



DIGITAL ETHICS IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA: REVISITING IBN ‘ĀSYŪR’S INTERPRETATION OF *KHUTUWĀT AL- SHAYṬĀN*

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Abstract:

This study explores digital ethics in the post-truth era by re-examining Ibn ‘Āsyūr’s interpretation of *khutuwāt al-shayṭān* (the steps of Satan). Employing a qualitative library research approach, it analyzes the primary text *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* alongside relevant contemporary literature. The findings indicate that Ibn ‘Āsyūr conceptualizes the steps of Satan as a gradual process that entices humans through subtle whispers until they become accustomed to deviant behavior. In today’s digital context, this idea resonates with algorithmic mechanisms of social media and the phenomenon of digital deception, which progressively cultivate bias, social polarization, and destructive patterns of behavior. The analysis highlights Ibn ‘Āsyūr’s emphasis on the necessity of self-control from the very outset. Accordingly, this research proposes the framework of a *safeguarding fortress* that integrates three interrelated dimensions: rational (critical thinking), psychological (self-regulation), and spiritual-ethical (moral awareness and divine guidance). Ultimately, digital ethics in the post-truth age cannot be sustained merely through technical literacy but must also be reinforced by a transcendental awareness that enables individuals to withstand the pervasive spread of informational illusions and disinformation.

Keywords: *Digital Ethics, Post-Truth, Ibn ‘Āsyūr, Khutuwāt al-Shayṭān.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of the digital world has profoundly transformed how humans access, disseminate, and interpret information. The emergence of digital media has undoubtedly opened broad avenues for public participation. However, it has also introduced new epistemological challenges, often referred to as the *post-truth* condition. This phenomenon marks a shift in societal orientation, from truth grounded in verifiable facts toward narratives driven by emotions and personal opinions (Haq, 2022; Keyes, 2004). The *post-truth* era did not emerge in isolation. It arose from preexisting social transformations, while digital technologies and social media algorithms have accelerated and intensified its spread. In this sense, the digital realm functions as an epistemic accelerator, rendering *post-truth* more pervasive, complex, and difficult to contain.

In the digital sphere, where information flows with unprecedented speed, people often struggle to distinguish between authentic knowledge and fabricated narratives. The prevalence of misinformation, clickbait, and conspiracy theories, amplified by algorithm-driven feeds, has blurred the boundary between fact and opinion. The rise of generative artificial intelligence further complicates this landscape by enabling the production of highly persuasive yet misleading texts, images, and even deepfakes, which can manipulate public perception in subtle

yet profound ways (Azka et al., 2025; Fitri et al., 2025). This convergence between algorithmic mediation and artificial generation of content represents a profound epistemological disruption, where credibility is often replaced by virality.

As McIntyre (2018) observes, *post-truth* is characterized by the dominance of emotions over facts. In such a condition, facts are not rejected because they are false, but because they fail to align with individuals' identities, emotions, or group loyalties. This dynamic suggests that *post-truth* represents not merely an epistemological shift, but a multidimensional crisis encompassing social, psychological, and moral dimensions. The collapse of shared standards of truth weakens the collective foundations of rational discourse and renders societies more vulnerable to manipulation through affective narratives. Disinformation, in this context, erodes the epistemological foundation of society (Urs, 2024).

Chang et al. (2025) note that social media algorithms, particularly those designed to optimize personalized content, intensify cognitive biases and social comparison, increasing users' exposure to harmful content and disinformation. Similarly, Sharma and Verma (2025) demonstrate that algorithmic "feedback loops" reinforce echo chambers, deepening perceptual bias and polarizing opinions. Such biases, when amplified by disinformation, undermine emotional stability and rational decision-making. *Confirmation bias* functions as a psychological mechanism that strengthens preexisting beliefs, preventing individuals from engaging with contradictory evidence—a condition now magnified by algorithmic curation.

