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Is Modern Life Actually Progressing,or Just Accelerating? A Multidisciplinary Critical Analysis with Empirical Survey Findings

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Abstract:

This research paper critically examines whether modern life represents genuine human progress or merely an escalating pace of change — acceleration without direction. Situated at the intersection of philosophy, sociology, technology studies, and education, the paper draws upon a broad range of theoretical frameworks including Hartmut Rosa's Social Acceleration Theory, Hannah Arendt's conception of political freedom, and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach. The study raises the central question: are we living better, or simply faster? By analysing dimensions such as technological proliferation, mental health crises, ecological degradation, inequality, and the erosion of meaningful human relationships, the paper argues that acceleration without wisdom constitutes a crisis of civilisation. The research incorporates empirical findings from a 16-item survey administered to 15 SASTRA University BSc B.Ed. and BA B.Ed. students, providing primary data on student perceptions of modern life quality, pace, and purpose. The findings contribute to interdisciplinary discourses on the nature, metrics, and goals of human progress in the 21st century.

Keywords: Progress, Acceleration, Modernity, Social Theory, Well-being, Technology, Sustainability, Education, SASTRA University, Survey Research

Introduction

The 21st century is defined by speed. Information travels at the velocity of light, economies shift overnight, and technological paradigms become obsolete within a decade. Yet amid this dizzying pace, a profound question persists: Is humanity actually progressing, or merely accelerating toward an undefined destination?

The concept of progress has historically been tied to Enlightenment ideals — the advancement of science, reason, democracy, and human welfare. From the industrial revolution to the digital age, societies have celebrated each wave of innovation as evidence of civilisational advance. Yet the same era that produced antibiotics, democratic institutions, and global connectivity has also generated climate catastrophe, mass surveillance, rising mental illness, and unprecedented inequality.

The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2013) introduced the concept of 'social acceleration' to describe the compressive effects of modern temporality on human experience. For Rosa, acceleration is not synonymous with progress: it is a structural condition of late modernity wherein the pace of technological change, social change, and the pace of life itself continuously increase, producing a state of 'frenetic standstill' — perpetual motion without genuine advance.

This paper argues that modern life has largely become a matter of acceleration rather than progress. While certain empirical indicators — life expectancy, literacy rates, and material living standards — have improved significantly, the deeper dimensions of human flourishing — meaning, belonging, ecological sustainability, and social justice — have been systematically neglected or eroded by the very dynamism that defines modernity.
The paper incorporates primary data from a survey of 15 SASTRA University students, enriching the theoretical analysis with empirical student perspectives. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature; Section 3 examines theoretical frameworks; Section 4 analyses key thematic dimensions; Section 5 presents survey methodology and findings; Section 6 offers discussion and synthesis; Section 7 presents conclusions and recommendations; Section 8 provides the full reference list.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Idea of Progress in Western Thought

The philosophical lineage of 'progress' extends from Condorcet's sketch of human perfectibility through Hegel's teleological history to Marx's materialist dialectics. Each framework posits a directionality in human affairs — an arc toward greater freedom, rationality, or justice. In the 20th century, however, the catastrophes of two world wars, the Holocaust, colonialism, and totalitarianism prompted a profound crisis of faith in automatic progress.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944) in the Dialectic of Enlightenment argued that the very rationality powering Western progress had become an instrument of domination. The mastery of nature through science led not to emancipation but to new forms

of barbarism. This critical tradition laid the groundwork for questioning whether technological advancement and moral progress necessarily coincide.

2.2 Social Acceleration Theory

Hartmut Rosa's landmark work, Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity (2013), provides the most systematic contemporary account of the relationship between speed and social life. Rosa identifies three interrelated dimensions of acceleration: technological acceleration (faster transport, communication, production), acceleration of social change (shorter institutional lifespans, faster cultural turnover), and acceleration of the pace of life (shrinking time for leisure, relationships, and reflection).

