
Ethical Dimensions of Social Media Use in the Light of Islamic Teachings: A Contextual Analysis for Pakistan

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Abstract

This article examines the ethical implications of social media use through the lens of Islamic teachings, with a specific focus on the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. As digital platforms increasingly shape public discourse, interpersonal communication, and individual behavior, questions of morality, accountability, and social responsibility have become urgent. Drawing upon primary Islamic sources—the Qur'an and Sunnah—and classical ethical frameworks such as *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law), the study identifies core Islamic principles relevant to online conduct, including truthfulness (*ṣidq*), privacy (*ḥurmah al-khāṣah*), avoidance of backbiting (*ghibah*), and the prohibition of spreading corruption (*fasād*). The article analyzes how these principles intersect with contemporary challenges in Pakistan, such as misinformation, cyberbullying, digital surveillance, and the erosion of public decorum. It further evaluates the role of religious scholars, educational institutions, and state policies in promoting ethical digital citizenship. The research concludes that a robust integration of Islamic ethics into digital literacy initiatives can foster a more responsible, compassionate, and

truthful online environment in Pakistan, aligning technological engagement with spiritual and moral integrity.

Keywords: Social Media Ethics, Islamic Teachings, Digital Citizenship, Pakistan, *Ghibah*, Truthfulness, *Maqāṣid Al-Sharī‘Ah*

Introduction

In the 21st century, social media has emerged as a transformative force in global communication, reshaping how individuals interact, access information, and construct identity. In Pakistan, where internet penetration has surged from 13% in 2015 to over 50% in 2024, platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) have become integral to daily life—especially among youth, who constitute nearly 64% of the population.¹

While these technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for education, civic engagement, and social connectivity, they also present significant ethical challenges that demand moral scrutiny.

Islamic teachings, with their comprehensive ethical framework governing speech, intention, and social interaction, provide a profound resource for navigating the digital landscape. The Qur’an and Sunnah emphasize the sanctity of human dignity, the gravity of speech, and the communal responsibility to uphold truth and justice. In an era where a single post can incite violence or a viral rumor can destabilize markets, these timeless principles acquire renewed relevance. As Pakistan grapples with issues like fake news, online harassment, hate speech, and digital addiction, an Islamic ethical perspective offers not only normative guidance but also a culturally resonant foundation for digital citizenship.

This article explores the ethical dimensions of social media use in Pakistan through the interpretive lens of Islamic ethics. It begins by outlining core Islamic principles pertinent to digital communication. It then examines contemporary challenges in the Pakistani context, evaluates existing responses from religious and educational

institutions, and proposes a framework for integrating Islamic ethics into national digital literacy strategies. The study is grounded in the conviction that technology, while neutral in form, acquires moral significance through human intention and use—and that Islam, as a holistic way of life, must inform how Muslims engage with the digital world.

Islamic Ethical Principles Governing Communication

Islam places immense emphasis on the ethical use of speech and communication. The Qur'an states: "And do not mix the truth with falsehood or conceal the truth while you know [it]".²

This injunction underscores the primacy of truthfulness (*ṣidq*) as a foundational virtue in all forms of expression, including digital communication. Lying, exaggeration, and the deliberate distortion of facts—common features of online misinformation—are categorically condemned. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "Truthfulness leads to righteousness, and righteousness leads to Paradise".³

Closely linked to truthfulness is the prohibition of *ghibah* (backbiting), defined as speaking about a person in their absence in a way they would dislike. The Qur'an likens backbiting to "eating the flesh of your dead brother",⁴

Powerful metaphor highlighting its moral repugnance. In the age of social media, where anonymous comments, meme culture, and public shaming are rampant, this prohibition takes on new urgency. Sharing private information, mocking individuals through edited videos, or circulating unverified allegations—even under the guise of "raising awareness"—often constitutes *ghibah* and violates Islamic ethics.

Privacy (*ḥurmah al-khāṣah*) is another cornerstone of Islamic communication ethics. The Qur'an commands: "O you who believe! Avoid much suspicion; indeed, some suspicion is sinful. And do not spy or backbite each other".⁵ Classical jurists interpreted this verse as establishing a right to personal privacy that must not be

violated without just cause. In Pakistan, where screenshots of private messages are frequently shared for public ridicule or political gain, this principle is routinely breached. Islamic ethics demand that even if information is technically accessible, it should not be disseminated without consent and legitimate purpose.

The concept of *amānah* (trustworthiness) further governs online conduct. Every user holds a trust—whether in sharing information, representing others, or using data responsibly. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “There is no faith for one who is not trustworthy” (Musnad Aḥmad).⁶

Thus, spreading unverified news, manipulating images, or impersonating others online constitutes a betrayal of *amānah*.

