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**Anxiety in the Viral Age: A Dialogical
Integration of Contemporary Psychology and
Islamic Psychology through the Concept of Nafs**

*Kecemasan di Era Viral: Integrasi Dialogis antara Psikologi Kontemporer dan
Psikologi Islam melalui Konsep Nafs*

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Abstract

The rising prevalence of anxiety in contemporary society is closely linked to the expansion of social media and viral culture, which generate persistent socio-digital pressures. This study analyzes anxiety in the viral era through a dialogical engagement between contemporary psychology and Islamic psychology, positioning the concept of *nafs* as an analytical framework. Using a qualitative conceptual-analytical design based on library research, the study draws on modern theories of anxiety, empirical findings on social media and mental health, and classical as well as contemporary Islamic scholarship. Data were examined through thematic and comparative-dialogical analysis to identify the characteristics of anxiety in digital contexts and to assess the relevance of *nafs*. The findings indicate that anxiety in the viral era is persistent and distributed, reflecting structural imbalance within the self and a crisis of meaning. This study proposes an integrative psychological framework that situates Islamic psychology as a dialogical and relevant perspective in contemporary mental health discourse.

Keywords: Anxiety; Islamic psychology; Mental Health; Nafs; Viral Age

Abstrak

Fenomena meningkatnya anxiety dalam masyarakat kontemporer berkaitan erat dengan ekspansi media sosial dan budaya viral yang menghasilkan tekanan sosial digital yang persisten. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis anxiety di era viral melalui dialog antara psikologi kontemporer dan psikologi Islam dengan menempatkan konsep *nafs* sebagai kerangka analitis. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif konseptual-analitis berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan merujuk pada teori modern tentang kecemasan, temuan empiris mengenai media sosial dan kesehatan mental, serta literatur klasik dan kontemporer psikologi Islam. Analisis dilakukan melalui metode tematik dan komparatif-dialogis untuk mengidentifikasi karakter anxiety dalam konteks digital dan menilai relevansi konsep *nafs*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa anxiety di era viral bersifat persisten dan terdistribusi, mencerminkan ketidakseimbangan struktural dalam diri serta krisis makna. Penelitian ini menawarkan kerangka psikologi integratif yang memosisikan psikologi Islam sebagai perspektif dialogis dan relevan dalam diskursus kesehatan mental kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Kecemasan; Psikologi Islam; Kesehatan Mental; Nafs; Era Viral



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INTRODUCTION

Anxiety has become one of the most prominent concerns in contemporary psychology, particularly within digital societies characterized by the rapid acceleration of information, intensified online interaction, and a pervasive culture of virality shaped by social media platforms. In such environments, individuals are continuously exposed to curated realities, instant feedback, and algorithm-driven content cycles that rarely allow psychological pause. Recent studies have demonstrated that increased exposure to digital media is associated with heightened anxiety symptoms, emotional strain, and psychological instability—especially among younger generations who have grown up immersed in predominantly online ecosystems.¹ In this context, anxiety can no longer be understood merely as an individual clinical disorder; rather, it must also be conceptualized as a psychosocial phenomenon shaped by cultural expectations, technological infrastructures, and evolving patterns of social comparison.

Over the past decades, modern psychology has developed diverse theoretical approaches to explain the emergence and persistence of anxiety. Cognitive theories emphasize the role of maladaptive thought patterns, cognitive distortions, and catastrophic interpretations in generating anxious responses.² In contrast, existential psychology interprets anxiety as an inevitable human response to uncertainty, isolation, freedom, and the search for meaning in an unpredictable world. While these approaches have made substantial contributions to both theoretical understanding and therapeutic intervention, much of contemporary psychological research operates within a predominantly secular framework.³ This framework tends to prioritize symptom identification, emotional regulation, and coping strategies, often giving comparatively limited attention to deeper questions concerning meaning, moral orientation, and the holistic structure of the human self.

Parallel to these developments, Islamic psychology has emerged as an intellectual endeavor seeking to articulate an alternative perspective grounded in classical Islamic thought. Central to this tradition are foundational concepts such as *nafs* (the self or soul), *qalb* (the heart), and *'aql* (intellect), which together describe a multidimensional understanding of human interiority. Within the Islamic intellectual heritage, restlessness, fear, and inner conflict are not regarded as anomalies but as inherent aspects of the dynamic and evolving nature of the human soul.⁴ Nevertheless, many contemporary studies in Islamic psychology remain largely normative and descriptive, focusing primarily on moral exhortation or spiritual guidance without sustained critical engagement with modern psychological theories. Consequently, Islamic psychology is often perceived as a peripheral discourse, insufficiently integrated into the broader global conversation in psychology.