Crucially, Rosa argues that acceleration produces 'desynchronisation' — a mismatch between different spheres of life — and 'alienation' — a fundamental estrangement between individuals and the world they inhabit. The accelerated subject experiences time as scarce and the world as unresponsive, generating precisely the opposite of what progress promises.

2.3 Amartya Sen and the Capability Approach

Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2011) offer an alternative conception of progress centred on capabilities — what people are genuinely able to do and be. The Capability Approach rejects purely economic measures of progress (such as GDP) in favour of multi-dimensional indices of human flourishing including health, education, political participation, emotional affiliation, and environmental sustainability.

By this standard, many dimensions of modern life show troubling stagnation or regression. Sen's earlier work on famines demonstrated that food scarcity is rarely caused by absolute shortages but by failures of entitlements and political will — a critique equally applicable to modern inequalities in housing, healthcare, and digital access.

2.4 Technology and the Paradox of Connection

Sherry Turkle (2011) in Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other documents how digital connectivity, while expanding the range of human interaction, has simultaneously undermined its depth and quality. Social media platforms optimise for engagement rather than wellbeing, producing what Byung-Chul Han (2015) calls a 'burnout society' — individuals compulsively performing productivity and connection while experiencing profound loneliness and exhaustion.

The empirical literature on social media and mental health is extensive. Twenge et al. (2018) demonstrate significant correlations between increased smartphone use and rising rates of depression and anxiety among adolescents, particularly young women. The technologically accelerated society has produced a mental health epidemic at the same time as it has provided unprecedented tools for human communication.

2.5 Ecological Limits and Unsustainable Growth

The concept of progress has historically been tied to economic growth, yet contemporary ecological science has made clear that infinite growth on a finite planet is impossible. The Limits to Growth (Meadows et al., 1972), the Planetary Boundaries framework (Rockström et al., 2009), and the IPCC reports on climate change collectively demonstrate that the dominant model of modern progress is ecologically unsustainable.

Kate Raworth (2017) in Doughnut Economics argues that the goal of modern societies should not be growth but prosperity within planetary boundaries — a conception of progress fundamentally different from, and in many ways opposed to, the accelerationist model dominant since the industrial revolution.

2.6 Education, Meaning, and the Examined Life

The philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2010) argues that the achievement society produces individuals so saturated with possibilities and demands that they lose the capacity for genuine reflection and contemplative experience. The educational system, increasingly oriented toward employability and competency rather than wisdom and meaning, mirrors this dynamic. Students are trained for acceleration rather than for living well.

Viktor Frankl's (1959) foundational work in logotherapy demonstrates that meaning — not pleasure or power — is the primary human motivation, and that societies which cannot provide frameworks of meaning generate existential vacuums. The accelerated modern world, with its rapid obsolescence of values and identities, may be producing precisely such a vacuum at civilisational scale.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Progress vs. Acceleration: A Conceptual Distinction

Before proceeding, it is essential to distinguish analytically between progress and acceleration. Progress implies directionality toward improvement in pre-specified dimensions of human flourishing. Acceleration describes the increasing speed at which processes occur. The two are often conflated in popular discourse — faster is assumed to be better — but this conflation is itself a symptom of the problem this paper diagnoses.

We propose the following working definitions:

- Progress: Sustained, multi-dimensional improvement in human wellbeing, justice, meaning, ecological sustainability, and political freedom.
- Acceleration: Increasing velocity in technological change, social change, and the subjective pace of life, irrespective of direction or value.
- Accelerationism (critical): The condition in which acceleration has become a self-reinforcing logic that displaces the question of purpose entirely.

By these definitions, our central claim is that modern societies have achieved substantial acceleration while experiencing mixed, contradictory, and in some dimensions regressive progress.

