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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERNET ADDICTION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of internet addiction in the digital era and its potential impact on young adults' psychological well-being are reasons for growing concern. Therefore, this study examines the association between internet addiction and psychological well-being in young adults in Malaysia. The sample of 200 participants was gotten through random sampling and Internet Addiction Test as well as Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale were used. The results revealed a weak to moderate positive relationship between IA scores and PWB scores (r = .354), indicating that increased internet addiction levels associate with a slightly higher psychological well-being. A high overall prevalence of IA was observed, with a severity distribution of 46% mild, 25% moderate, and 1% severe. Additionally, the sample's mean PWB score was quite high (58.05). The unexpected results had underscored the need for further nuanced research within the Malaysian context to understand the specific drivers of internet use and its relationship with well-being, potentially influenced by observational learning and perceived social norms. This study challenges current linear models and necessitates research on the nature of online engagement and sociocultural factors which potentially relate to this particular cut-off.

Keywords: internet addiction, psychological well-being, young adults

INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic digital world of today, the Internet has had a significant impact on society and offered a multitude of advantages to its users. Nonetheless, there have been worries expressed about the possibility of Internet addiction. The phrase "internet addiction" describes a person's inability to control their internet use, leading to compulsive online behaviors that greatly disrupt their everyday lives and bring them great misery (Mahadevaswamy, 2023). Since they utilize the internet the most, young individuals are most vulnerable to its negative effects (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024).

Malaysia's smartphone penetration rate has been increasing from 2020, which is around 87.61 percent (Statista, 2024). Internet access has advanced rapidly in response to the smartphone penetration rate. According to reports, there is a significant prevalence of Internet addiction and emotional distress which may include depression, anxiety and stress (Fu et al., 2022). In research by Ibrahim et al. (2022), almost half of the teenagers with high depressive symptoms reported moderate internet use and showed a strong correlation between depression and

problematic internet use. Addiction to the internet has serious negative effects for Malaysian, especially in terms of mental health. Internet addiction has been closely linked to increased rates of stress, worry, and depression. Future productivity and well-being of individuals can be damaged if mental health issues are left untreated. These psychological challenges not only damage them but also have an effect on collective society.

Given these concerns, psychological research is increasingly focusing on the relationship of internet addiction with psychological well-being. The exact nature and nature of this relation is still questionable, particularly in the Malaysian context, however research demonstrates that people with high levels of internet addiction are likely to have mental health results (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Understanding this association is important as it can inform to promote healthier digital habits and provide insight into the potential risks associated with excessive internet use.

Research has suggested that many different communities of young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 in most parts nations can go online. Most people now only view the internet as a core utility, and even though for a very small fraction of people it can also become dysfunctional and harmful to their health (Islam et al., 2020).

Malaysia's digital economy has evolved to a new stage of maturity (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024), an increasing number of young adults are becoming highly dependent on the internet for entertainment, socialization, and daily activities. The internet has done a lot of good for people; but going overboard can also silently wreak havoc on mental health and add to stress, anxiety, and depression. The issue is that a lot of people might not know just how much their internet habits have on their well-being. This is why internet addiction is a raising concern that deserves further scrutiny by researchers, mental health professionals and educators. This issue should be studied further to determine the prevalence of internet addiction in Malaysia and whether or not it is good for the mind. Young adults were studied as they are the largest group of Internet users.

The aim was to examine the prevalence of addiction to internet among young adults in Malaysia, to examine the psychological well-being of young adults in Malaysia and to determine the relationship between internet addiction and psychological well-being among young adults in Malaysia. In particular, it aims to address the following research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of internet addiction among young adults in Malaysia?
2. What is the overall psychological well-being of young adults in Malaysia?
3. Is there a significant relationship between internet addiction and psychological well-being among young adults in Malaysia?

In addressing these issues, the research informs an understanding of the connection between internet addiction and psychological well-being among Malaysian young adults.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTERNET ADDICTION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

The main theory of this study is Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) which was introduced by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch in the year of 1973. This theory explains why individuals engage in media use and what gratifications they obtain from that consumption. The researchers emphasized that people use media to achieve goals and satisfy specific needs such as entertainment and communication (Katz et al., 1973). As claimed by Katz et al. (1973), most individuals use media to satisfy specific needs which can also be psychological needs. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985) provides a strong framework to relate

unmet psychological needs to internet addiction. This theory suggests that humans have three basic psychological needs includes autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are not fulfilled in real life, individuals may turn to misbehaviour such as excessive internet use to seek the unmet needs through the internet. However, excessive reliance on the internet to fulfil social needs may negatively impact mental health, leading to addiction and lower psychological well-being.

