethics as a complementary analytical perspective before identifying the conceptual gap addressed by this article. Collectively, these sections provide the theoretical foundation for the conceptual framework developed in this study.

2.1 Modern Progress from a Contemporary Sociological Perspective

Modern progress extends beyond economic growth, technological innovation and physical development. From a sociological perspective, it also transforms social structures, individual identity and patterns of human interaction. Contemporary sociology offers several complementary perspectives for understanding these transformations. Giddens (1991) argues that modernity fundamentally reshapes the relationship between individuals, social institutions, time and space. As traditional social structures become less influential, individuals assume greater responsibility for constructing their own identities. Beck (1992), in contrast, conceptualises modern society as a *risk society*, arguing that scientific and technological advancement generates new forms of risk that are increasingly difficult to anticipate and manage. Bauman (2000) further develops this discussion through the concept of *liquid modernity*, describing contemporary social relationships as increasingly fluid, fragile and unstable. Although these scholars approach modernity from different theoretical traditions, they converge on a common argument. Modern progress extends beyond economic growth, technological innovation and physical development. It also reshapes social organisation, interpersonal relationships and everyday human experience. These structural changes create new social conditions that may influence psychological well-being beyond what can be explained by economic or technological indicators alone. It should be noted that Giddens, Beck and Bauman did not develop their theories specifically to explain psychological well-being. Their work primarily addresses social transformation, institutional change, risk and human relationships in contemporary society. In this article, their perspectives are therefore employed as analytical lenses for understanding the broader context of modern progress rather than as theories of psychological well-being. Drawing upon these perspectives, modern progress is understood as a process that simultaneously generates opportunities and new forms of social challenge. This understanding provides the conceptual basis for examining the paradox of modern progress developed in the following sections.

2.2 Psychological Well-being

Psychological well-being has been conceptualised from several theoretical perspectives, each emphasising different dimensions of human flourishing. Among the most influential are Ryff's model of psychological well-being, Diener's concept of subjective well-being and Veenhoven's work on the relationship between happiness and long-term health. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding well-being from complementary viewpoints. Ryff (1989) conceptualises psychological well-being from a eudaimonic perspective, arguing that well-being extends beyond the experience of positive emotions. Her model comprises six interrelated dimensions, namely self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth. Psychological well-being, therefore, reflects an individual's ability to function effectively while pursuing a meaningful and fulfilling life. Diener (1984) approaches well-being from the perspective of subjective well-being. This framework focuses on how individuals evaluate their own lives through life satisfaction together with the balance between positive and negative emotions. Unlike Ryff's model, which emphasises psychological functioning, Diener's perspective highlights personal evaluations of life experiences. Veenhoven (2008) extends this discussion by demonstrating that happiness is associated with favourable long-term health outcomes. His findings suggest that individuals who experience higher levels of well-being are generally more likely to enjoy better physical health, greater resilience and longer life expectancy. These observations reinforce the view that psychological well-being represents more than an emotional state. It also contributes to broader aspects of human health and quality of life. Although these perspectives differ in emphasis, they share a common assumption that psychological well-being is multidimensional and cannot be reduced to the absence of mental illness alone. Well-being encompasses emotional balance, meaningful relationships, personal development and positive life evaluation. Despite their substantial contributions, these frameworks pay relatively limited attention to the spiritual dimension of human well-being. They primarily examine psychological functioning and subjective evaluation from secular perspectives, while the relationship between individuals and the Divine is not explicitly incorporated into their conceptualisations. This limitation provides an important rationale for considering Islamic spiritual ethics as a complementary analytical perspective in the present discussion.

2.3 Contemporary Challenges to Psychological Well-being

Rapid technological advancement and modern lifestyles have introduced new challenges to psychological well-being. Contemporary research consistently identifies chronic stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, loneliness and problematic social media use as among the most significant concerns associated with life in the digital era. Rather than occurring independently, these challenges often reinforce one another and shape individuals' overall psychological well-being. One major challenge arises from the changing nature of work. Digital technologies have blurred the boundaries between professional and personal life by enabling continuous work-related communication beyond conventional working hours. Such conditions create forms of emotional exhaustion that differ from traditional occupational stress because they are no longer confined to specific

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workplaces or working hours (Ramadhan et al., 2024). At the same time, constant exposure to digital notifications and information overload has increased anxiety, illustrating that technological progress may generate new psychological demands alongside its practical benefits.

