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Islamic Ruling on the Use of Social Media

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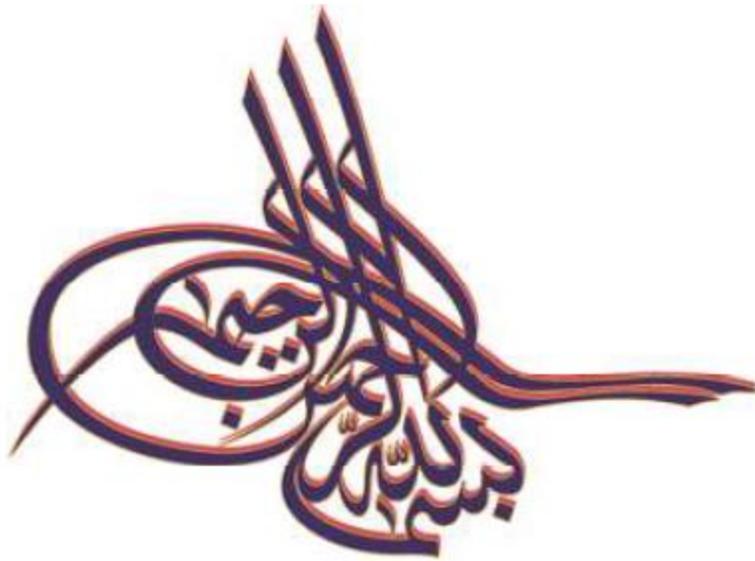
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"الأراء في هذا البحث تعبر عن رأي الباحث وليس بالضرورة عن رأي أمجا"

Opinions in this research are solely those of the author and do not represent AMJA.



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1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Allah and His creation is one that is characterized by immense Mercy and Grace. Allah (ﷻ) has showered His creation with innumerable blessings, to the extent that if one spent their entire existence enumerating these blessings they would exhaust their life before encompassing all of Allah's favors. Indeed Allah (ﷻ) made this entire world and what it contains in the service and benefit of His creation.

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُم مَّا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا مِّنْهُ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ (الجمانية: 13)

"He subjected for you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth—all by His grace. Surely in this are signs for people who reflect." (45:13). One of the greatest blessings of our time that provides for us with very unique opportunities to fulfill our purpose in this world is the technological progress of the modern era. Like with any blessing, however, if it is not used properly and wisely, it can quickly turn into an evil and a great harm. The advent of social media and its various platforms is a perfect example of this. Social media has provided human beings with the ability to connect, learn and reach all across the world. At the same time, it has opened the door in an easily accessible way to many significant harms. It is vitally important to understand the role and impact of this technology that has captured the globe and be able to utilize it as a tool of goodness and benefit, while preventing and protecting people from its many harmful and impermissible aspects. The aim of this paper is to discuss the ruling of using social media in light of this reality of mixed lawful and unlawful material. This study is based on the principles present in the sacred texts, along with an emphasis on the importance of properly utilizing social media under the guidelines set forth. It will become clear that social media, when properly regulated and applied, is from the great blessings of Allah that can be a robust tool in fulfilling our purpose and calling to Allah (ﷻ).

2. IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

With its immense reach and widespread use, social media has become something known across the world and is not in need of a formal definition to be understood by most. However, in order to set the standard of what is being discussed, social media is defined as forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content (such as videos) [Merriam Websters]. More specifically, a social networking site is defined as a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system level data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site. [Ellison and Boyd, 2013]. These definitions can be summarized in the idea that social media allows for the creation and exchange of user generated content.

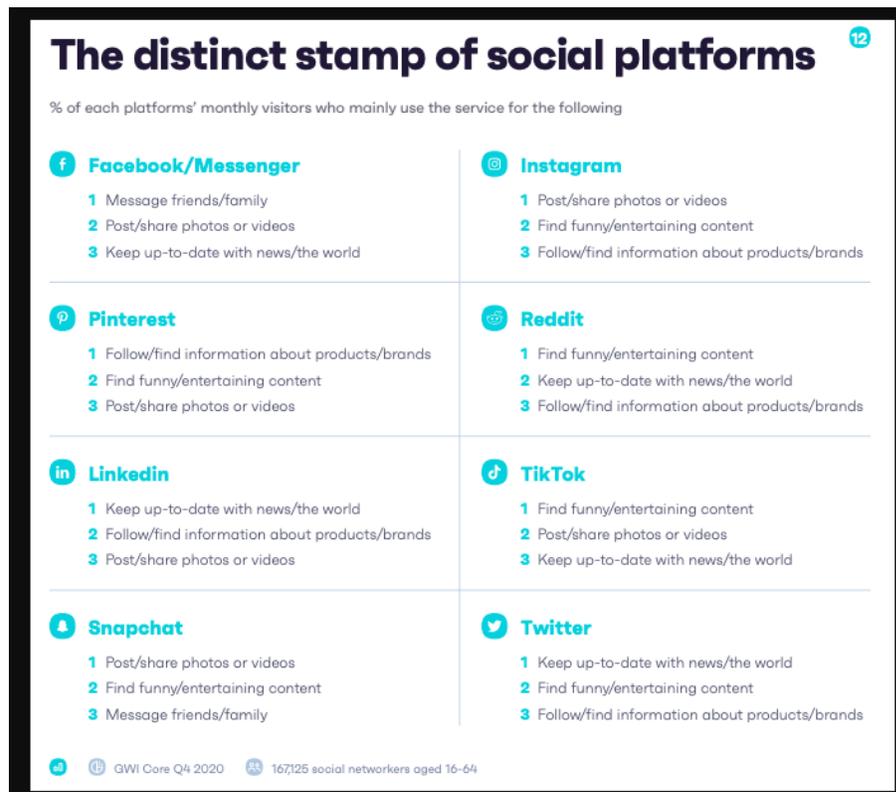
Analysis from digital research shows that there are 4.65 billion social media users around the world in April 2022, equating to 58.7 percent of the total global population (Kepios 2022). Specifically in the United States, roughly seven-in-ten Americans say they use some type of social media site – a share that has remained relatively stable over the past five years (Pew Research 2021). There is data that also shows the typical social media user actively