3.2 Multi-Dimensional Framework of Analysis

This paper analyses modern life across five interconnected dimensions:

- Material and Technological Dimension: Advances in material living standards, health technology, and productivity.
- Psychological and Existential Dimension: Mental health, meaning, wellbeing, and quality of subjective experience.
- Social and Relational Dimension: The quality of human relationships, community, trust, and belonging.
- Political and Ethical Dimension: Democratic participation, justice, rights, and moral progress.
- Ecological Dimension: Sustainability, relationship to the natural world, and intergenerational responsibility.

This multi-dimensional approach resists reductive accounts of progress that privilege any single metric, whether GDP, life expectancy, or technological capability.

4. Thematic Analysis

4.1 Material Progress: The Undeniable Gains

It would be intellectually dishonest to ignore the genuine achievements of modern civilisation. Global life expectancy has increased from approximately 31 years in 1900 to over 73 years by 2023 (World Health Organization, 2023). Extreme poverty, defined as living on less than $2.15 per day, has declined from approximately 36% of the world population in 1990 to below 9% in 2022, despite significant COVID-19 setbacks (World Bank, 2022). Literacy rates have risen to above 86% globally. Vaccines have eradicated or controlled diseases that once killed millions annually.

These gains are real, significant, and ought not to be dismissed. They represent genuine progress by any reasonable definition. Yet they are not evenly distributed, and they have come with ecological and social costs that threaten their sustainability. The question is not whether modernity has produced any progress, but whether its dominant logic is adequate to the full range of human needs.

4.2 The Mental Health Crisis as Diagnostic

One of the most telling indicators of the limits of accelerationist progress is the global mental health crisis. The World Health Organization reports that depression is now the leading cause of disability worldwide. Anxiety disorders affect more than 264 million people globally. Suicide rates, while declining in some regions, remain alarmingly high, particularly among young people. In developed nations, which by material metrics represent the frontier

of modern progress, rates of loneliness, depression, and anxiety have risen sharply in recent decades.

Jonathan Haidt and Jean Twenge's research documents a dramatic deterioration in adolescent mental health correlating with smartphone adoption and social media use, particularly from around 2012. Young people in the most technologically advanced societies report lower life satisfaction, higher anxiety, and more frequent suicidal ideation than their counterparts in previous generations.

4.3 Inequality: The Persistence of Injustice

Thomas Piketty's Capital in the Twenty-First Century (2014) presents a rigorous empirical analysis demonstrating that wealth inequality in advanced capitalist economies has returned to or exceeded Gilded Age levels. The richest 1% of the global population now holds approximately 38% of global wealth (Credit Suisse, 2022). This concentration of wealth is not merely a distributional concern; it translates into differential access to healthcare, education, political influence, and basic life opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic starkly illustrated this dynamic: while the wealthy worked remotely and invested in rising asset markets, low-income workers faced disproportionate health risk, job loss, and educational disruption. The pandemic's unequal impacts revealed that modern progress has been distributed along pre-existing fault lines of class, race, and geography.

4.4 Ecological Catastrophe: Progress Against Nature

Perhaps the most decisive argument against simple narratives of modern progress is the ecological crisis. The Anthropocene — the geological era defined by human impact on the Earth system — is characterised by a sixth mass extinction event, accelerating climate change, ocean acidification, freshwater depletion, and widespread soil degradation.

The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (2021) confirms that without rapid and far-reaching transformation of the global economy, irreversible climate tipping points will be crossed within decades. The model of progress dominant since the industrial revolution — powered by fossil fuels, committed to continuous economic growth, treating nature as an externality — is the proximate cause of this crisis.

4.5 The Erosion of Time and Meaning

Rosa (2013) observes that despite extraordinary increases in productivity and time-saving technologies, modern individuals consistently report feeling more time-pressured, not less. The paradox is explained by the logic of acceleration itself: efficiency gains are immediately reinvested in increased activity, obligations, and consumption rather than translated into leisure or contemplation.