Loneliness represents another important challenge despite unprecedented levels of digital connectivity. Putnam (2000) argues that declining participation in community organisations has weakened social capital over recent decades. Turkle (2011) similarly contends that digital communication often creates an illusion of connection without fostering meaningful relationships. Together, these perspectives suggest that loneliness in contemporary society stems less from a lack of interaction than from changes in the quality of social relationships. A systematic review covering 113 countries further identifies loneliness as a major global public health concern (Surkalim et al., 2022), while Holt-Lunstad (2021) demonstrates that prolonged social isolation is associated with health risks comparable to well-established physical risk factors. Another challenge concerns *fear of missing out* (FOMO), which refers to persistent anxiety that others are experiencing rewarding events from which one is absent. The widespread use of social media encourages continuous comparison with carefully curated representations of other people's lives, often leading individuals to evaluate themselves against unrealistic standards. Ansari et al. (2024) conclude that the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being is neither simple nor uniform, but depends largely on patterns and purposes of use.

Evidence from Malaysia reflects similar patterns. A study involving public university students reported significant associations between depression, anxiety, loneliness and internet addiction (Muhamad et al., 2026). Likewise, Maskun et al. (2025) found that Malaysian Generation Y faces distinctive challenges in balancing digital engagement with personal well-being. These findings indicate that the psychological consequences of modern progress are not confined to global contexts but are also evident within Malaysian society. Nevertheless, the relationship between technology and psychological well-being should not be interpreted in deterministic terms. Orben (2020) argues that public concern over new technologies has recurred throughout history and that their overall impact on well-being may be smaller than frequently assumed. This perspective highlights the importance of avoiding simplistic explanations that attribute declining psychological well-being solely to technological development. Taken together, previous studies have generally examined these challenges as separate phenomena. The present discussion instead views them as interconnected expressions of the broader paradox of modern progress. This perspective provides the foundation for developing a more integrated conceptual understanding in the following section.

2.4 Previous Studies on the Paradox of Modern Progress

Previous research has examined the relationship between modern progress and psychological well-being from different perspectives. Five studies were selected because they represent the themes most closely aligned with the focus of this article. Collectively, they reveal three recurring limitations, namely a narrow emphasis on single dimensions, restricted population coverage and limited attention to spiritual ethics. One group of studies concentrates on individual dimensions of modern life. Kassim et al. (2026) analyse loneliness through the sociological perspectives of Durkheim and Bauman, arguing that material progress does not necessarily reduce feelings of social isolation. Hasbie et al. (2024) examine the influence of information and communication technology on mental health and conclude that its effects depend largely on patterns of use. Ansari et al. (2024) similarly report that the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being remains complex and inconsistent across studies. Although these investigations provide valuable insights into their respective topics, they examine each dimension separately without explaining how different aspects of modern progress interact. Another group of studies focuses on specific populations. Maskun et al. (2025) investigate digital well-being among Malaysian Generation Y and identify distinctive challenges in balancing productivity with personal well-being. Twenge (2020) reports increasing levels of depression among adolescents in the United States alongside rising smartphone use. While both studies contribute important empirical evidence, their findings are largely confined to particular age groups and cultural settings. Such limitations reduce their applicability to Malaysian society as a whole. A further limitation concerns the absence of spiritual ethics as an analytical perspective. The selected studies rely primarily on sociological and psychological frameworks developed in Western scholarship. Spiritual values are rarely considered as factors that may strengthen psychological resilience or shape responses to the pressures of modern life. As a result, explanations of psychological well-being remain fragmented across separate themes rather than integrated within a broader conceptual framework. The literature reviewed here has not identified any study that simultaneously brings together multiple dimensions of modern progress, examines psychological well-being within the broader Malaysian context and incorporates Islamic spiritual ethics as a complementary analytical perspective. This gap provides the basis for developing the conceptual framework proposed in the present article.