uses or visits an average of 7.4 different social platforms each month, and spends an average of close to 2½ hours per day using social media (GWI). This shows the scope of social media use in today’s world, of which the Muslim world is not immune. Throughout countries in the Muslim world, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the UAE, social media use on platforms such as Facebook is present in over 80% of the population. Research shows that in Saudi Arabia, social media users stand at 27 million of the total population of 35.08 million (Data Reportal Saudi Arabia 2021). 75% of Middle East youth ages 18-24 rely on social media as their source of news and information.

3. TYPES AND CLASSES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

While there are hundreds, if not thousands, of social media platforms, there are now six social media platforms that claim more than one billion monthly active users each. Additionally, 17 social media platforms have at least 300 million active users in January 2022 (Data Reportal). These include the most well known and popular today: Facebook, Youtube, Whatsapp, and Instagram.

Many of these platforms have specific areas of focus but also overlap with multiple functions and purposes. Some of the most popular uses of these platforms are for posting and sharing photos and videos, messaging friends and family, keeping up to date with news and current events, following and researching brands and products, and looking for entertainment content. The main uses of some of the most popular social media platforms are shown (GlobalWebIndex 2021).



Beyond the frequency and range of use, social media also has a tremendous impact on the social element of society. From the 86% of Americans who use digital devices to get

the news, more than half (53%) receive their news through social media (Pew Research 2021). This shows the impact of social media on worldview and information source; however this doesn't come without its negative effects on users. A 2018 British study tied social media use to decreased, disrupted, and delayed sleep, which is associated with depression, memory loss, and poor academic performance.

It is important to recognize that social media platforms are vast in number and frequently changing and evolving. Therefore, instead of speaking on specific platforms, it is more effective and beneficial to discuss and propose general guidelines and principles related to social media use that can then be applied on the ever increasing and changing specific social media platforms.

4. SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT ON YOUTH

While social media has a profound impact on all levels of society, the impact on children and young adults is especially noteworthy and even more pronounced. Studies have shown that 95% of adolescents age 13-18 have access to a smartphone (Pew Research 2018). In 2018, 45% of U.S. adolescents reported they were online "almost constantly" (Anderson 2018). While there are definitely benefits of access to social media for this age group, there are also many tangible and potential risks. These include easy access to harmful material, online bullying, and conflict. Peer influence is also heightened online, where young people may access a wide range of people in addition to potentially dangerous content. Being exposed to these harmful behaviors can also act as an encouragement to engage in those same behaviors. For example, studies showed that a significant number of those adolescents who engaged in self harm and attempted suicide had been exposed to similar material on social media around the same time (Nesi 2020). Social comparison on social media has also been linked to higher risks of depression. Research found that "when teenage girls used Social Media sites directed at online photo sharing, such as Instagram, they engaged in selective self-presentation by posting edited selfies. This behavior was aimed at receiving attention and approval from their peers, measured by the number of likes and followers." (Stsiampkouskaya et al. 2021). This need to gain the number of likes and followers can lead to posting provocative and unislamic photos, along with unhealthy and unrealistic comparisons and expectations.

Displacement, in which other important activities are replaced by social media use, also has its negative consequences such as negatively impacting sleep quality, laziness, and negligence of commitments and responsibilities (Nesi 2020). All these potential risks are heightened for Muslim youth and families, as many of these can be in direct violation of the Shariah. This can manifest through such things as lapses in mandatory acts of worship, including the 5 daily prayers, or using up the time that can be spent on the remembrance of Allah. This can negatively impact the commitment to practicing ones' religion and slow take a person away from Islam. In addition, other research found that social media use and the quality of family life are inversely proportional to each other, negatively impacting the family life with more frequent social media use. As a result, these addictive behaviors can lead to isolation from family and hinder relationships (Khan 2021).

Therefore, it is imperative on Muslim families to set the proper guidelines and principles for social media use amongst not only children but the entire family. This must also be enhanced by limiting content and filtering access when possible, as well as monitoring social media use and interactions for children.

It is the responsibility of the families to restrict access to platforms that are in direct violation of the Shariah, to monitor and limit access to individuals and groups, and to set daily limits for amount and types of use. This is due to the fact that the nature of social media is such that unfiltered and open access enables exposure to corrupt individuals and groups, explicit content, distraction from Islamic and societal duties, unhealthy attachment and addiction, and can result in weaker connections and relationships within society. There has been research concluding that the time spent on social media, repeatedly checking for messages, and personal investment correlated with risk factors for depression, anxiety, and psychological distress (Keles, McCrae and Grealish 2020). The high dependence on social media can lead to an unhealthy society that is virtually connected but emotionally disconnected. All of these can and have threatened the Muslim creed, identity, and character. Islam encourages physical presence and interaction such as greeting each other, visiting the sick, and caring for the vulnerable and weak. This is due in part to the deep emotional and spiritual impact on individual and societal relationships.

5. ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES RELEVANT TO THE RULING OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The proper understanding of a novel matter and its uses is necessary in order to arrive at its ruling. This is because the ruling of anything is contingent on a correct conception of that thing (الحكم على الشيء فرع عن تصوره). With the given definition and understanding of social media, it is clear that it is from the worldly matters (i.e. not inherently an act of devotion or worship). Therefore, the default ruling is one of permissibility unless and until a clear evidence changes the ruling. As Allah (ﷻ) says,

"هو الذى خلق لكم ما فى الارض جميعا" (البقرة:29)

"He is the One Who created everything in the earth for you" (2:29) From this is established the maxim in Islamic Law, The default in matters is permissibility (الاصل فى الاشياء (الحل), under which social media is categorized. In addition, social media provides access and opportunity for matters that are encouraged and even commanded in the Shariah such as spreading of dawah materials, seeking knowledge and connecting to the scholars and authentic knowledge across the globe, facilitating charity, awareness of otherwise ignored and unknown causes, promotion of social justice, and maintaining and strengthening family ties and the bonds of unity and brotherhood.

It is also abundantly clear to anyone who uses social media that it contains many objectionable elements and provides access to material that is in violation of the Shariah. This also needs to be given due consideration, since the virtual world mirrors the real world in its rulings and applications. In general, what the Legislator made Haram (impermissible) in our physical world must also be considered Haram (impermissible) in the virtual world, based on the analogical reasoning (Qiyas) that the two realities are legally equivalent. In addition, social media in some cases can also provide easier access to these impermissible elements and can therefore be even more dangerous in their impact. Some of these potential dangers and harms include but are not limited to: inappropriate images and videos, vulgar and foul language, music, encouragement of alcohol consumption and drug use, Islamophobic material, advertisements and marketing encouraging Haram in general, false beliefs and ideologies, promotion of LGBT lifestyle, doubts and improper understandings of Islam, access for those

without qualifications or credibility to represent and teach Islam, spreading of rumors and false accusations, privacy fears and leaking of sensitive information.

To consider the benefits of social media while limiting its harms, the use of juristic principles, as well as an accurate understanding of how social media platforms work are required to arrive at a proper and appropriate ruling. Since social media is a new matter with no explicit ruling in the sacred texts, and since it has clearly been shown to contain benefits and harms, the purpose of its use as well as what its use entails and leads to is important for determining its ruling. This is based on the overarching legal maxim, "Actions are by their intentions" (الأمر بمقاصدها) as well as the maxim that, "The means take the rulings of their objectives" (الوسائل لها حكم المقاصد). Another important legal maxim to utilize is "Consideration of Consequences" (النظر في المآلات). The "consequences" here refer to the effect of actions after their occurrence. This principle focuses on the impact and repercussion of actions, and so the action is analyzed based on not just itself but also what follows as a result. The ruling then can also be determined based on its consequences, whether they were intended or not.

Moreover, it is important to utilize the principle of weighing and balancing between benefits and harms when looking at social media use. This can be analyzed under the reality that social media in today's age is something that has widespread affliction (عموم البلوى) and as such, must be dealt with by enhancing the benefits and lessening the harms as much as possible. This would be analogous to television use, given its place and spread in today's world. In responding to a question on the use of television and its widespread reach in today's world, Sh. Salah Al-Sawy (حفظه الله) answered, "This is something that is widespread in its affliction and should be dealt with through the logic of minimizing harms within the range of ability, and what is not possible to be prevented fully in terms of evil should be prevented as much as possible." He also mentions, "The television in its foundation is an instrument that can be used in goodness and that can be used in evil, and there are many channels that broadcast beneficial religious and Dawah programs, and so if these channels are by default Islamic in their nature, but they may have some problematic issues in some of the shows and music, then I hope that there would be no sin on your shoulders, and that the burden of these mistakes would be on the broadcaster in cases of improper use."

"فإن هذا مما عمت به البلوى، ويُتعامل معه بمنطق تقليل المفسد في حدود الوُسع والطاقة، وما لا تستطيع دفعه بالكلية من الشر ادفع منه ما استطعت..."

"فإن التلفاز في الأصل جهازٌ محايد يُمكن استخدامه في الخير ويمكن استخدامه في الشرِّ، وقد كَثُرَت الفضائيات التي تَبَثُّ برامج إيمانية ودَعَوِيَّة نافعة، فإذا كانت القنوات كما تقول قنوات إسلامية من حيث الأصل، ولكن يعيبها ما يتخللها من بعض المسلسلات والموسيقى، فأرجو ألا يكون على عاتقك إنهم، وأن تكون التَّبعية في حالة إساءة الاستخدام على المُباشِر لهذه الإساءة."

Since social media has spread in the way it has and become an almost indispensable part of society, another principle would be appropriate and relevant and that is that "A need takes the position of a necessity, whether a general or specific need" (الحاجة تنزل منزلة الضرورة،) (عامّة كانت او خاصة) This again would allow for the benefits of social media to be utilized, the harms to be minimized, while overlooking some of the unavoidable harms if they are limited. It would also deal with the objection that may be raised that in social media applications users would be guaranteed to come across some form of impermissible material, whether it be false ideologies, prohibited images, or the likes. However, the believer who loves Allah and His

Messenger, and fears His punishment will exercise sufficient control to filter, ignore or minimize these materials. As long as this exposure to haram materials is limited and controlled, this use is permissible because the risk can be tolerated. A similar challenge is experienced in public spaces such as parks, stores and modes of transportation. It is upon the believer to utilize prophetic principles in these areas such as

لَا تُتَّبِعِ النَّظْرَةَ النَّظْرَةَ فَإِنَّ لَكَ الْأُولَىٰ وَلَيْسَتْ لَكَ الْآخِرَةُ

“Do not follow one glance at a woman with another. Verily, you have the first one and not the second¹,” as control for such haram exposure.