Whereas Ryff's Model of Psychological Well-Being provides a comprehensive understanding of the dependent variable. This model explains the multifaceted nature of psychological well-being by recognising six traits of psychological well-being which are autonomy, self-acceptance, personal growth, environmental mastery, purpose in life and positive relationships (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). It is said that each trait contributes to the better psychological well-being state. In addition, the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions (Fredrickson, 2004) provides a potential mechanism for understanding the unexpected positive relationship observed between internet addiction and psychological well-being. This theory suggests that positive emotions can broaden cognitive and behavioural repertoires. The positive emotions might be elicited by certain online activities prevalent among the participants, which resulting to the development of the personal resources that may increase psychological health such as social relationships or temporary mood boost.

RESEARCH ON INTERNET ADDICTION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

According to Tang et al. (2020), internet addiction is a significant topic in clinical psychology because it can lead to a variety of issues with people's psychological health. The prevalence of internet addiction seems to be a major problem among young adults in Malaysia, and there is various studies reporting substantial percentages. According to Johari and Tan (2024), before the COVID-19 epidemic, 28.1% of Malaysian youth suffering from moderate-to-severe internet addiction, and there was 26.1% with moderate addiction and 2.0% severe addiction. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have also aggravated this situation. Singh et al. (2024) point to a major transition away from physical activities to online activities, resulting in a rise in internet usage.

Studies focusing on specific subgroups within young adults in Malaysia also indicate high prevalence rates. Zakaria et al. (2023) reported that 33.3% of college students had IA, a high prevalence that is within the range and is similar to the 37% prevalence seen in studies that used the same scale. They also pointed out that the Malay version of the IAT scale is the only validated tool for internet addiction screening that is currently accessible in local language. Sam et al. (2022) focused on thirty percent of Malaysian internet users, which aged between 18 and 29. Their findings revealed that 59.7 percent of participants in this group tested positive for signs of internet addiction. Similarly, Jaafar et al. (2022) found an even higher frequency of IA (above 80%) among allied health students, who frequently consist of young people, with moderate and severe IA were reported by 16.2% and 2.3% of the students, respectively.

Fook et al. (2021) focused on mobile addiction among young adults in Malaysian tertiary institutions, highlighting the increased reliance on smartphones for online learning during the pandemic. A meta-analysis by Pan et al. (2020) has reported a global prevalence of 7.02% with a recent study in India reported 3.1% were likely highly addicted, while 24.1% were considered to be prone to addiction (Iyer et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic and associated quarantine measures in China were linked to a substantial increase in internet addiction prevalence, reaching 36.70% (Li et al., 2021). Demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status and socioeconomic status continue to be explored as potential risk factors (Oluwole et al., 2021; Jehangir et al., 2022). Psychological factors such as depression, anxiety, self-efficacy, stress, and loneliness consistently emerge as significant correlates (Kumar

et al., 2023; Zewude et al., 2024; Soriano-Molina et al., 2025). The degree of Internet addiction was inversely correlated with social support; that is, a higher level of addiction was linked to less social support (Lu et al., 2023).

Internet addiction has been linked to various kinds of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, stress, impulsivity, low self-esteem, and social isolation (Iyer et al., 2022; Arayici et al., 2025). Furthermore, the problematic internet use has been associated with physical health outcomes such as sleep disturbances, eye strains, unhealthy behaviour patterns (Mahadevaswamy & Rawat, 2023; Jaishy et al., 2022). Additionally, academic performance and work function can be significantly impaired due to diminished productivity and concentration as well as insufficient energy to perform (Mahadevaswamy & Rawat, 2023; Bai et al., 2022).

Ultimately, the literature is consistent that internet addiction is a complex phenomenon that has many factors involved. It is a combination of psychological vulnerability, social structures, and the persuasive methods of internet technology, resulting in a harmful effects rather than just simply about excessive time online.