2.5 Contemporary Sociology and Islamic Spiritual Ethics

Previous sections have shown that contemporary sociological and psychological perspectives provide valuable explanations of social change and psychological well-being. These perspectives, however, pay relatively limited attention to spirituality as a dimension of human well-being. Islamic intellectual tradition offers a complementary perspective through concepts that emphasise inner tranquillity, balance and moral orientation. In this article, four concepts are considered particularly relevant, namely *sakinah*, *nafs al-mutma'innah*, *tawazun* and *wasatiyyah*. The Qur'an describes *sakinah* as a state of tranquillity bestowed by Allah upon believers, particularly during periods of hardship. Surah Al-Fath (48:4) associates this tranquillity with the strengthening of faith, while Surah Al-Fajr (89:27–28) refers to *nafs al-mutma'innah*, the tranquil soul that returns to its Lord in a state of peace and acceptance. These concepts indicate that psychological well-being in the Islamic tradition extends beyond emotional comfort and is closely connected with spiritual fulfilment and the relationship between human beings and Allah. Islamic ethics also emphasises *tawazun* (balance) as a guiding principle for human life. Surah Al-Qasas (28:77) encourages believers to pursue success in the Hereafter without neglecting their responsibilities in this world. This principle promotes a balanced approach to material achievement and spiritual development rather than privileging one at the expense of the other. A related concept, *wasatiyyah* (moderation), is presented in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:143), where the Muslim community is described as a middle nation.

Together, these principles suggest that human well-being depends not only on material success but also on balance, moderation and moral responsibility. Within the Malaysian policy context, the importance of mental and spiritual well-being has also received increasing recognition. The Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM, n.d.) argues that national well-being should encompass spiritual and psychological dimensions alongside material development. This position reflects a broader understanding of well-being that extends beyond

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economic indicators alone. Rather than combining contemporary sociology and Islamic spiritual ethics at the epistemological level, this article employs them as complementary analytical perspectives for interpreting the same phenomenon. Contemporary sociology explains how structural transformation, institutional change and shifting social relationships generate new psychological challenges. Islamic spiritual ethics offers additional insight into the internal resources that enable individuals to respond to these challenges. Viewed together, these perspectives provide a more comprehensive conceptual understanding of the paradox of modern progress and psychological well-being in Malaysian society.

2.6 Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

The literature reviewed in this chapter reveals several important gaps that provide the rationale for the present article. Contemporary sociological perspectives developed by Giddens, Beck and Bauman offer valuable explanations of structural change associated with modern progress. These perspectives, however, were not designed specifically to explain psychological well-being. Likewise, the psychological well-being frameworks proposed by Ryff, Diener and Veenhoven provide multidimensional accounts of well-being but give relatively little attention to spirituality as an integral dimension of human flourishing Previous studies on the paradox of modern progress exhibit similar limitations. Kassim et al. (2026), Hasbie et al. (2024) and Ansari et al. (2024) each examine a single dimension of the phenomenon, focusing respectively on loneliness, information and communication technology, and social media. Maskun et al. (2025) and Twenge (2020), meanwhile, concentrate on particular population groups, limiting the wider applicability of their findings. Collectively, these studies rarely integrate sociological and psychological perspectives with Islamic spiritual ethics within a single conceptual framework. The present article addresses these limitations in three ways. First, it brings together multiple dimensions of modern progress that have largely been examined in isolation, including economic development, technological change and contemporary lifestyles. Second, it adopts a broader societal perspective by examining psychological well-being within the Malaysian context rather than focusing on a specific generation or social group. Third, it incorporates Islamic spiritual ethics as a complementary analytical perspective alongside contemporary sociology. Based on the literature reviewed, such an integrated approach has not been identified in previous research. The proposed framework conceptualises psychological well-being as the outcome of interactions among structural social change, individual psychological experience and spiritual resilience. Rather than treating these dimensions independently, it explains how they intersect in shaping the paradox of modern progress. This framework therefore represents the principal conceptual contribution of the article and provides the analytical foundation for the discussion that follows. Based on the synthesis of the literature and the research gaps identified above, a conceptual framework was developed to explain the relationship between modern progress, the paradox of modern progress and psychological well-being in Malaysian society. The framework is presented in Figure 1.