The use of social media today in connecting individuals, families, and the community as a whole can be considered close to a societal need, as Shaykh Al-Didu mentioned, social interaction is something people require and falls under the category of a need. Considering this need along with the mentioned legal maxim, “A need takes the position of a necessity, whether a general or specific need” (الحاجة تنزل منزلة الضرورة، عامة كانت او خاصة) what is beyond one's control will be overlooked and considered permissible as long as the user filters and practices material control to the best of their ability².

Along with this, the level of exposure to and avoidability of haram on these platforms must be taken into consideration. If the level of exposure to haram for a user is high on an otherwise halal platform, this may change the ruling of that platform or even for that user. However, if the level of exposure to haram is minimal and can be ignored or averted by the user, then the ruling of that platform and for that user would remain as permissible. This approach can be derived using analogous principles in the Shariah. For example, when there is pure water that is mixed with impurities, the amount of water, the amount and type of impurities, and the need for that water are all taken into consideration to determine a ruling for the use of the water. A high level of impurity that impacts the water would render it impermissible, while a minimum amount of impurity in a larger amount of water would be overlooked and still permissible to use. While this is more subjective in the case of social media, it is still an important principle to consider and utilize, along with proper accountability, education, and control.

6. CONTENT FILTERING AND MONITORING

It is important to note that many social media platforms contain content filtering that can remove or lessen inappropriate and harmful elements. This can help to protect users in a significant way from seeing or engaging with material in violation of the Shariah. For example, on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, users can block or unfriend other users, leave unwanted groups, sort feeds in particular ways, report users or posts, see fewer advertisements on selected topics, block offensive comments, and filter certain words. Most social media platforms contain similar content filters. Additionally, many social media platforms use algorithms that promote and suggest content based on what the user searches, watches, and engages with. That reinforces the idea that a person can generally limit themselves to beneficial and permissible content. There still is always the potential for content

1 Hadith of the Prophet (ﷺ), narrated by Buraydah in Al-Tirmidhi. Classified Saheeh by Al-Albani: 2777

2 Paraphrased from Shaykh Al-Didu's Fatwa session on the Rulings of Social Media-Mafaheem Session 2

to slip through but an aware and purposeful user can utilize the benefits of social media platforms while protecting themselves from many of its harms.

There are different types of filtering that must be considered and utilized. Filtering on an application or platform level uses the application's capabilities to restrict what is deemed to be inappropriate content. This is moderated by both an "automated detection system" and human moderators who are trained to identify certain inappropriate themes. Also, filtering can be done on many other applications based on an Access Control List (ACL) to allow a closed circle of communicators such as the case in Facebook and others. Moreover, certain types of filtering can be done using third party applications at the firewall level in the machine or access point (AP) to block content based on the website(URL), message keywords, or time of the communication activities.

This filtering can also be adjusted based on different factors, such as age. For younger ages, where the need for social media may be specific to set activities or goals such as online education, whitelisting filtering can be used to allow access only to the specific sites needed. For older ages where more general accessibility is needed, blacklisting filtering can be used to give general access permission while blocking all unwanted sites and areas.

It must be made clear that there is no filter that is foolproof and filtering can also be very subjective and incomplete, therefore monitoring and training are essential aspects of the use of social media. This is especially the case with children and youth. The potential harms on youth are so significant in our times that serious consideration needs to be taken before any type of access is given. A young person being exposed to something prohibited for the first time may lead to curiosity, addiction and destructive behavior. There are also built in parental monitoring devices on many social media platforms that allow for partial or full parental supervision. It is squarely the responsibility of parents and authority figures to prevent and limit use until there is an adequate level of maturity and preparedness through education, training, and monitoring.

7. GENERAL RULING FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL MEDIA

As was mentioned, the number of social media platforms is vast and growing, and is more than can be listed in a single resource. However, broad categories can be given based on the established purpose of the platform as well as what it may contain of violations of the Shariah that can be filtered or controlled. This categorization can help determine the ruling of a specific social media platform and how it can be navigated.

The framework for a general ruling of social media based on the type of platform can be summarized as follows:

1. If the goal or the purpose of the platform itself is in violation of the Shariah, then the use of this platform would be considered impermissible by default. For example, platforms that are established to facilitate haram relationships (such as dating platforms) or lifestyle deviancies (such as LGBTQ) would be considered Haram to use. This would also include joining groups or online communities within permissible platforms that are founded on or promote ideas or actions that are impermissible. As Allah (ﷻ) says,

"وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ" (المائدة: 2)

“and do not cooperate in sin and transgression.” (5:2).