It is precisely this gap between contemporary psychology and Islamic psychology that forms the central point of departure for the present study. This research approaches anxiety not only as a psychological symptom requiring technical management, but also as an existential experience intimately connected to the structure of the self and the human quest for meaning. The Islamic concept of *nafs* offers a rich analytical framework for understanding the self as a dynamic

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- 1 Jean M. Twenge, *iGEN: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, First Atria Paperback edition (New York: Atria Paperback, 2018), 85.
 - 2 Aaron T. Beck dan David A. Clark, "Anxiety and Depression: An Information Processing Perspective," *Anxiety Research* 1, no. 1 (1988): 23–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615808808248218>. Lihat juga Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, Rev. ed (New York: Norton, 1977), 19–25.
 - 3 Ernest S. Barratt dan Charles Donald Spielberger, *Anxiety: Current Trends in Theory and Research*, with Florida State university (New York: Academic Press, 1972), 23.
 - 4 Malik Badri, *Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study* (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000), 9.

entity—capable of growth, imbalance, and transformation—yet also vulnerable to anxiety arising from internal disharmony and external pressures.⁵ Reframing anxiety through this lens opens the possibility of moving beyond purely clinical reductionism toward a more integrative and meaning-centered interpretation.

The urgency of this inquiry becomes even more evident in the era of virality, where anxiety is not solely generated by personal life events but is continually produced and amplified through digital mechanisms of social comparison, performative self-presentation, and the relentless pursuit of validation. Reputable journal articles consistently indicate that social media functions as an amplifying medium, intensifying anxiety, self-dissatisfaction, and psychological pressure through constant exposure to idealized representations of others. Yet despite these findings, relatively few studies incorporate religious or spiritual perspectives into their analytical frameworks. This omission is particularly significant given that, for many Muslim individuals and communities, religious meaning systems are not peripheral but constitute an integral dimension of everyday psychological experience.

In response to these conditions, this study situates itself at the intersection of contemporary psychological scholarship and the Islamic intellectual tradition through a dialogical-critical approach. Rather than positioning Islamic psychology as a normative alternative standing apart from modern theory, this research treats the concept of *nafs* as an analytical lens capable of engaging modern psychological frameworks on equal epistemic footing. Through this dialogical engagement, Islamic psychology is rearticulated not as a parallel or isolated discourse, but as a conceptual resource with substantive potential to enrich the global understanding of anxiety in digitally mediated societies.

To accomplish this objective, the article proceeds through a structured and systematic discussion. The first section analyzes the conceptualization of anxiety within contemporary psychology, with particular emphasis on its relationship to social media dynamics and viral culture. The second section examines the concept of *nafs* within the Islamic intellectual tradition as a framework for understanding the structure of the self and the dynamics of the human psyche.⁶ The final section integrates these two frameworks in order to evaluate the relevance and theoretical contribution of *nafs* in expanding the understanding of anxiety in the viral era. Ultimately, this article seeks to formulate an integrative conceptual framework that not only broadens the theoretical horizon of anxiety studies but also affirms the relevance of Islamic psychology as a meaningful and rigorous scholarly perspective within contemporary cross-cultural psychological discourse.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a conceptual-analytical design grounded in library research. It is not confined to any specific geographical location, as the entire process of data collection and analysis was conducted through written sources. The subject of this research is not individuals or social groups, but rather texts, ideas, and conceptual constructions related to anxiety in contemporary psychology and the concept of *nafs* within the Islamic intellectual tradition. This approach was deliberately chosen because the objective of the study is to construct a theoretical analysis and foster a conceptual dialogue, rather than to test empirical hypotheses or conduct psychological interventions.⁷

5 Imam Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumiddin*, trans. oleh Ibnu Ibrahim Ba'adillah, 3 (Jakarta: Republika Penerbit, 2012), 8.

6 Asriyanti Rosmalina dan Tia Khaerunnisa, "Penggunaan Media Sosial dalam Kesehatan Mental Remaja," *Prophetic: Professional, Empathy, Islamic Counseling Journal* 4, no. 1 (2021): 49, <https://doi.org/10.24235/prophetic.v4i1.8755>.

7 John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, third edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), 44.