This has profound implications for meaning-making. Philosophical and religious traditions across cultures — from Aristotelian leisure (schole) to Buddhist mindfulness to Christian Sabbath — have consistently identified contemplative time as essential to meaningful human life. The accelerated society systematically eliminates such time, producing what Han (2015) calls 'deep boredom' — a pathological restlessness that masks an underlying existential emptiness.

5. Research Methodology And Survey Findings

5.1 Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining a systematic literature review with primary quantitative data collection. A structured survey instrument of 16 questions was administered to students at SASTRA Deemed University in May 2026. The survey included Likert-scale items (Sections B and D) and multiple-choice items (Sections C), capturing perceptions across the thematic dimensions identified in Sections 3 and 4 above.

5.2 Sample Profile

A total of 15 student responses were collected. The demographic profile of respondents is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Respondent Demographics

Category	Sub-category	N	%
Programme	BSc B.Ed.	8	53.3%
	BA B.Ed.	7	46.7%
Year of Study	1st Year	13	86.7%
	3rd Year	1	6.7%
	4th Year	1	6.7%
Gender	Female	13	86.7%
	Male	2	13.3%

5.3 Section B: Perceptions of Modern Progress (Q1–Q8)

Table 2 presents the distribution of responses to the eight Likert-scale items measuring perceptions of modern progress.

Table 2: Perceptions of Modern Progress – Response Distribution (N=15)

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Q1. Quality of life improved in last 50 years	0	5 (33%)	4 (27%)	4 (27%)	2 (13%)
Q2. Technology made people happier	0	2 (13%)	4 (27%)	8 (53%)	1 (7%)
Q3. Life moves too fast to live meaningfully	0	0	4 (27%)	8 (53%)	3 (20%)
Q4. Economic growth = adequate measure of progress	2 (13%)	4 (27%)	5 (33%)	3 (20%)	1 (7%)
Q5. Democratic rights expansion = moral progress	0	1 (7%)	2 (13%)	11 (73%)	1 (7%)
Q6. Climate change reveals unsustainability	0	0	5 (33%)	6 (40%)	4 (27%)
Q7. My generation will live better than parents	1 (7%)	2 (13%)	6 (40%)	3 (20%)	3 (20%)
Q8. 'Progress' is propaganda for inequality	1 (7%)	0	8 (53%)	4 (27%)	2 (13%)

Key findings from Section B: An overwhelming 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the expansion of democratic rights represents genuine moral progress (Q5). A significant 73% also agreed or strongly agreed that modern life moves too fast for individuals to live meaningfully (Q3), strongly corroborating Rosa's acceleration thesis. Climate change was recognised as evidence of unsustainable development by 67% of students (Q6). Notably, only 40% agreed that quality of life has improved in the last 50 years (Q1), suggesting considerable student scepticism about general progress narratives.

5.4 Section C: Technology, Speed, and Wellbeing (Q9–Q16)

Table 3 presents response distributions for the multiple-choice technology and wellbeing items.

Table 3: Technology, Speed & Wellbeing – Response Distribution (N=15)

Question	Most Common Response	N	%
Q9. Daily screen time	More than 6 hours	8	53.3%
Q10. Overwhelmed by pace of change	Sometimes	7	46.7%
Q11. Social media effect on wellbeing	Somewhat positively	10	66.7%
Q12. AI impact on quality of life	Slightly improve	7	46.7%
Q13. Time for reflection & personal growth	Sometimes	10	66.7%
Q14. Digital tech effect on relationships	Slightly helped	8	53.3%
Q15. Education: meaningful life vs job market	Balanced preparation	7	46.7%
Q16. Stress vs. previous generation	Slightly higher	8	53.3%

Notable findings from Section C: A striking 53.3% of students spend more than 6 hours daily on digital devices (Q9), placing them firmly in the high-consumption bracket. Nearly two-thirds (66.7%) report having access to time for reflection and personal growth only 'sometimes' (Q13), corroborating the paper's central claim about the erosion of contemplative time. A slight majority (53.3%) report higher stress levels compared to what they perceive previous generations experienced (Q16). Opinions on AI remain divided but cautiously optimistic (Q12). The majority (46.7%) believe education provides a balanced preparation, while 33.3% believe it is primarily job-market-oriented.