2. If the goal or the purpose of the platform is halal (permissible), then the ruling will be one of the following:

- a. If the *goal* or the purpose of the platform itself is permissible and legitimate, with no minimum violations, then the use of the platform would be considered permissible and legitimate. An example of this would be LinkedIn, established as a way to connect users to each other based on career and profession.
- b. If there are clear violations found within these types of platforms, then one would look into the level of the violation and its avoidability. If the violations are *infrequent* and *minor*, then the use is permissible because these violations would be overlooked if one does their best to avoid them. Examples of this could include Facebook and Twitter, where the user has a high level of control in who they connect with, befriend, and follow. There is still the potential to come across impermissible images and content, but with the proper safeguards, they can be significantly lessened and avoided.
- c. If the violations are *significant* but can be controlled or filtered, then the use is permissible if one can *apply* content filtering to *minimize* the haram material to an insignificant level that can be avoided. Otherwise, the use will be impermissible. If the religious violations are significant and filtering is possible but difficult with frequent unsuccessful filtering, then it is strongly recommended to avoid using these platforms to minimize the risk of falling in Haram. It is the responsibility of the user to do their best to control their exposure to Haram. If they fail to do so, the use of that platform can be Haram for that specific individual. An application of this would be in the use of Instagram, where there is a significant level of potential violations that require the user to apply content sensitivity filtering, have a high level of personal awareness and control, as well as avoid certain parts of the platform to avoid these violations.
- d. If the violations are an indispensable part of the platform and it is likely infeasible to filter or avoid, then its use is impermissible and it should definitely be avoided. For example, if an indispensable aspect of certain platforms is the use and proliferation of music, then using it becomes impermissible and should be completely avoided, if one takes the opinion that musical instruments are haram. This can apply to a platform such as TikTok, where the user is inundated with a feed of random videos, the vast majority of which contain music as well as other unavoidable violations.

Based on the discussion and principles mentioned above, we can summarize the proper the condition of social media based on its benefits and harm exposure in the following five rulings of the Shariah:

1. **Wajib or Fard Kifayah**- In the use of social media for Dawah, Naseehah, defending Islam, commanding the good and forbidding evil, standing up for justice and rights and the like. Allah (ﷻ) says,

” وَأَعِدُّوا لَهُمْ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ مِنْ قُوَّةٍ ” (الأنفال: 60: 0)

“Prepare against them what you can of power” (8:60). Without doubt, social media is a source of power and can be a tremendous tool when used correctly and with wisdom. Shaykh Ibn Uthaymeen speaks on the use of media in calling to Allah, “I believe it to be obligatory to use the means of media in calling to Allah (ﷻ), because this is a means by which the proof is established, and I see that media tools can be used in calling to Allah (ﷻ) through many different means, and I believe it to be obligatory to take advantage of this opportunity, and to spread the call to Allah through these channels” (Al-Sahwa Al-Islamiyah: 178).

It is critical to mention here the impact of those who are unqualified or under qualified speaking on behalf of Islam. Studies have shown the power they have in defining Islam for the newer generations and the ability they have to shape the narrative of Islam (Bouziane 2022). It is an absolute necessity for those who carry the correct knowledge and methodology to reach people where they are and to speak their language, both in content and approach. It can be argued that this extends to the inclusion of beneficial material even on some platforms that should generally be avoided, in order to ensure the message reaches the people. As Allah (ﷻ) says,

”وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ“

“We have not sent a messenger except in the language of his people to clarify for them” (14:4). Social media is the language of the age, and if the message is not delivered by those who are qualified and able to do so, then it will continue to be delivered by those who are not qualified but willing to do so.

2. **Mandoob**- This would be the ruling of social media when used for other beneficial and encouraged areas, such as learning and teaching the religion, connecting with the scholars, and spreading goodness.
3. **Mubah**- This would be the default ruling and for general use of social media that is (1) purely halal (permissible) such as connecting with others of lawful relationship, shopping, following the news, or (2) contains violations that can be filtered or avoided to a minimum level.
4. **Makrooh**-This ruling would come into effect with excessive use without benefit and if the use takes one away from more beneficial acts and endeavors, or there is wasting of time with no benefit. Also, as was explained previously, if there is a higher level of haram that is difficult to filter, using the platform is disliked because of the potential of unavoidability.
5. **Haram**- This would be the ruling if social media is used for Haram or to facilitate and encourage Haram such as dating, harming others, spreading corruption and fitnah. Also anything that goes against the explicit texts of the Quran and the sunnah would fall under this category. This would also include if the social media platform contains unavoidable Haram that can't be filtered and is an inherent and significant part of the platform.

8. SUMMARY

Social media is a powerful tool that can be used for good and for evil. Allah (ﷻ) has blessed the people of this time with these types of tremendous technology as a unique way

to fulfill the purpose of our existence and call to Him. There is no doubt that the benefits of social media can be utilized and taken advantage of with the right level of control, filtration and purposeful use. It is also imperative that safeguards are put into place to avoid the harms and evils of social media. This is especially the case for those in authority such as parents, teachers and education administrators with their children and students, who are vulnerable and unaware of the detrimental use of social media. The ruling of using social media and the associated smart devices in Islam is directly linked to these safeguards and control that allow for the minimization of haram exposure. There must be a concerted effort from both individuals and parents to do their part to monitor, limit, and control access as much as possible given the high risk that is present in unfiltered social media use. If this is done using the guiding principles of the Shariah, the benefits of social media can far outweigh the harms and can lead to great benefit for the believing individual, family and ummah as a whole.

9. APPENDIX: METHODS AND TYPES OF CONTROL SOFTWARE

To add a level of practicality to rulings and statements made in this paper, we will look at several ways to control and limit the undesirable content a user is exposed to (in both type and frequency).

For each platform we use, there are controls can be applied at various levels, including:

- Browser/platform-level (Chrome/Safari/Edge, etc.)
- Device-level (PC/laptop/mobile phone, etc.)
- Router-level (network)

While an exhaustive list cannot be offered here, we hope to present enough options for the reader to grasp that there are options one can take to defend against exposure, and that “what is beyond one’s capacity is not an excuse for what is within his capacity”.