The data used in this study consist of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data include foundational works in psychology that discuss theories of anxiety—particularly cognitive and existential approaches—as well as the Qur’an and classical Islamic texts that elaborate on the structure of the human psyche, including the concept of *nafs*. Secondary data comprise internationally reputable journal articles examining anxiety in the era of social media, supporting academic books, and relevant scientific reports. The research instrument took the form of a structured literature review guide, designed to select sources based on criteria of academic authority, topical relevance, and scholarly currency. Data collection was conducted through a systematic search of scientific journal databases and academic book collections to ensure comprehensive and credible coverage of the subject matter.⁸

Data analysis was carried out using thematic and comparative methods. The analytical procedure involved three main stages: (1) identifying key concepts of anxiety in contemporary psychology and examining their characteristics within the context of social media and digital culture; (2) mapping the concept of *nafs* and the dynamics of the human psyche as articulated in classical Islamic literature; and (3) conducting a dialogical analysis to compare, relate, and critically evaluate the conceptual contributions of Islamic psychology to the understanding of anxiety in digital society. This analytical process followed the principles of interpretative qualitative analysis, emphasizing depth of meaning, conceptual coherence, and theoretical relevance. Accordingly, the methodological framework employed in this study is fully aligned with its conceptual-analytical aims.⁹

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Anxiety in Contemporary Psychology and the Viral Age

In contemporary psychology, *anxiety* is generally understood as an affective condition characterized by excessive worry, tension, and the persistent anticipation of perceived threats.¹⁰ It may manifest as a situational response (*state anxiety*), but it can also develop into a relatively stable disposition embedded within the structure of personality (*trait anxiety*). Within the cognitive framework, Aaron T. Beck argues that anxiety is rooted in cognitive distortions—particularly recurrent threat appraisals and negative biases toward the future—which subsequently trigger emotional reactions and avoidance behaviors.¹¹ Meanwhile, the existential approach developed by Rollo May views *anxiety* as an inherent human response to uncertainty, limitation, and crises of meaning.¹² From this perspective, anxiety is not merely a psychological disorder, but an existential signal that reveals the fundamental vulnerability of human existence. Together, these two major traditions demonstrate that *anxiety* cannot be reduced to a purely clinical symptom, as it encompasses intertwined cognitive and existential dimensions.

Entering the context of the viral era, the character of *anxiety* undergoes a significant transformation.¹³ This era is marked by a logic of visibility, metrics of popularity, and the rapid

8 Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, Fourth edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2019), 24–27.

9 Norman K. Denzin dan Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2011), 111.

10 David H. Barlow, *Anxiety and Its Disorders: The Nature and Treatment of Anxiety and Panic*, 2. ed., paperback ed (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 18.

11 Beck and Clark, “Anxiety and Depression.”

12 May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, 25.

13 Erin A. Vogel et al., “Social Comparison, Social Media, and Self-Esteem.,” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 3, no. 4 (2014): 206–22, <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm000047>.

circulation of information through social media platforms.¹⁴ Intensive digital exposure reinforces mechanisms of social comparison, pressures of self-performativity, and the demand for instant validation in the form of likes, comments, and public recognition. A systematic review by Keles et al. identified a significant correlation between the intensity of social media use and increased anxiety and psychological distress, particularly among younger age groups.¹⁵ These findings extend Beck’s cognitive framework: threats no longer primarily arise from concrete offline situations, but are continuously produced by information flows, quantitative popularity metrics, and viral narratives that implicitly evaluate individuals in public digital spaces. Consequently, *anxiety* in the viral era tends to be persistent and distributed—it does not emerge episodically, but flows through constant digital exposure.

Although contemporary psychology provides essential conceptual tools for understanding the mechanisms of *anxiety*, several limitations become apparent when these theories are confronted with the complexity of the viral era. Many studies focus on coping strategies and emotional regulation, such as emotion regulation techniques or cognitive restructuring, yet pay comparatively little attention to deeper questions of meaning and the underlying structure of the self. While existential approaches do address issues of meaning, they often remain at a phenomenological level without offering a comprehensive anthropological framework of the human person. At this juncture, an analytical gap emerges: how can we explain persistent anxiety in individuals who have mastered coping techniques, yet continue to experience recurring restlessness due to identity pressures, constant digital exposure, and self-fragmentation in online public spaces?