Moreover, Islam prohibits *fasād* (corruption or mischief) in the land. The Qur’an warns: “And do not commit abuse on earth, spreading corruption” .⁷

Social media campaigns that incite sectarian hatred, promote violence, or destabilize social harmony fall under this prohibition. In Pakistan, where digital platforms have been used to mobilize mob violence or spread anti-state narratives, the ethical imperative to avoid *fasād* is particularly salient.

Finally, the principle of *ḥisbah*—the duty to “enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong” —extends to the digital sphere.⁸

Muslims are not only prohibited from unethical online behavior but are also encouraged to actively counter falsehood, support victims of cyberbullying, and promote constructive discourse. This transforms passive scrolling into an arena of moral responsibility.

These principles—truthfulness, privacy, trustworthiness, avoidance of backbiting and corruption, and active moral engagement—form a coherent ethical framework that can guide social media use in accordance with Islamic teachings.

Contemporary Challenges in the Pakistani Context

Pakistan's rapid digital transformation has outpaced the development of ethical and regulatory safeguards, leading to several pressing challenges that intersect with Islamic moral concerns.

Misinformation and Fake News: The viral spread of false information is perhaps the most pervasive issue. During the 2022 floods, fabricated images and exaggerated casualty figures circulated widely, diverting aid from genuine victims.⁹ Similarly, during elections, doctored videos and baseless allegations against candidates have influenced public opinion. From an Islamic perspective, sharing unverified content violates the Qur'anic command to "verify" news¹⁰

Constitutes a form of *buhtān* (slander), which is gravely sinful. ¹¹

Cyberbullying and Online Harassment: Women, minorities, and public figures are frequent targets of online abuse in Pakistan. Trolling, slut-shaming, and threats of violence are common, particularly on platforms like TikTok and Instagram.¹¹ Such behavior contravenes the Islamic injunction to "speak to people good words"

¹² Violates the dignity (*karāmah*) that Islam accords to every human being .¹³

The anonymity of social media often emboldens users to act in ways they would never consider in person, revealing a disconnection between offline piety and online conduct.

Digital Addiction and Time Wastage: Excessive social media use has led to declining academic performance, family discord, and mental health issues among Pakistani youth.¹⁴

The Prophet (peace be upon him) emphasized the value of time, saying: "There are two blessings which many people lose: health and free time" (Sahih al-Bukhari).¹⁵

Wasting hours on trivial or harmful content contradicts the Islamic ethic of *ni'mah* (gratitude for blessings) and *hifz al-waqt* (guarding one's time).

Erosion of Public Discourse: Social media in Pakistan has increasingly become a space of polarization, where nuance is lost, and dialogue is replaced by vitriol. Political debates often descend into personal attacks, and religious discussions are weaponized for ideological gain. This undermines the Islamic ideal of *ḥikmah* (wisdom) and *maw‘izah ḥasanah* (gentle exhortation) in da‘wah.¹⁶

The culture of “canceling” individuals without due process further violates the presumption of innocence and the right to repentance—core tenets of Islamic justice.

Surveillance and Data Exploitation: While less discussed in public discourse, the commodification of user data by global tech companies raises ethical concerns. Islamic law emphasizes the sanctity of personal information and prohibits its unauthorized use. The commercial exploitation of behavioral data for targeted advertising or political manipulation may constitute a violation of *ḥurmah al-khāṣah*, especially when users are unaware of how their data is used.

These challenges demonstrate that the ethical risks of social media are not merely technical but deeply moral—and thus require responses rooted in ethical and spiritual frameworks, not just legal regulation.

Institutional Responses and Religious Guidance

In response to these challenges, various institutions in Pakistan have begun addressing the ethical dimensions of social media from an Islamic perspective.

Religious scholars and ‘*ulamā*’ have issued *fatāwā* (legal opinions) condemning online backbiting, fake news, and harassment. The Islamic Fiqh Academy of Pakistan, for instance, declared in 2020 that sharing unverified news is *ḥarām* (forbidden) unless verified through reliable sources.¹⁷

Similarly, prominent scholars have emphasized that digital communication falls under the same ethical rules as face-to-face interaction. Friday sermons (*khuṭbahs*)

in major mosques frequently address responsible social media use, framing it as part of *taqwā* (God-consciousness).

Educational institutions have also taken steps. Public and private universities now include modules on digital ethics in Islamic studies and communication courses. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) has encouraged the integration of Islamic ethics into media and journalism curricula.¹⁸

However, implementation remains inconsistent, and many students graduate without a clear ethical framework for online engagement.