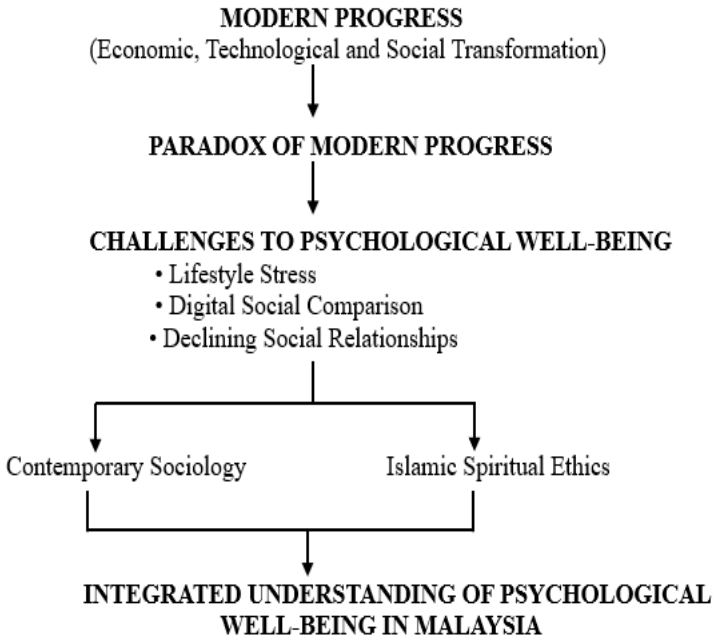


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Paradox of Modern Progress and Psychological Well-being in Malaysia.
Source: Developed by the author based on the literature synthesis

Figure 1 illustrates how modern progress gives rise to the paradox of modern progress, which subsequently influences psychological well-being. This relationship is interpreted through two complementary analytical perspectives, namely contemporary sociology and Islamic spiritual ethics. The framework serves as the foundation for the analysis presented in the Findings and Discussion section.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This article adopts a qualitative research design based on document analysis. The design is appropriate because the primary objective is to develop a conceptual framework through the synthesis of existing literature rather than to test causal relationships empirically. Bowen (2009) defines

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document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating printed and electronic materials. This approach enables the analysis of complex social issues by drawing on credible and publicly accessible documentary sources.

3.2 Data Sources

The analysis draws upon academic publications, official reports and primary Islamic sources relevant to modern progress, psychological well-being and Islamic spiritual ethics. Academic sources include peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books covering contemporary sociology, psychological well-being and previous studies on the paradox of modern progress. Official documents comprise reports published by the Ministry of Health Malaysia, the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, the World Health Organization and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Qur'anic verses and authentic hadith were also consulted to examine concepts related to inner tranquillity and balanced living within the Islamic tradition. Documents were selected according to four criteria, namely relevance to the research objectives, credibility of the source, accessibility of the original publication and publication by recognised academic or official institutions. The review primarily covers publications produced between 2000 and 2026 to capture both foundational theories and recent developments. Statistical information was verified against original sources to minimise the risk of outdated or inaccurate reporting.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in three sequential stages. Content analysis was first applied to official reports and statistical documents to identify patterns related to psychological well-being in Malaysia. Thematic analysis was then undertaken to identify recurring themes across the academic literature concerning modern progress, psychological challenges and Islamic spiritual ethics. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis involved repeated reading of the literature, initial coding, theme development and theme refinement. The final stage involved conceptual synthesis, through which findings from the previous analyses were integrated into a unified conceptual framework. Rather than imposing predetermined assumptions, the framework emerged from patterns that appeared consistently across multiple sources. Credibility was strengthened through cross-checking evidence from academic publications and official reports. This article does not adopt a systematic review protocol such as PRISMA because its objective is conceptual development rather than comprehensive evidence synthesis.

3.4 Limitations

The article relies exclusively on published documents and does not include primary data collected through interviews or surveys. Consequently, the findings represent a conceptual interpretation of existing knowledge rather than direct evidence of individual experiences. Future research employing quantitative, qualitative or mixed-method approaches would be valuable for empirically examining the relationships proposed in the conceptual framework.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Lifestyle Stress in Modern Society