The idea of psychological well-being is an amalgam notion which implies to the best possible psychological experience and functioning. The six components of Carol Ryff's alternative, multifaceted model of psychological well-being revolves around autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Hossen & Salleh, 2024). Ryff et al. (2021) argues that hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are parts of the psychological well-being. Hedonic well-being refers to life satisfaction, positive effect and negative effect, whereas eudaimonic well-being emphasizes autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and acceptance of self. Recent work also investigates resilience, and self-compassion as crucial elements that contribute to overall psychological well-being (Sayed et al., 2024; Waugh & Sali, 2023; Cowand et al., 2024).

Some recent studies have shown that variables such as demographic factors, personality traits, economic factors, socio-cultural factors, physical activities, and environmental factors influencing psychological well-being (Sirgy, 2021). Studies have consistently reported that extraversion and conscientiousness are positively associated with higher levels of internal control and mindfulness and were associated with psychological distress.

Personality traits have been repeatedly found important in research. Neuroticism was corroborated as a vulnerability factor for mental health problems by being associated with higher external control and memory complaints (Orrù et al., 2025; Sirgy, 2021). One of the best indicators of wellbeing is optimism, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Sirgy, 2021; Rippon et al., 2022). Increased physical activity is associated with reduced levels of cortisol, lower negative moods, fewer anxiety and depression symptoms, and fewer issues with sleep, all of which reduce anxiety, stress, negative behaviours, low moods, unhealthy diets, and exercise habits (Trajković et al., 2023). Additionally, a study in Malaysia by Kan et al. (2023) shows that social support can improve psychological well-being, especially by reducing loneliness and helping people deal with personal difficulties. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant psychological impact on the individuals affected where they exhibited lower levels of well-being, and social support (Babazadeh et al., 2024). Given the unfavourable correlation between lower income levels and mental health outcomes, people who are financially vulnerable may be more prone to elevated stress and anxiety (Liu et al., 2025). Additionally, improving sleep was associated with better mental health regardless of the severity of mental health difficulty (Scott

et al., 2021). According to Shakoor et al.'s research study from 2025, getting enough sleep, eating well and exercising are all essential to boost mental health.

Furthermore, Ryff's model served as a useful framework for understanding the various elements affected PWB. Positive traits like self-esteem, resilience, and physical activity are consistently associated with better well-being, while stress, neuroticism, and financial strain cause harm. The COVID-19 crisis additionally highlighted the relevance of protective factors such as sleep, social support and healthy routines. We need to understand these influences if we are to positively influence mental health and create effective interventions.

Internet addiction is known as distress rooted from excessive or poorly managed obsessions, cravings, or behaviours related to computer use and internet access (Shaw & Black, 2008), which has a grave impact on the psychological well-being of young adults. Kumar et al.'s research from 2023 asserted that undergraduates with high severity of internet addiction can be low on psychological well-being. This result is supported by Oluwole et al. (2021), who have found a negative significant correlation between internet addiction score as well and mental well-being. According to Arayici et al. (2025), internet addiction and psychological well-being were inversely correlated, implying the negative impact that specific compulsive online activities may have on mental health. This finding is in line with other studies demonstrating that problematic internet use is linked to higher stress, anxiety and depression levels. Youth, particularly college students may be at a higher risk of the consequences associated with both compulsive internet use and frequent reliance on digital platforms for social and academic objectives (Zahid & Rauf, 2022). Further studies also revealed that internet addiction decreased psychological well-being (Iyer et al., 2022; Jaishy et al., 2022).

Next, Bal and Turan (2021) revealed that there is a substantial correlation between the decline in psychological well-being and the rise in internet addiction in a study titled Examination of Internet Use in terms of Psychological Well-Being. It was observed that the participants' psychological well-being was excellent, and their level of internet addiction was generally low. In line with previous studies, Mahadevaswamy and Rawat (2023) bolster this argument by asserting that greater degrees of Internet dependency are associated with worse levels of psychological well-being. More time is typically spent online by those who suffer from acute social interaction anxiety. Chuan et al. (2022) noted that there is a significant negative relationship of with internet addiction on psychological well-being. This could elevate the internet addiction risks.