To clarify the distinctive character of *anxiety* in the viral era and to differentiate it from classical understandings, the following table presents a thematic comparison between contemporary psychology and the dynamics of anxiety within social media contexts. This table serves as a conceptual foundation that will subsequently be analyzed comparatively alongside the Islamic perspective in the following section.

Table 1. The Character of Anxiety in Contemporary Psychology and the Viral Era

Aspect	Contemporary Psychology	Viral Era (Social Media)
Primary source	Cognitive distortions, uncertainty	Social comparison, digital validation
Nature of anxiety	Episodic–situational	Persistent–distributed
Analytical focus	Symptoms & coping	Identity, self-performativity
Limitation	Limited engagement with meaning	Limited holistic framework of the self

Source: by Author

In line with the findings summarized above, interdisciplinary reports and studies indicate that digital media function as an emotional amplifier, accelerating and expanding the reach of anxiety.¹⁶ *Anxiety* is no longer triggered solely by concrete events, but also by continuous social anticipation—such as *fear of missing out* (FoMO), unavoidable public evaluation, and algorithmic uncertainty that determines visibility and recognition. This analysis underscores that although contemporary psychology offers valuable instruments for understanding the mechanisms of

14 Sumadi Suryabrata, *Psikologi Kepribadian* (Jakarta: Rajawali Pers, 1983), 72.

15 Keles et al., “A Systematic Review.”

16 Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 161.

anxiety, it still leaves a conceptual gap at the level of self-structure and existential meaning.¹⁷ It is precisely this conceptual space that calls for a more holistic framework—one that not only explains cognitive processes and emotional regulation, but also examines the deeper internal dynamics of the human self.¹⁸ At this point, the mapping of the concept of *nafs* within the Islamic intellectual tradition becomes particularly relevant as a foundation for comparative dialogue and the development of an integrative framework in the subsequent discussion.

The Concept of Nafs and Critical Dialogue with Contemporary Psychology in Understanding Anxiety

Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, anxiety is not viewed as a psychological anomaly but as an inherent aspect of the human psychic structure.¹⁹ The Qur'an portrays human beings as anthropologically vulnerable to restlessness, as reflected in QS. al-Ma'arij (70): 19–21:²⁰

﴿ إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ خُلِقَ هَلُوعًا ﴿١٩﴾ إِذَا مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ جَزُوعًا ﴿٢٠﴾ وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ الْخَيْرُ مَنُوعًا ﴿٢١﴾ ﴾

“Indeed, humankind was created impatient: [19] distressed when touched with evil, [20] and withholding when touched with good – [21].” Surah Al-Ma'arij

States that humans are created anxious, prone to complaint in times of hardship, and defensive when granted ease. This description suggests that anxiety represents a baseline condition of human existence rather than merely a pathological symptom. Such a perspective resonates with modern psychological findings on *trait anxiety* and emotional vulnerability, yet it provides a more explicit anthropological foundation by normalizing human fragility within a broader metaphysical framework.

The mapping of anxiety within Islam centers on the concept of *nafs* as a dynamic structure of the self. Classical scholarship does not treat the *nafs* as monolithic, but as graded and developmental—ranging from *nafs ammarah* (the impulsive self), to *nafs lawwamah* (the self-reflective and self-reproaching consciousness), and ultimately to *nafs mutma'innah* (the tranquil self). Al-Ghazali situates the *nafs* as the locus of inner conflict, where impulses, emotions, and moral awareness intersect.²¹ Anxiety arises when an imbalance occurs between impulsive drives and the self's reflective capacity. From this standpoint, anxiety is not merely a reaction to external threats but also a manifestation of internal tension within the structure of the self.

The affective-regulatory dimension of Islam is further illuminated by Qur'anic verses that emphasize both human vulnerability and inner tranquility. QS. an-Nisa' (4): 28 affirms that human beings are created weak, which may be conceptually understood as recognition of psychological vulnerability.²²

﴿ يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ أَنْ يُخَفِّفَ عَنْكُمْ وَخُلِقَ الْإِنْسَانُ ضَعِيفًا ﴿٢٨﴾ ﴾

17 Ananda Dea F et al., “Analisis Wacana Ekspresi Kecemasan dalam Media Sosial: Kajian Pragmatik Tuturan Remaja dengan Fenomena Fomo,” *Indo-MathEdu Intellectuals Journal* 6, no. 6 (2025): 10168–74, <https://doi.org/10.54373/imeij.v6i6.4355>.

18 Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, New Directions in Critical Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 75.