Civil society organizations have launched awareness campaigns. The “Digital Pakistan” initiative, supported by the Ministry of Information Technology, includes components on digital citizenship and online safety.¹⁹

Religious NGOs, such as Al-Khidmat Foundation, have conducted workshops in schools and colleges on “Islamic Ethics in the Digital Age,” using Qur’anic verses and Prophetic examples to illustrate responsible behavior.

The state has also enacted legal measures. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 criminalizes cyberbullying, hate speech, and the spread of false information.²⁰

While necessary, such laws are reactive and punitive. They do not address the underlying moral deficit that enables unethical behavior. Moreover, concerns about potential misuse for suppressing dissent highlight the need for complementary ethical education that fosters internal restraint rather than mere fear of punishment.

Despite these efforts, a coordinated national strategy that bridges Islamic ethics, digital literacy, and policy remains absent. Religious guidance is often fragmented, educational content is superficial, and public awareness is low. There is a critical need for a holistic approach that empowers citizens to self-regulate their online conduct through internalized moral principles.

Toward an Integrated Framework for Ethical Digital Citizenship

To cultivate ethical social media use in Pakistan, a multi-pronged strategy is required—one that harmonizes Islamic teachings with modern digital literacy. The following framework proposes actionable pathways:

1. Curriculum Integration: Islamic ethics should be systematically integrated into school and university curricula. Lessons on *ghibah*, truthfulness, and privacy can be contextualized for digital environments. For example, students can analyze viral posts to identify ethical violations and propose Islamic alternatives. Teacher training programs must equip educators to facilitate these discussions with theological depth and practical relevance.

2. Fatwā-Based Digital Guidelines: Religious bodies should collaborate with technologists to develop clear, accessible guidelines for social media use based on *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*. These guidelines could address issues like data privacy, content sharing, and online activism, grounded in the five essential objectives of Islamic law: protection of religion, life, intellect, progeny, and property.²¹ Such guidelines would provide Muslims with a principled basis for navigating complex digital dilemmas.

3. Mosque-Based Awareness Campaigns: Mosques, as central community institutions, can serve as hubs for digital ethics education. Short audio-visual materials, distributed via WhatsApp and YouTube, can explain Islamic rulings on common online behaviors. Imams can dedicate portions of Friday sermons to contemporary digital issues, making ethics relevant to daily life.

4. Media Literacy with an Islamic Lens: National digital literacy campaigns should incorporate Islamic values. Instead of merely teaching “how to spot fake news,” programs should emphasize *why* truthfulness matters in Islam. Public service messages can use Qur’anic verses and Prophetic sayings to reinforce ethical norms, creating a culture where moral restraint is valued over viral fame.

5. Ethical Design and Platform Accountability: While individual responsibility is crucial, platform design also shapes behavior. Pakistani tech developers and policymakers should advocate for ethical design principles—such as friction mechanisms before sharing unverified content or privacy-by-default settings—that align with Islamic values of caution and respect.

6. Research and Dialogue: Universities and think tanks should support interdisciplinary research on Islamic digital ethics. Conferences bringing together scholars of Islamic studies, communication, psychology, and computer science can generate context-specific solutions. Publishing in Urdu and regional languages will ensure wider accessibility.

This framework recognizes that ethical behavior cannot be legislated alone; it must be cultivated through education, community reinforcement, and spiritual reflection. By anchoring digital citizenship in Islamic ethics, Pakistan can foster a generation of users who are not only tech-savvy but also morally grounded.

Conclusion

Social media is neither inherently good nor evil; its moral character is determined by how it is used. In Pakistan, where Islamic values remain central to cultural identity, these values must serve as the compass for digital engagement. The Qur’anic emphasis on truth, the Prophetic warnings against backbiting, and the juristic recognition of privacy offer timeless guidance for navigating the complexities of the digital age.

The challenges—misinformation, harassment, addiction, and polarization—are real, but they are not insurmountable. Through a concerted effort involving religious institutions, educators, policymakers, and civil society, Pakistan can develop a model of ethical digital citizenship that is both authentically Islamic and responsive to contemporary realities. Such a model would not only protect individuals from

harm but also elevate public discourse, strengthen social trust, and honor the Islamic ideal of *ihsān*—excellence in all actions, seen and unseen.

In a world where the digital and the spiritual are increasingly intertwined, the call to “speak good or remain silent”²²

Remains as relevant on a smartphone screen as it was in the marketplace of Madinah. By heeding this call, Pakistani Muslims can transform social media from a space of chaos into a realm of compassion, truth, and moral responsibility.

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