When multiple options are available and one is obviously superior to others from an Islamic standpoint, we strive to recommend that.

For brevity’s sake, implementation details are kept to a minimum here, as we wish to keep the focus on what can be done.

9.1 Browser/Platform-level Controls

9.1.1 Google

Google is the world’s top search engine, prevalent to the point that its name has become synonymous in English with “search” (i.e. one would say to another “Go and google it if you don’t believe me”).

Due to its widespread use as the gateway to the internet (and being the most visited website), Google is a top way for exposure to unsafe content and an obvious choice to start with. The danger lies when Google uses its search algorithm to decide which results to display to the user, and there are two main components that are used in the algorithm:

- Keywords entered → Some adult content uses keywords that unsuspecting users and children enter and thus be presented to click on
- “Cookies” (files that previously visited websites have saved on one’s device) → These track where one went on those sites and how long they were there. Google can analyze these stored cookies and decide that it is okay to display (clickable) inappropriate ads

Some methods to protect one’s self and children when it comes to Google:

1. Router-level: Add **google.com/ncr** to the hosts file in the router’s setting. This does require technical knowledge but can be done simply. It will block all access to google.com, so no one using the network will be able to search. Consequently, users

would have to rely on another search engine or directly accessing the desired site URLs

- a. Note that the router settings can be used to be block any undesirable site, in addition to search engines
 - b. Another way to achieve this is discussed in the section on Router-level controls
2. Third-party filtering software → These are installed on the router level or the device level and add search parameters that tell Google to exclude certain types of contents in the results. They vary in their ease of setup and accuracy in blocking inappropriate results, so the reader is advised to research these.
 3. Google's SafeSearch → Applied on the browser-level. While "Moderate" allows explicit images, "Stricter" will filter all adult content. This option is also available for YouTube as it is another property of the same parent company (Alphabet) that owns Google

9.1.2 YouTube

As YouTube is the world's second most visited site, it is also important to take a deeper look at how to make it safer for use, especially as it is a platform for sharing videos, which affect users more particularly than other forms of media content.

Some methods to reduce inadvertent exposure while using the YouTube follow. We recommend **all** of these:

1. Disable Autoplay → Stops YouTube from automatically a "recommended video" immediately the current one
 - a. On iOS: From within the app, Settings > Autoplay > Toggle off
 - b. On Android devices: Settings > YouTube > General > Autoplay
2. Blocking specific videos or specific channels
3. Blocking on a smart TV that comes with a YouTube app

More details can be found at: <https://kidslox.com/how-to/block-videos-on-youtube-app/>

9.1.3 TikTok

TikTok is another heavily popular social media platform that allows users to create and share short videos. Its user base skews much younger than that of YouTube's, and one of its primary features is a customized For You page (FYP). The app's algorithm makes it easy for users to inadvertently stumble upon inappropriate content.

Before proceeding, one should note that TikTok divides under-18 users into three age groups (from <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/articles/parents-ultimate-guide-to-tiktok>):

1. **Under 13**: Can only see videos, but not search or comment
2. **13-15**: Can upload videos, and but only "friends" can find them and comment on them
3. **16-17**: Can livestream and directly message other users

Based on the user's age, TikTok presents content based on what its algorithm decides is age-appropriate. We recommend taking the most conservative approach and using a date

of birth (DOB) that presents the child user to TikTok as being **Under 13**, regardless of the child’s actual age, as there is no guarantee that what TikTok decides is “appropriate” falls within Islamic guidelines.

For example, the child is 14 years old as of June of 2022 and one wants these controls to remain in effect until he reaches the age of 16 (i.e. for 2 years). When setting up his account, the parent would backdate his DOB to 2012 or earlier (i.e. as if he was 10 years old) to allow these under-13 controls to remain in effect for that duration.

With that, in order to implement parental controls on TikTok, the steps below are needed:

1. Download TikTok on the device and create a child account with recent date of birth that corresponds to the desired level of control (regardless of the actual age of the user):
2. Enable Restricted Mode
 - a. In the app, Profile → Settings → Digital Wellbeing → Restricted Mode
3. Set up **Family Pairing** to prevent the child from turning Restricted Mode off
 - a. From the parent’s account, Profile → Settings → Family Pairing → Select **Parent** when asked “Who is Using this TikTok Account?” → Keep the QR code open
 - b. From the child’s account, do the same steps, but answering **Teen** instead. Then scan the QR code on the parent’s device
 - c. Adjust the child’s connected account as desired → Discussion of these settings follow
4. Extra step - Use an additional parental control app for TikTok. There are several apps available for this and they vary in set up and use

9.1.4 Settings for child’s safety

According to Tiktok’s site (<https://support.tiktok.com/en/account-and-privacy/account-privacy-settings/privacy-and-safety-settings-for-users-under-age-18>), there are multiple settings that can be specified. While deeper discussion of all available options are found on the TikTok site, we will present the options along with the setting we think is most appropriate. Note that many of these settings only apply to ages 13 and above.