19 Zaharuddin Zaharuddin, “Psikologi Islam Perspektif Malik Badri,” *Psikis: Jurnal Psikologi Islami* 3, no. 1 (2017): 43–51, <https://doi.org/10.19109/psikis.v3i1.1392>.

20 Kementerian Agama RI, *Al-Qur'an dan Terjemahnya* (Jakarta: Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Qur'an, 2019), 841.

21 Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumiddin*, 9.

22 Kementerian Agama RI, *Al-Qur'an dan Terjemahnya*, 104.

“And it is Allah’s Will to lighten your burdens, for humankind was created weak [28].” Surah An-Nisa’

Meanwhile, QS. ar-Ra’d (13): 28 states that hearts find tranquility through the remembrance of God (*dhikrullah*).

الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَتَطْمَئِنُّ قُلُوبُهُمْ بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ ﴿٢٨﴾

“Those who believe and whose hearts find tranquility in the remembrance of Allah – indeed, it is in the remembrance of Allah that hearts find true tranquility [28].” Surah Ar-Ra’d

In psychological terms, this may be interpreted as *meaning-based regulation*—not an instant removal of anxiety, but a reorientation of affective responses through the strengthening of existential meaning. This approach differs from purely technical coping strategies that often focus on symptom management without addressing deeper questions of meaning.²³

Classical Islamic literature also discusses anxiety using terminology that intersects with modern psychology. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, for instance, elaborates on *waswas* as a condition of recurring restlessness triggered by obsessive thoughts and anticipatory fear.²⁴ This description parallels the cognitive-psychological concepts of rumination and anticipatory anxiety. The distinction, however, lies in the analytical framework: Islamic tradition situates these phenomena within the broader structure of the self and its moral orientation, rather than treating them as isolated cognitive processes. In this way, the concept of *nafs* functions as an anthropological framework integrating cognitive, emotional, and existential dimensions of anxiety.²⁵ To summarize these dynamics, the following table presents a thematic mapping of anxiety within the concept of *nafs*.

Table 2. The Dynamics of Anxiety in the Concept of *Nafs* (Islam)

Aspect	Concept of <i>Nafs</i>	Psychological Implication
Basic anthropology	Humans are vulnerable and restless	Normalization of vulnerability
Source of anxiety	Internal imbalance	Conflict between impulse and awareness
Affective regulation	Orientation toward meaning & tranquility of the heart	Meaning-based regulation
Ultimate goal	<i>Nafs muṭma’innah</i>	Sustainable inner peace

Source: Author analysis

When compared with contemporary psychology, both traditions reveal points of convergence as well as epistemological differences. Modern psychology—particularly cognitive and existential approaches—offers powerful analytical tools for explaining anxiety at the level of mental processes and subjective experience. Beck highlights the role of cognitive distortions and recurrent threat appraisal, while May conceptualizes anxiety as a signal of a crisis of meaning

23 Djamaludin Ancok dan Fuat Nashori Suroso, *Psikologi Islam: Solusi Islam Atas Problem-Problem Psikologi*, Cet ke-3 (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2000), 61.

24 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Ighathat al-Lahfan min Masayid al-Shaytan* (Beirut: Darul Kutub Ilmiyah, 1995), 45.

25 Amber Haque, “Psychology from Islamic Perspective: Contributions of Early Muslim Scholars and Challenges to Contemporary Muslim Psychologists,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 43, no. 4 (2004): 357–77, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-004-4302-z>.

in modern human existence.²⁶ However, in the viral era, anxiety often persists despite the application of individual coping strategies, suggesting the presence of structural socio-digital pressures and deeper meaning-related concerns that are not fully addressed within these frameworks.

The concept of *nafs* contributes an analytical perspective by viewing the self as an integrated and dynamic structure.²⁷ Anxiety emerges when an imbalance occurs between impulsive drives, reflective awareness, and the orientation toward inner tranquility—an imbalance that may be intensified by external pressures such as social comparison and the demand for digital validation. When empirical findings on social media use are interpreted through the lens of *nafs*, anxiety in the viral era appears not merely as situational distress but as a persistent condition rooted in structural tension between the self, meaning, and the socio-digital environment.²⁸ The dialogical synthesis between these two traditions can be summarized as follows.