Document analysis identifies lifestyle stress as one of the earliest manifestations of the paradox of modern progress in Malaysian society. Economic development has transformed the organisation of work and everyday life. At the same time, it has introduced new forms of psychological pressure that were far less evident in earlier generations. A recurring theme across the literature is the increasingly blurred boundary between work and personal life. Digital technologies enable employees to remain connected to work beyond conventional office hours, creating forms of emotional exhaustion that differ from traditional occupational stress because they are no longer confined to specific workplaces or working hours (Ramadhan et al., 2024). As a result, many employees find it increasingly difficult to separate professional responsibilities from family and personal life. This pattern is consistent with Giddens' (1991) argument that modernity restructures the relationship between time and space, gradually weakening the regulatory role of traditional institutions. At the same time, productivity-oriented cultures encourage individuals to evaluate their self-worth through achievement and measurable performance. Those who struggle to meet increasingly demanding expectations may experience feelings of inadequacy, even when such expectations are unrealistic. Beck's (1992) concept of the risk society provides a useful explanation for this situation by suggesting that modern progress generates new forms of risk that individuals are expected to manage independently. National evidence further illustrates this pattern.

The Malaysian Happiness Index identifies work-life balance as one of the factors associated with overall life satisfaction (Razak, 2022). In addition, the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2023 reported that 4.6 per cent of Malaysian adults experienced symptoms of depression, while 16.5 per cent of children and adolescents faced mental health problems (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2023). These findings should not be attributed solely to economic conditions such as inflation or labour market uncertainty. The documents reviewed suggest that psychological stress becomes more complex when economic pressures interact with technological change and contemporary lifestyles. Household internet access in Malaysia reached 96.8 per cent in 2024 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024), while 11.7 per cent of internet users reported spending more than 18 hours online each day (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2024). Internet access alone does not indicate digital dependency. Nevertheless, prolonged online engagement may increase exposure to technology-related pressures. This issue is examined further in the following section. Taken together, the evidence indicates that modern progress has not eliminated everyday stress but has transformed both its sources and its expression. Rather than reducing the demands of daily life, rapid economic and technological development has created new forms of pressure that are increasingly embedded in everyday routines. Lifestyle stress therefore represents the first manifestation of the paradox of modern progress identified in this study.

4.2 Social Comparison in the Digital Environment

Document analysis identifies digital social comparison as another manifestation of the paradox of modern progress in Malaysian society. Although social media has expanded opportunities for communication, it has also introduced new forms of psychological pressure. Platforms originally designed to connect people increasingly encourage users to compare themselves with carefully curated representations of other people's lives. The literature consistently identifies social comparison as one of the principal mechanisms linking social media use to psychological well-being. Users are repeatedly exposed to selective portrayals of success, happiness and achievement, whereas the ordinary challenges and imperfections of daily

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life remain largely invisible. Ansari et al. (2024) argue that the relationship between social media use and psychological well-being is neither straightforward nor universal. Its effects depend largely on how and why digital platforms are used. This interpretation is consistent with Bauman's (2000) concept of *liquid modernity*, which describes contemporary social relationships as increasingly fluid and unstable. Emotional security that was once grounded in enduring interpersonal relationships is gradually replaced by short-lived and rapidly changing digital interactions. One consequence of this environment is fear of missing out (FOMO), a persistent concern that others are enjoying rewarding experiences from which one is excluded. Individuals gradually shift from evaluating their lives according to personal fulfilment to judging themselves against the online experiences of others. Similar patterns have been observed in Malaysia. Norasid and Ashaari (2024) found that continuous social comparison through social media shapes how individuals evaluate their quality of life.

National evidence further illustrates the scale of digital engagement. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2024) reported that 11.7 per cent of internet users spend more than 18 hours online each day, with young people representing the largest proportion of this group. Research involving Malaysian public university students also identified significant associations between depression, anxiety, loneliness and internet addiction (Muhamad et al., 2026). These findings suggest that excessive digital engagement may have important implications for psychological well-being. Even so, the evidence does not support the conclusion that technology alone is responsible for declining psychological well-being. Orben (2020) notes that public concern about new technologies has emerged repeatedly throughout history and that their effects are often overstated. The documents reviewed therefore indicate that social media operates alongside broader social and individual influences rather than functioning as an independent cause of psychological distress. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the psychological consequences of social media depend more on patterns of use than on the technology itself. Digital platforms can strengthen social connections, but they may also encourage individuals to base their self-worth on external validation rather than meaningful interpersonal relationships. Digital social comparison therefore represents the second manifestation of the paradox of modern progress identified in this study.