Lippke et al. (2021) demonstrates the nuanced association between internet usage and psychological health. Using internet for information seeking and communication can positively impact life satisfaction and reduce depression, even if poor well-being is linked to various negative physical and psychological outcomes. These benefits can be mediated by increased social engagement and access to information. However, problematic internet use, such as using internet for leisure and engaging in social media excessively, is associated with negative outcomes such as anxiety, stress, social disconnectedness, and even withdrawal.

Higher levels of online addiction among college students are linked to worse mental health outcomes, according to Zewude et al. (2024), who highlight the substantial and detrimental direct impact of internet addiction on mental health. Furthermore, a study conducted in 2021 by Arslan and Coskun discovered a negative correlation between mental health and the degree of internet addiction.

Yet, a study by Jehangir and Khalid (2022) found no significant correlation between internet addiction and psychological well-being. Several other studies likewise show no connection

between internet addiction and psychological health, which lend credence to this conclusion (Nurmaria & Risnawati, 2021; Raymond & Kartasasmita, 2022; Alqahtani et al., 2020).

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTERNET ADDICTION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

This model presents that the detrimental effects of internet addiction on psychological well-being by incorporating Young's (1998) and Ryff and Keyes' (1995) instruments.

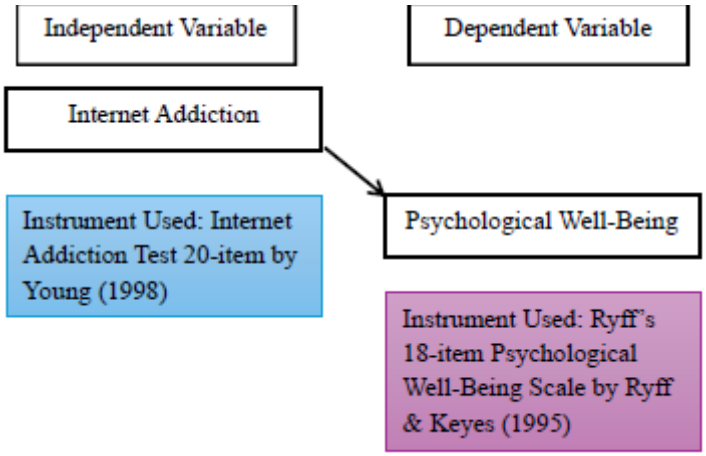


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The psychological well-being of users has been greatly affected by everyday usage of the Internet. People used internet for communication, access to role information, socialization motive, work-study and entertainment. Various online behaviours require different cognitive processes and may have different results. Educational use, for example, may help to shape feelings of competence and intellectual development (Alam & Mohanty, 2023), although social comparison resulting from heavy social media use may diminish psychological well-being, self-esteem and perceived social support (McComb et al., 2023; Lee, 2020). Those who use internet for work-study purposes may experience excessive screen time, and as a consequence excessive screen reading leads to eyestrain, neck & shoulder pain and backache. It may even result in internet addiction and elevated depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders (Devi & Singh, 2023).

Furthermore, the framework recognises that the relationship is not necessarily straightforward. Playing games sporadically for relaxation may be harmless or even promote social relationships; however, playing excessively at the expense of other important activities could have mentally deleterious effects (Park et al., 2024). Binge-watching has been proven to be linked to mental health issues, such as the development of behavioural addictions, sleep issues, and a decline in psychological well-being (Alimoradi et al., 2022).

This framework provides a detailed understanding than simply examining overall internet use by considering the specific level of internet use and their potential positive and negative impacts to different aspects of psychological well-being. It highlights the necessity for research that differentiates between various online activities to better understand their distinct impacts on psychological well-being.

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METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN AND THE INSTRUMENT

This research employed a quantitative research design to investigate the correlation between internet addiction and psychological well-being for Malaysian young adults. A structured survey instrument, adapted from Feleke et al. (2024) and Akhtar et al. (2023) were used to measure the relevant variables for internet addiction and psychological well-being. A structured questionnaire that contained the survey tool was used and organized into three main components (Section A, B & C). The demographic data in Section A will be gathered, including the age, gender, and current residency of the respondents. Different facets of internet addiction components with 20 items will be evaluated in Section B using Internet Addiction Test (IAT) by Kimberly Young. The psychological well-being of young adults will be the main topic of Section C. The Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale 18-item version will be implemented in this section to measure psychological well-being. The independent variable will be measured on the 5-point Likert scale with an additional "not applicable" option, which goes from "rarely" to "always", while the dependent variable will be measured using the 7-point Likert scale, which goes from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", to acquire a more profound understanding of the participants' responses.