Feature	Below Age 13	Ages 13-15	Ages 16-17	Recommendation
Private account	Private	Private by default	Public by default	Private
Suggest your account to others	Off	Off	Off	Off - Those contacts who are already known to the child’s family can be added. We do not know the condition and intent of “others” the child’s account may be suggested to

Video downloads (others can download the child's videos and share elsewhere)	Off and cannot be changed	Off and cannot be changed	Off by default	Off
Who can send you direct messages	Not available	Not available	"No one" by default. Can change to Friends	Friends (with the understanding that parents already supervise their children's contacts) TikTok does not allow sharing of private videos in direct messages
Who can Duet* with your videos	Others cannot Duet with child's video Child can Duet with others'	Others cannot Duet with child's video Child can Duet with others'	Friends (default)	Same as above
Who can Stitch* with your videos	No one can Stitch your videos	No one can Stitch your videos	Friends (default)	Same as above

* Duet is when a user uses another's video in a split-screen with their own

* Stitch is when a user uses another's video as part of their own

9.2. Device-level controls

9.2.1 iOS devices (including iPhone and iPad)

Some methods that can be used to secure iOS devices:

1. iOS Screen Time → blocks sites on the device level
 - a. From "Screen Time" in the Settings app, choose "Content & Privacy Restrictions"
 - b. Select a passcode
 - c. Tap "Content Restrictions" and then "Web Content"
 - d. Options are:
 - i. Unrestricted Access
 - ii. Limit Adult Websites → Good, but this access is only "limited" and not blocked

- iii. Allowed Websites Only → This is the **safest** option, as it blacklists the whole internet except for a few trusted sites
2. Block the "Siri Web Search" → Prevents Siri from accessing the Internet
 - a. From Settings, choose "Siri & Search" and then "Web Search"
 - b. Turn off the switches next to "Siri Suggestions" and "Allow Web Search"
 - c. Choose "Done"
3. Third-party site-blocking apps → They vary in their effectiveness but allow the banning of specific sites

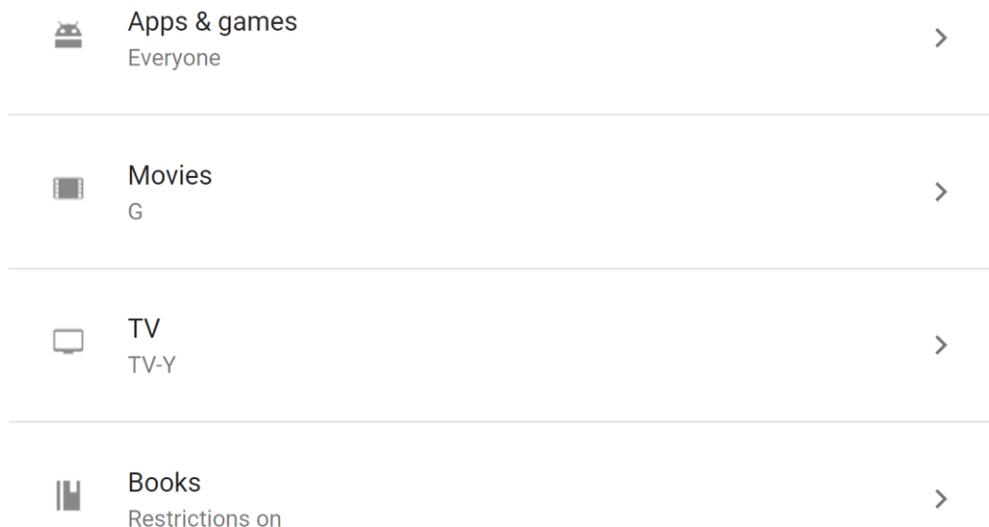
9.2.2 Android devices

Android devices can also be configured similarly:

1. **Google Play** restrictions
 - a. From the **Google Play** app, expand the menu to access the settings
 - b. Choose "Parental Controls" and secret PIN
 - c. Set restrictions on the store based on age ratings (as in the image below)
2. Enable Safe Search
 - a. From the Chrome app, select the "three dots" menu and then **Settings**
 - b. Under choose Privacy and Security and then Safe Browsing
 - c. Choose either Enhanced protection or Standard protection
3. Third-party site-blocking apps →

Content restrictions

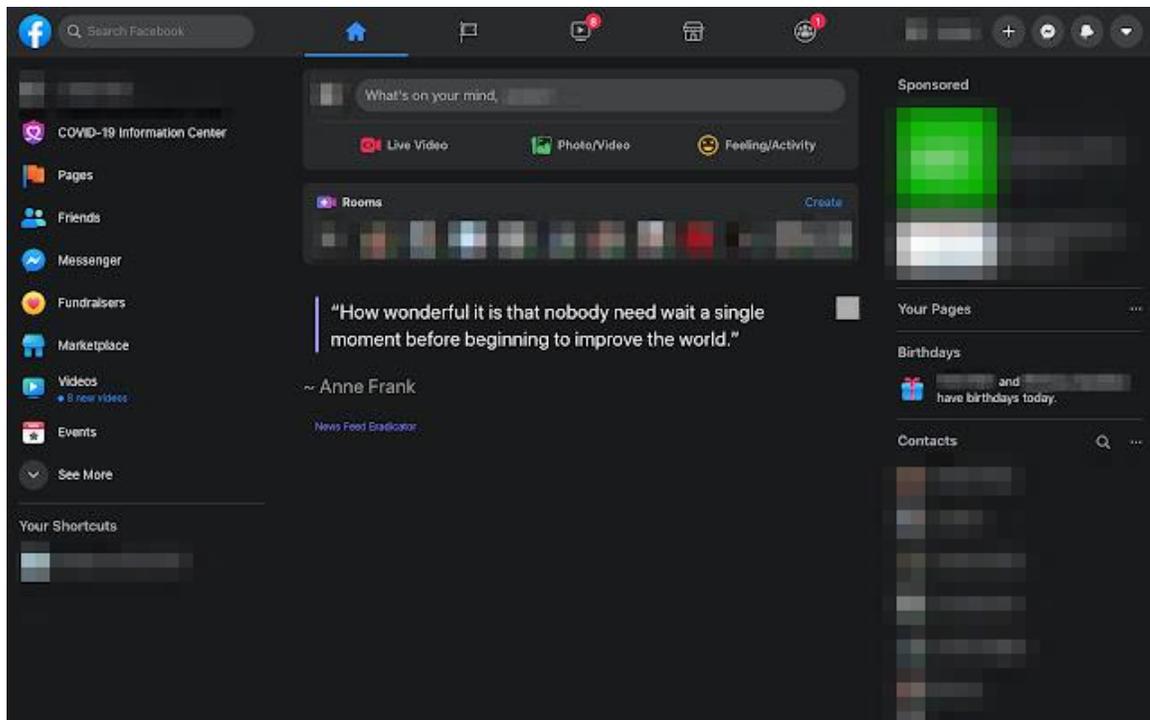
Choose what your child can browse on the Play Store. She'll still need your approval for new purchases or downloads, unless they're from your Family Library.