4.3 The Quality of Social Relationships in the Digital Age

Document analysis identifies declining social relationship quality as the third manifestation of the paradox of modern progress in Malaysian society. The preceding sections discussed lifestyle stress and digital social comparison. A further manifestation concerns the changing nature of human relationships. Although people today have more opportunities to communicate than any previous generation, more frequent interaction does not necessarily lead to stronger social bonds. A recurring theme across the literature is the gradual decline in community participation. Putnam (2000) argues that involvement in civic organisations and neighbourhood activities has steadily decreased over recent decades, contributing to the erosion of social capital. In this context, social capital refers to networks of trust and reciprocal relationships that enable communities to function cohesively. Putnam explains the structural processes through which social capital weakens, whereas Durkheim (1951) explains its consequences for individuals through the concept of *anomie*. As shared norms lose their influence, individuals become increasingly disconnected from society and experience a diminished sense of belonging and purpose. Taken together, these perspectives explain both the structural origins and the individual consequences of declining social cohesion.

Turkle (2011) further argues that digital technologies often create the illusion of companionship without fostering meaningful relationships. Brief exchanges through text messages, emojis and social networking platforms frequently replace face-to-face interactions that require time, attention and emotional commitment. As a result, individuals may accumulate hundreds of online contacts while still feeling that no one truly understands them. This helps explain why loneliness continues to increase despite unprecedented opportunities for communication. A systematic review covering 113 countries identified loneliness as a major global public health concern (Surkalim et al., 2022). Further evidence comes from Holt-Lunstad (2021), who demonstrates that social isolation and loneliness are associated with health risks comparable to well-established risk factors such as smoking and obesity. These findings suggest that the consequences of the paradox of modern progress extend beyond psychological well-being and may also affect physical health and wider societal well-being.

The evidence does not indicate that digital technology alone is responsible for declining relationship quality. Broader social changes, including urbanisation, occupational mobility and the increasing prevalence of smaller family structures, also contribute to this development. Digital technologies can strengthen existing relationships by enabling families and friends to remain connected across geographical distances. Even so, they are less capable of replacing the emotional depth and mutual support that develop through sustained face-to-face interaction. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the paradox lies not in reduced opportunities for communication but in the changing character of social interaction. Modern technologies have made people easier to contact, yet not necessarily easier to understand. Declining social relationship quality therefore represents the third manifestation of the paradox of modern progress identified in this study.

4.4 The Relationship between Modern Progress and Psychological Well-being

The documents reviewed indicate that the relationship between modern progress and psychological well-being in Malaysia is neither simple nor linear. Economic growth and technological advancement do not automatically improve psychological well-being. Their influence depends on how effectively individuals and social institutions adapt to rapid social change. The three manifestations discussed in the preceding sections, namely lifestyle stress, digital social comparison and declining social relationship quality, should not be viewed as independent developments. Instead, they represent different expressions of the same underlying process. Economic and technological development has accelerated rapidly, whereas the capacity of individuals and social institutions to adapt has not always kept pace. The interpretation proposed here represents a conceptual synthesis derived from the literature rather than an empirically tested model. The literature suggests that lifestyle stress may encourage greater engagement with social media as a way of coping with everyday pressures. Increased exposure to digital environments may, in turn, create more opportunities for social comparison and intensify psychological strain. Persistent comparison can also reduce the time and attention devoted to meaningful face-to-face relationships. As these relationships weaken, individuals may have fewer sources of emotional support for coping with everyday stress. These processes are best understood as mutually reinforcing rather than as a simple sequence of cause and effect. The statistical evidence reviewed in this study provides further context for this interpretation. The National Health and Morbidity Survey 2023 reported symptoms of depression among 4.6 per cent of Malaysian adults and mental health problems among 16.5 per cent of children and adolescents (Ministry of

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Health Malaysia, 2023). During the same period, household internet access reached 96.8 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024), while 11.7 per cent of internet users spent more than 18 hours online each day (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2024). These figures indicate that expanding digital connectivity and growing mental health challenges have occurred concurrently. They should not, however, be interpreted as evidence of a direct causal relationship.