RESEARCH SAMPLE, SAMPLING AND PROCEDURES

A quantitative survey research design was used to collect data from a stratified random sample of 200 young adults in Malaysia. The population was divided into strata based on the states as we aim to identify the relationship between internet addiction and psychological well-being among young adults in Malaysia which should consist of respondents from all states. The final sample included 21% male, 77% female and 2% of the 'prefer not to say' respondents. This targeted sampling was chosen to avoid bias and allows the researchers to analyse the data more precisely as it is divided into strata.

The sample size of 200 was determined using Raosoft sample size calculator with 95% confidence level and 7% margin of error with the population size of 34.1 million. The recommended sample size based on the calculation was 196, which rounded off to 200 for the study purposes (Raosoft, 2024). The reason of the great margin of error because of the limited time and resources to achieve a larger sample size. Future studies may consider larger samples to enhance statistical generalizability. Data collection was conducted using an online survey via Google Form. The survey took 5 to10 minutes to be completed.

DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

The data collected were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to ensure proper statistical evaluation. Descriptive analysis and the Pearson correlation will be used to summarize the obtained data. Descriptive analysis will be applied for the first two hypotheses, which involves the prevalence rate of individuals having internet addiction and psychological well-being, the mean to describe the average level of addiction and psychological well-being, and the standard deviation to show how much the scores vary. The Pearson's correlation will be used to examine the relationship between internet addiction and psychological well-being among young adults in Malaysia in this study.

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RESULTS

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Demographic information on the 200 participants is presented. The age ranged from 20 to 34 years, with the highest age group of 20 to 24 years which is 85.5%. The sample was higher in female gender proportion, which is 77%, with 21% identifying as male and 2% as prefer not to say as stated in Table 1.

Table 1. Gender Analysis of Survey Respondents

Gender	n	%
Male	42	21.0
Female	154	77.0
Prefer not to say	4	2.0
Total	200	100

In terms of state, the highest proportion were from Selangor (21.5%), with smaller proportions identifying from Johor (12.5%), Sabah (11%), Perak (7.5%), Sarawak (7.5%), Kedah (6.5%), W. P. Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya & Labuan (6.5%), Kelantan (5.5%), Pulau Pinang (5.5%), Pahang (5.0%), Negeri Sembilan (3.5%), Terengganu (3.5%), Melaka (3.0%), and Perlis (1.0%) as stated in Table 2.

Table 2. State Analysis of Survey Respondents

State	n	%
Johor	25	12.5
Kedah	13	6.5
Kelantan	11	5.5
Melaka	6	3.0
Negeri Sembilan	7	3.5
Pahang	10	5.0
Perak	15	7.5
Perlis	2	1.0
Pulau Pinang	11	5.5
Sabah	22	11.0
Sarawak	15	7.5
Selangor	43	21.5
Terengganu	7	3.5

W. P. Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya & Labuan	13	6.5
Total	200	100.0

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF INTERNET ADDICTION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN MALAYSIA

To address the first research question, the analysis revealed that there is a significant prevalence of internet addiction among young adults in Malaysia, with 73% overall prevalence and 27% with normal levels of internet use. From the 73% prevalence, only 1% were severely addicted, while 25% were moderately addicted and 47% had mild addiction as stated in Table 3.

Table 3. Prevalence of Internet Addiction by Category

Category	Prevalence	n	%
0	0 – 30 scores	54	27.0
1	31 – 49 scores	94	47.0
2	50 – 79 scores	50	25.0
3	80 – 100 scores	2	1.0
Total		200	100

Note: 0: Normal Internet Use | 1: Mild Addiction | 2: Moderate Addiction | 3: Severe Addiction

As shown in Table 4, the mean score (m = 40.84, SD = 14.42) falls within the range of 31 to 49, which corresponds to the category of mild addiction. Consequently, Hypothesis 1 was supported by the data shown, indicating that there was a significant prevalence of internet addiction among young adults in Malaysia.