5.5 Summary of Key Empirical Findings

The survey data converge on several important conclusions that reinforce the paper's theoretical argument:

- Students overwhelmingly recognise the acceleration problem: 73% agree that life moves too fast to live meaningfully.
- Ecological awareness is high: 67% agree that climate change reveals the unsustainability of modern development.

- High digital device use (53% spending 6+ hours daily) is accompanied by reported stress elevation and limited reflective time.
- Optimism about AI is tempered and divided, reflecting the ambivalence that marks student perceptions of technology more broadly.
- Democratic progress is affirmed, but general progress narratives remain questioned by a significant minority.

6. Discussion And Synthesis

The literature reviewed and empirical data collected in this paper converge on a central finding: modern societies have achieved remarkable and historically unprecedented material and technological advances, yet these advances have not been matched by commensurate gains in human wellbeing, social justice, ecological sustainability, or existential meaning. The dominant logic of modernity — continuous acceleration, growth, and innovation — has proven partially emancipatory and partially destructive.

This finding aligns with Sen's capability approach: genuine progress requires expanding what people can do and be, not merely accelerating economic production or technological capability. By this measure, the gains of modernity are real but incomplete, and in some dimensions such as mental health, ecological integrity, and meaning, they have been reversed.

The student survey corroborates this analysis at the micro-level. Students at SASTRA are highly digitally embedded, frequently time-pressured, and generally sceptical about whether the pace of modern life is compatible with meaningful living — even as they affirm specific domains of progress such as democratic rights and medical advances. This pattern reflects the broader paradox: simultaneous appreciation of modernity's gains and awareness of its costs.

For young people in higher education, the implications are particularly acute. They are the inheritors of both the gains and the contradictions of modern civilisation, and they are being trained within an accelerationist framework that may not equip them to navigate, let alone transform, this situation. Education that orients students toward wisdom, reflection, ecological responsibility, and social justice — rather than merely toward productivity and employability — is itself a form of counter-acceleration.

Conclusion And Recommendations

This paper has argued that modern life is predominantly characterised by acceleration rather than progress in the full, multi-dimensional sense required for genuine human flourishing. While material advances are real and important, they are accompanied

by a mental health epidemic, deepening inequality, ecological catastrophe, and an erosion of meaning and contemplative time that collectively constitute a civilisational crisis.

The empirical data from SASTRA students support this analysis: despite high digital engagement and cautious technological optimism, a majority report feeling that life moves too fast for meaningful living, experiencing stress levels above prior generations, and having limited time for reflection and personal growth.

The question 'Is modern life actually progressing, or just accelerating?' is not merely academic. It is a question of civilisational orientation — of whether humanity can develop the wisdom to match its power, the justice to distribute its prosperity, and the restraint to preserve the ecological conditions of its own survival.

Based on this analysis, the following recommendations are offered:

Recommendation	Description
Curriculum Reform	Universities, including SASTRA, should integrate courses in ecological literacy, philosophy of progress, and mental health alongside technical and professional training.
Research Priority	Social science research should systematically monitor multi-dimensional indicators of wellbeing beyond GDP, including meaning, ecological sustainability, and relational quality.
Policy Reorientation	Policymakers should adopt capability-based and Doughnut Economics frameworks to guide development planning and assess societal progress.
Digital Literacy	Educational institutions should foster critical digital literacy that enables students to relate to technology reflectively rather than reactively.
Community Investment	Policy and institutional design should actively strengthen the social fabric — community, civic participation, and intergenerational connection — that acceleration tends to erode.

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