Table 3. Synthesis of the Critical Dialogue Between Contemporary Psychology and Islamic Psychology in Understanding Anxiety

Analytical Dimension	Contemporary Psychology	Islamic Psychology (Concept of <i>Nafs</i>)	Synthetic Findings (Research Contribution)
Epistemological foundation	Empirical-secular; based on observation & experimentation	Theological-anthropological; based on revelation & introspective reflection	Cross-epistemic approach integrating empirical analysis and meaning
Conception of the self	Individual as cognitive-emotional subject	Self as dynamic structure (<i>ammarah-lawwamah-muṭma'innah</i>)	Self is understood as a layered structure prone to conflict
Source of anxiety	Cognitive distortions, uncertainty, and social pressure	Internal imbalance & conflict between impulse and awareness	Anxiety is structural: internal + socio-digital
Character of anxiety	Episodic-situational	Persistent as an existential condition	Viral-era anxiety tends to be persistent and distributed
Focus of regulation	Coping & emotion regulation	Orientation toward meaning & self-reflection	Meaning-based regulation
Limitation	Reduction to individual mechanisms	Limited engagement with modern empirical dialogue	Integration bridges reductionism and normativism
Theoretical contribution	Explanation of psychological mechanisms	Mapping of self-structure & meaning	Integrative cross-cultural psychological framework

Source: Author analysis

26 Beck and Clark, “Anxiety and Depression.”

27 Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumiddin*, 12.

28 May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, 25.

Through this synthesis, the study affirms that the critical dialogue between contemporary psychology and Islamic psychology is not intended to oppose the two traditions, but to construct an integrative framework.²⁹ Contemporary psychology explains the mechanisms of anxiety, while the concept of *nafs* enriches the understanding of self-structure and existential orientation. This integration yields a more comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding anxiety in the viral era as simultaneously cognitive, existential, and structural in nature.

Conceptual Implications: Toward an Integrative Psychological Framework

The critical dialogue presented in the previous discussion underscores that understanding anxiety in the viral era requires a theoretical framework that moves beyond both mechanistic reductionism and religious normativism. Contemporary psychology has been successful in explaining the cognitive mechanisms and subjective experiences of anxiety. Yet, it often proves insufficient in addressing deeper questions concerning the structure of the self and the erosion of meaning under socio-digital pressures. Conversely, Islamic psychology—through the concept of *nafs*—offers a holistic mapping of the self, but frequently remains underconnected to modern empirical findings.³⁰ The central conceptual implication of this study is the need for an integrative psychological framework that combines the empirical strengths of contemporary psychology with the anthropological depth of the Islamic understanding of the psyche.

Theoretically, such integration shifts the analytical focus from mere symptom management toward understanding anxiety as a structural and dynamic phenomenon. Within this framework, anxiety is not reduced to cognitive distortion or existential crisis alone, but is interpreted as an indicator of imbalance among impulses, reflective awareness, and orientation toward meaning within the structure of the *nafs*.³¹ This perspective aligns with critiques of purely technical coping approaches, which tend to offer short-term relief while neglecting deeper issues of existential meaning—an issue frequently highlighted in existential psychology and critiques of digital culture. Accordingly, integrative psychology situates the regulation of anxiety at the level of meaning and self-structure, rather than limiting it to technique-based interventions.

A further implication concerns the reinterpretation of empirical findings on social media and anxiety. Recent studies consistently show that social media functions as an amplifier of negative emotions through mechanisms of social comparison and public validation demands. Within the integrative framework proposed here, such findings are read as external pressures that intensify internal conflicts within the *nafs*, thereby generating persistent anxiety. In other words, modern empirical data gain greater analytical depth when situated within a structural model of the self that explains how digital pressures are internalized, negotiated, and imbued with meaning by individuals.³²

To summarize these implications, the following figure presents a conceptual diagram of the integrative psychological framework proposed in this study. The diagram illustrates the relational flow between viral-era pressures (social media and viral culture), psychological processes (cognitive appraisal and crisis of meaning), and the structure of the self (*nafs*) as the central integrative axis. This diagram is not merely decorative; rather, it visually synthesizes the conceptual findings derived from the thematic–comparative analysis.