Table 4. IAT Score Statistics

Variable	M	SD
Internet Addiction Test Score	40.84	14.42

To address the second research question, the analysis revealed that young adults in Malaysia experience significant psychological well-being. The result represented the mean value for psychological well-being among young adults in Malaysia and its standard deviation (m = 58.05, SD = 12.679) in Table 5. This scale pointed out that the higher score indicates higher psychological well-being.

Table 5. PWB Score Statistics

Variable	M	SD
Psychological well-being	58.05	12.679

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Furthermore, for the last research question, the data showed that there is a positive relationship between internet addiction and psychological well-being among young adults in Malaysia. IA and PWB had a positive linear connection that was statistically significant (p <.001), according to the correlation study done on 200 young adults.

Table 6. Correlation between Internet Addiction and Psychological Well-being

Variable	Psychological Well-Being
Internet Addiction	.354**

There is a modest to moderately positive correlation between these two variables, as indicated by the Pearson correlation coefficient (r=0.354) in Table 6. This implies that, within this sample, people who scored higher on the online addiction scale also tended to report slightly better psychological well-being scores, whereas people who scored lower on the internet addiction scale tended to report slightly lower psychological well-being scores. This result defies the widely held belief that there is a negative correlation between internet addiction and mental health. More research is necessary to examine possible causes of this surprising positive association, considering the sample's unique features, the type of psychological well-being measure employed, and the impact of additional potential confounding variables.

DISCUSSION

Interestingly, our results consistent with the outcomes of prior research, such as the study conducted by Jaafar et al. (2022). Jaafar et al.'s research, like ours, found a high frequency of IA which is above 80% among allied health students, who frequently consist of young people, with moderate and severe IA were reported by 16.2% and 2.3% of the students, respectively. The current study reported a prevalence of 25% and 1% respectively for moderate and severe addiction, leaving the rest 46% as mild addiction. This suggests that most of the young adults are experiencing minor signs of problematic internet use such as having difficulty controlling screen time, or internet usage impacting their routines. The high internet use might be associated with the social comparison and less involvement in offline activities, especially after COVID-19 pandemic. Other than that, COVID-19 has also caused a shift towards online learning (Fook et al., 2021), which lead to increased internet use for educational purposes, potentially blurring the lines between necessary use and excessive use. Some young adults might use the internet as a way to cope with stress, anxiety, boredom, or feelings of loneliness (Sun et al., 2023), particularly for those who may feel isolated offline as it can provide a sense of connection and belonging. Not to forget that the vast and readily available nature of online content, including social media, gaming, shopping platforms, videos, and pornography (Singh et al, 2024), can be highly engaging and potentially addictive especially with the reward system features in some of the apps (Garaialde et al., 2021). The environment is important as people tend to imitate others within the social group if they see that something is perceived as acceptable. This aligns with the observational learning which was introduced by Bandura through social learning theory.

Past study pointed out that self-esteem can increase psychological well-being along with optimism and self-efficacy (Sirgy, 2021; Rippon et al., 2022). Other than that, physical activity is linked to decreased negative moods, fewer symptoms of psychological issues, which lower stress levels and risk of psychological distress (Trajković et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance factors influencing psychological well-being such as socialization and healthy lifestyles. Many of young adults in current study was adolescents during COVID-19, which might be an important point as adolescence is crucial for emotional

and social changes (World Health Organization, 2024). Social relationships, healthy eating habits, adequate sleep and exercise can significantly enhance overall well-being (Livingston et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2021; Shakoor et al., 2025).

The study results indicate a statistically significant but weak to moderate positive relationship between Internet Addiction (IA) and Psychological Well-Being (PWB), which suggest that higher levels of Internet dependence are linked to slightly higher levels of psychological well-being, which contradicts with earlier research. This suggests that people use internet to cope with negative emotions, escaping reality or regulate psychological distress (Gioia et al., 2021) thus reducing depression and received support socially (Jaafar et al., 2021). Social distancing during the COVID-19 might plays a role in this case, where prolonged social isolation can lead to social withdrawal (Kathirvel, 2020). People might feel more comfortable with online socialization due to the reduced social anxiety for them to interact and engage with others. This increased online social interactions can further buffer against the feeling of loneliness and depression thus boost the happiness and psychological well-being. Additionally, it is plausible to consider the positive social comparison might also increase the psychological well-being. According to a previous study by Meier et al. (2020), when people respond to other people's vacation or nature photos with benign envy, this promotes the positive motivating result of inspiration and so enhances wellbeing. This research adds credence to the idea that even little amounts of everyday digital inspiration could improve wellbeing. In the study, inspiration in response to Instagram postings about travel and environment was strongly linked to greater levels of good affect and eudaimonic well-being, even while it was not linked to negative affect.