9.3 News Feed Eradicator

All too often a user will login to FaceBook or Twitter to check what others are saying and then be trapped by the infinitely scrolling “news feed”. Not only does this lead to wasting inordinate amounts of time that could be better spent on more beneficial things, it facilitates a rapid consumption of content that the user did not directly request. This feed is where the overwhelming majority of the accidental exposure to haram content lies, as it is selected by the platform’s AI.

In order to seize control back, one powerful browser extension called the News Feed Eradicator (<https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/news-feed-eradicator/fjcldmjmhkklehbacihaiopjklilhgg?hl=en>) that the user installs in a browser like Chrome. After that, whenever they access FaceBook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Reddit (among other sites), the “news feed” is replaced by a single inspirational quote, similar to the image below:



In this paradigm, all content on the visited platform is blacklisted by default except what the user specifically navigates to (via groups and pages they are directly interested in for research or business purposes)

9.4 Router-level controls

One product available in the market for controlling web access for devices using the family’s network is **Circle**. Connecting a Circle device to a router on the family’s Wi-Fi network enables many features including filters, time limits, pausing internet activity, bedtime, focus time, location, history and usage. The last two are important as they allow us to track what happens after the fact, but as we are looking from a preventative angle (preventing these occurrences to start with), we will look at the filter levels it provides.

1. Kid - Filters out Social Media, Explicit Content, Mature content, Gambling, Dating and Malicious Content site by default
2. Teen - Filters out explicit Content, Mature Content , Gambling, Dating and Malicious Content sites by default.
3. Adult - No restriction but parents can apply a Custom filter.
4. None - No Filter and No restrictions.

In the example case for a teenage son, one might apply the Teen level, and then add a custom filter with specific sites that need to be blocked. Circle is a paid service with data on millions of sites, with continuous upgrades to the lists of sites flagged as undesirable, so it can be expected that this combination of filtering level and custom filter would be very effective.

Potential drawbacks of this method of control is that it can affect performance of the network due to the information the device collects and that is not as effective when the children's devices are using cellular data instead of the home Wi-Fi.

Our recommendation is to use **Teen** level, while paying special attention to the default sites and disabling all social media sites except ones you deliberately want your child to have access to.

Younger children and others who do not need social media yet would do good to have the **Kid** level.

9.5 Conclusion on control methods

We have explored examples of multiple options available for various platforms. They differ in complexity of implementation, ease of use and efficiency. There is much more that to be said on this, but we hope that what has already been presented gives a clear idea of the tools available to secure the experience for ourselves and our families and confirms the basis of the ruling of this paper.

Ultimately, the first line of defense when using social media (for parents and children alike) is *taqwa*, as if someone is strongly determined to exceed the limits of Allah, they will likely find a way to circumvent a system blocking them from their desires, given enough time. But if the user has a pure intention, then the matter becomes much easier, and our final lines of defense will prove effective, Allah willing.

Regardless of the method(s) we choose to use, measuring the child's activity is important to ensure that no gaps are found in our protection plan. While there is some overlap between the control methods in the access we can grant, they work best when used in conjunction with each other, not at a single level in isolation. This minimizes whatever gaps may exist in our solution.

As a final advisory, while the discussion has been concerned with how to guard against the *zina* of the eyes, one should be aware that *zina* of the ears (music, foul speech and any other speech hated by Allah) needs to be warded off as well.

The decisions made by ratings boards (government-run or otherwise) are based on moral standards that are not rooted in revelation from Allah, so even if we expect these filter

settings to effectively block sexually explicit material, we cannot expect them to block music channels (as in principle, they have nothing against it).

Thus, we must keep in mind that it is not only sexually explicit images we are on guard against, but against music and anything else that affects the soul of the believer negatively, and then build our own filters accordingly, using the available ones as a base to build on. This strongly calls out the need for the Muslim community to build and promote shariah-compliant internet filters, and with the advent of automatic learning algorithms, the concept grows in feasibility.

When using the Internet in general (and social media in particular), we must adhere to the principle of اتق الله حيث ما كنت ("be mindful of Allah wherever you are"), and we must realize that if we cannot attain a religiously obligated duty without some instrument or tool, then ruling extends to that instrument or tool ما لا يتم الواجب الا به فهو واجب. And Allah's help is sought.

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