The theoretical perspectives discussed in Chapter 2 help explain why these developments occur simultaneously. Giddens (1991) argues that modernity reshapes everyday life by transforming the organisation of time and space. Beck (1992) explains that modernisation also generates new forms of risk that individuals increasingly manage without the support of traditional institutions. Bauman (2000) argues that social relationships have become more fluid and less stable under conditions of late modernity. Taken together, these perspectives explain why material and technological progress does not necessarily lead to higher levels of psychological well-being. Collectively, the evidence suggests that psychological well-being is shaped by the interaction of multiple social processes rather than by a single factor. Lifestyle stress, digital social comparison and declining social relationship quality ultimately influence psychological well-being by disrupting emotional balance, weakening meaningful relationships and reducing individuals' capacity to maintain healthy psychological functioning. These interconnected manifestations provide a clearer explanation of why the relationship between modern progress and psychological well-being cannot be understood through a single social or psychological factor alone. A more comprehensive interpretation therefore requires attention to social structures, psychological processes and spiritual values. The following section considers how spiritual values complement this broader analytical framework.

4.5 Integrating Contemporary Sociology and Islamic Spiritual Ethics

This section applies the two analytical perspectives introduced in Chapter 2 to the three manifestations discussed in the preceding sections. Contemporary sociology and Islamic spiritual ethics are not combined at the epistemological level because they are grounded in different intellectual traditions. Instead, they are used as complementary perspectives for interpreting the same social phenomenon. The documents reviewed indicate that contemporary sociology explains the external dimensions of the paradox of modern progress. It focuses on structural transformation, institutional change and shifting patterns of social relationships that influence psychological well-being. Islamic spiritual ethics complements this perspective by drawing attention to the internal dimensions of human experience, particularly the values and moral orientation that shape individual responses to social change. The discussion in Section 4.1 highlighted the growing difficulty of maintaining clear boundaries between work and personal life. From the perspective of Islamic spiritual ethics, the concept of *tawazun* provides a useful framework for understanding this challenge. Surah Al-Qasas (28:77) advocates a balanced approach to worldly responsibilities and spiritual commitments. Viewed through this perspective, lifestyle stress reflects not only increasing work demands but also the absence of a value framework that helps individuals establish appropriate priorities.

The discussion in Section 4.2 showed that digital social comparison often encourages individuals to evaluate themselves through external recognition. The concept of *sakinah*, described in Surah Al-Fath (48:4) as tranquillity granted by Allah, offers an alternative foundation for psychological well-being by directing attention towards inner stability rather than external validation. From this perspective, vulnerability to social comparison may depend on the extent to which personal well-being is shaped by external approval instead of inner spiritual fulfilment. The discussion in Section 4.3 demonstrated that contemporary communication technologies facilitate social interaction but do not necessarily strengthen meaningful relationships. Islamic tradition regards interpersonal relationships as an important ethical responsibility. A hadith narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim emphasises the relationship between the condition of the heart and human conduct. Viewed from this perspective, the quality of social relationships is shaped not only by external social structures but also by an individual's moral and spiritual condition. Taken together, these perspectives provide different levels of explanation for the same phenomenon. From a sociological perspective, psychological well-being is influenced by structural transformation and changing patterns of social life. Islamic spiritual ethics, in contrast, emphasises meaning, values and inner resilience. Considered together, these perspectives offer a broader understanding of the paradox of modern progress than either approach can provide independently. This interpretation should nevertheless be understood as a conceptual synthesis derived from the literature rather than as an empirically validated model.

4.6 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have practical implications across multiple levels of society, from individuals to policymakers. These implications can be viewed from two complementary perspectives. The first concerns operational measures that support psychological well-being in everyday life, whereas the second relates to broader policy considerations for defining and evaluating national progress. At the individual level, understanding the mechanisms underlying the paradox of modern progress may help people recognise the sources of psychological strain in their daily lives. The concepts of *tawazun* and *sakinah* discussed in Section 4.5 provide a useful framework for maintaining balance and personal well-being. For Muslim individuals, these principles may be expressed through established religious practices such as daily prayers or regular self-reflection, creating opportunities to restore emotional balance and reassess personal priorities. Malaysia has already introduced initiatives that provide psychological support, including *Let's TALK Minda Sihat* and the *HEAL Helpline* (Ministry of Health Malaysia, n.d.; Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2026). The findings suggest that these initiatives could be further strengthened by incorporating approaches that promote meaning, purpose and personal values alongside conventional psychological support. Educational institutions also have an important role in promoting digital literacy and psychological well-being. School and university programmes can move beyond raising awareness of technological risks by encouraging students to reflect on the values that shape their online behaviour and self-evaluation. Such initiatives may help young people develop a stronger internal basis for self-worth rather than relying primarily on external validation through digital platforms.