Moreover, the researcher note that increased reliance on God has been associated with lowered psychological distress thus boosting psychological well-being. This assumption is reinforced by Upenieks and Ellison's (2022) study, which examined whether stronger reliance on religion could buffer the negative impact of financial hardship on mental health outcomes. In addition, support and positive reinforcement derived from social relationships can enhance psychological well-being by fostering greater self-esteem. Social and emotional support from the social relationships (Harris & Orth, 2019) as well as the pleasant effect of rewards (Latifah & Ichsan, 2023) found to be enhancing self-esteem in individuals especially children and students. They said that the rewards encouraged the successful students to keep repeating the behaviour to receive rewards and make other students feel more motivated to achieve what their friends received. Studies by (Ooi et al., 2023; Rippon et al., 2021) has revealed that self-esteem works as a mediator and positively associated with mental well-being.

Current study supports the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) which was introduced by Katz et al. (1973). As they emphasized that people use media to achieve goals and satisfy specific needs such as entertainment and communication (Katz et al., 1973), it is in line with the finding of this study that indicates there was a significant prevalence of internet addiction among young adults in Malaysia. However, the results of the findings somehow challenged the existing studies as most of the literature found that the relationship between internet addiction and psychological well-being was negative. This suggests a need for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship although a study found that greater psychological well-being is significantly predicted by having access to and utilising the internet, with over 96% of cases demonstrating improved well-being linked to increased internet use and access (Pramanik, 2024).

Several limitations in the current study should be taken note of. Firstly, the sample size of the study was quite limited due to the limited time, future research on larger samples is encouraged. Additionally, the instrument used in this study was using self-report measures

which may not accurately convey what are intended to evaluate since participant bias or participant understanding of the items may affect their accuracy. It is critical to note that this is a cross-sectional questionnaire which may cause inability to draw clear conclusions at the end.

Future researchers are advised to expand the sample size using the same technique, stratified random sampling, to significantly enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, they can also include qualitative measures in the research through interviews and observations for richer data. Subsequent research might also consider including an objective measure of internet use such as screen time tracking or app usage, in order to yield a more realistic assessment of actual internet use behaviour (Hamid et al., 2024). Further, factors influencing the association such as educational status, occupation, income and social support should be explored.

CONCLUSION

The present study offers several contributions towards internet addiction and psychological well-being among young adults in Malaysia. Firstly, the research implies a high prevalence of problematic internet use and reveals an unexpected statistically significant positive relationship between internet addiction and psychological well-being, the opposite directionality to that predominantly reported, necessitating further attention to explaining the source(s) of high rates observed and interrelations found. At the same time, this work could serve as a reference for other studies and is beneficial to internet addiction research. There is potential for significant impact from further research into this area. A more thorough understanding of healthy digital engagement could also be gained when exploring specifics of different online activities and links to wellbeing.

In summary, in our sample of Malaysian young adults, the prevalence of internet addiction was unexpectedly high (73%), and quite uniformly distributed between mild to moderate levels. Inconsistent with the prevailing literature, a statistically significant but weak positive correlation was found between internet addiction and psychological well-being, in the face of overall high self-reported well-being in the sample. This suggests a complex interplay where, for this population, greater internet activities may be entwined with perceived immediate rewards or connectedness that impacts on measures of wellbeing possibly through a process of observational learning and perceived social conventions regarding internet use. These results highlight the importance of further nuanced understanding in the Malaysian setting to understand the specific drivers of internet use and its relationship with well-being, enabling more targeted interventions and prevention among this at-risk sample.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors affirm that there are no conflicts of interest associated with the conduct or publication of this research.

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