29 Keles et al., “A Systematic Review.”

30 Pratama, M. Y., Sihabudin, M., Sya’roni, M., & Saepudin. Living the Qur’an: Exploring Dalā’il Al-Khairāt in Indonesia as a Bridge Between Devotional Tradition and Emotional Experience. *Millati: Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities*, 9, No. 2 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.18326/millati.v9i2.3944>

31 May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, 25. Lihat juga Rosa, *Social Acceleration*, 72.

32 Keles et al., “A Systematic Review.”

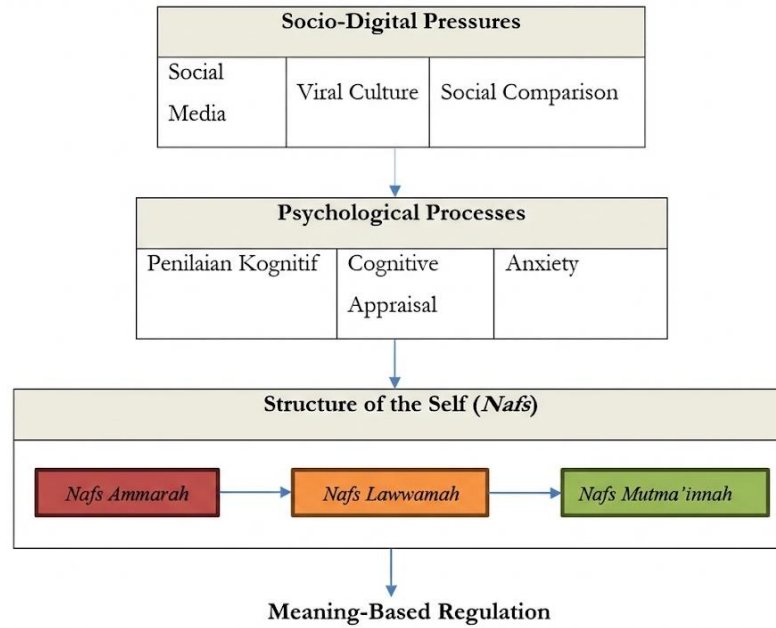


Figure 1. An Integrative Psychological Framework for Understanding Anxiety in the Viral Era

Source: by Author

As illustrated above, socio-digital pressures—manifested through social media and viral culture—shape individuals’ cognitive and existential processes, including threat appraisal and crises of meaning. These processes interact with the internal structure of the *nafs* (*ammarah–lawwamah–mutma’innah*), which determines the intensity and persistence of anxiety. Meaning-based regulation functions as a balancing mechanism within the self-structure, enabling the reorientation of affective responses and the pursuit of sustained inner stability.

The theoretical implication of this framework lies in opening pathways for the development of cross-cultural psychology that is more sensitive to both spiritual and digital contexts. Integrative psychology does not reject empirical methods; rather, it situates them within a broader anthropological perspective. Thus, the contribution of this study does not primarily reside in offering practical therapeutic solutions, but in advancing a conceptual enrichment that enables a more comprehensive and contextually relevant understanding of anxiety in modern society.

Finally, the academic implication of this study is the affirmation of Islamic psychology as an equal partner in scientific dialogue within contemporary psychological discourse. By positioning the concept of *nafs* as a dialogical analytical framework, this research contributes to ongoing efforts toward the decolonization of psychological knowledge, which has often been centered on secular Western experiences. At the same time, it avoids falling into normative exclusivism. The proposed integrative psychological framework therefore serves as the conceptual foundation that will be synthesized and reaffirmed in the concluding section.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that anxiety in the viral era is a psychosocial phenomenon that cannot be adequately understood through contemporary psychological approaches that focus solely on cognitive mechanisms or individual coping strategies. The analysis demonstrates that persistent socio-digital pressures—such as social comparison, demands for self-performativity, and public validation—generate a form of anxiety that is both enduring and distributed. Accordingly, anxiety in digital society operates at the level of self-structure and meaning, rather than merely as a situational response to specific stressors.

Through a critical dialogue between contemporary psychology and Islamic psychology, this study finds that the concept of *nafs* provides an anthropological framework capable of enriching the understanding of anxiety. The integration of these two perspectives results in an integrative psychological framework that positions anxiety as an indicator of structural imbalance within the human self—an imbalance intensified by socio-digital pressures. The primary contribution of this research lies in positioning Islamic psychology as a dialogical and analytically relevant perspective within contemporary psychological discourse, without falling into religious normativism or empirical reductionism.

As a follow-up, this study recommends the development of cross-cultural empirical research to examine and test the proposed integrative psychological framework, as well as methodological exploration to operationalize the dimensions of *nafs* within modern psychological research. The author also extends appreciation to the scholars and institutions that have provided intellectual space and academic resources, enabling this study to be developed in a critical and interdisciplinary manner.

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