Workplaces represent another important setting for intervention. Employers and labour policymakers can contribute by promoting healthier boundaries between work and personal life. Policies that discourage unnecessary work-related communication outside office hours, together with programmes that support work-life balance and employee well-being, may reduce some of the pressures associated with contemporary working environments. These measures respond directly to the lifestyle stress identified in Section 4.1. Families and local communities remain essential sources of emotional support despite continuing technological change. Creating opportunities for meaningful

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interaction without digital distractions, such as shared family activities or community programmes, may strengthen social relationships and reinforce a sense of belonging. These initiatives complement rather than replace the benefits of digital communication. Beyond these operational measures, the findings also carry broader implications for public policy. National progress should not be evaluated solely through economic growth and technological development. Greater attention should also be given to indicators of psychological and social well-being within national development frameworks. In the Malaysian context, this broader perspective is consistent with existing recognition that mental and spiritual well-being form important dimensions of overall societal well-being (Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, n.d.). Within this framework, spirituality is understood as a source of meaning, balance and personal resilience that can be interpreted across different religious and cultural traditions. This interpretation follows directly from the conceptual framework proposed in this study rather than from normative religious assumptions. Taken together, these implications suggest that addressing the paradox of modern progress requires coordinated efforts involving individuals, educational institutions, workplaces, communities and government. Sustainable development depends not only on economic and technological advancement but also on society's capacity to strengthen psychological well-being alongside human and social development.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined why rapid economic and technological progress in Malaysia has not been accompanied by comparable improvements in psychological well-being. Document analysis identified three manifestations of the paradox of modern progress, namely lifestyle stress, digital social comparison and declining social relationship quality. Rather than representing separate developments, these manifestations reflect interconnected processes that emerge when material and technological progress advance more rapidly than the capacity of individuals and social institutions to adapt. The analysis also brought together contemporary sociological perspectives and Islamic spiritual ethics as two complementary analytical lenses. From a sociological perspective, structural transformation, institutional change and shifting patterns of social relationships help explain the challenges affecting psychological well-being. Islamic spiritual ethics complements this perspective by highlighting the importance of values, inner balance and moral orientation in responding to these changes. These perspectives are not integrated at the epistemological level. Instead, they provide complementary explanations of the same phenomenon. The proposed conceptual framework makes two principal contributions to the literature. It brings together lifestyle stress, digital social comparison and declining social relationship quality within a single analytical framework rather than treating them as separate issues. It also extends discussions of the paradox of modern progress to the Malaysian context by incorporating Islamic spiritual ethics alongside contemporary sociological perspectives. The principal contribution of this study therefore lies not in introducing the concept of the paradox of modern progress itself, but in proposing a conceptual framework that offers a more comprehensive understanding of its implications for psychological well-being in Malaysia.

The findings also have important practical implications. At the operational level, they highlight the value of coordinated efforts involving individuals, educational institutions, workplaces, families and communities to strengthen psychological well-being. At the strategic level, they suggest that national progress should be evaluated not only through economic and technological indicators but also through measures of psychological and social well-being. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis relies exclusively on documentary sources and does not include primary data collected through interviews or surveys. The application of Islamic spiritual ethics represents a conceptual interpretation derived from the literature rather than an empirically validated model. The proposed framework may also evolve as additional evidence becomes available or as it is applied in different cultural contexts. Future research could test the conceptual relationships proposed in this study using quantitative, qualitative or mixed-method approaches. Comparative studies across Malaysian states or neighbouring countries would further enrich understanding of the paradox of modern progress in different social and cultural settings. Ultimately, the paradox of modern progress can be understood as a condition in which economic and technological advancement outpaces the capacity of individuals and social institutions to adapt, creating new challenges for psychological well-being. Sustainable progress therefore requires more than continued economic growth and technological innovation. It also depends on strengthening human development, social institutions and psychological well-being as equally important dimensions of national development.

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