The Indonesian context reflects these global dynamics. Subekti et al. (2025) report that during the 2024 general election, at least 2,882 pieces of disinformation circulated across Facebook, X, Instagram, and TikTok, posing serious threats to public opinion and democratic quality. Complementing this, a UNESCO survey reveals that 62% of digital content creators admit not always verifying information before sharing it (Ha, 2024). This lack of verification, combined with the rapid circulation of hoaxes through instant messaging and social media platforms, intensifies information disorder and erodes public trust (Milana & Swarnawati, 2022). These patterns indicate that Indonesia's digital ecosystem still lacks robust literacy frameworks to mitigate *post-truth* vulnerabilities.

When social media use occurs without critical awareness or regulatory boundaries, these dynamics contribute to cognitive overload and heightened anxiety. Twenge (2017) emphasizes that *digital natives* (iGen) are especially susceptible, as their identity formation and worldview are still in development, making them more vulnerable to online validation mechanisms and digital manipulation. Unregulated exposure to algorithmic ecosystems thus exacerbates phenomena such as *fear of missing out* (FoMO) and identity crises, while also destabilizing trust in knowledge, intensifying polarization, and compromising mental well-being. Nevertheless, meta-analyses by Orben and Przybylski (2019) and Odgers and Jensen (2020) show that social media's effects on well-being are relatively small, with substantial variation depending on gender, preexisting psychological conditions, and patterns of media use.

In light of these challenges, revisiting classical-modern Islamic intellectual traditions becomes particularly relevant. One of the most insightful frameworks can be found in Ibn 'Ashūr's *al-Tahrīr wa al-Tanwīr*. He interprets the Qur'anic phrase *khuṭuwāt al-shayṭān* (the footsteps of Satan) as a gradual process by which humans are lured through subtle impulses and desires until they deviate from the truth. When contextualized in the contemporary era, these "footsteps" resonate with the algorithmic mechanisms of social media that gradually steer users toward consumerism, false validation, digital escapism, or disinformation traps.

Through this interpretive lens, the present study does not merely highlight the problem of disinformation or moral degradation in digital spaces, but also seeks to offer a normative-spiritual contribution to building societal resilience

against the temptations of the digital age. By re-reading Ibn ‘Āshūr’s concept of *khuthuwāt al-shaytān*, this research aims to formulate an ethical and epistemological framework that integrates spiritual discipline (*tahdhīb al-nafs*) with digital literacy, cultivating both moral awareness and cognitive vigilance amid the challenges of *post-truth*.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach based on library research, focusing on the analysis of classical Qur’anic exegesis and contemporary literature. The primary source is *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr* by Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ‘Āshūr, particularly his interpretation of the verses containing the term *khuthuwāt al-shaytān* (the steps of Satan) in QS. al-Baqarah (2):168, QS. al-Baqarah (2):208, QS. al-An‘ām (6):142, and QS. al-Nūr (24):21. The research adopts a hermeneutic approach combined with content analysis techniques to explore how Ibn ‘Āshūr conceptualizes the notion of Satanic temptation while emphasizing human rationality and moral responsibility.

Secondary data are drawn from relevant contemporary academic literature, particularly studies on post-truth communication, digital psychology and behavior in social media contexts. These sources are used to link classical Qur’anic interpretation with epistemological and moral challenges in the digital era. The analytical stages include: (1) identifying key concepts in Ibn ‘Āshūr’s interpretation of *khuthuwāt al-shaytān*; (2) categorizing factors that, according to him, influence human susceptibility to such temptations; (3) comparing these insights with contemporary theories on post-truth and digital phenomena; and (4) constructing a synthetic model of digital ethics in the post-truth era, integrating rational, psychological, and spiritual dimensions based on Ibn ‘Āshūr’s exegetical framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ibn ‘Āshūr’s Interpretation of *Khuthuwāt al-Shaytān*

The Qur’anic concept of *khuthuwāt al-shaytān* (“the steps of Satan”) constitutes one of the key metaphors illustrating the subtle and gradual strategies through which Satan leads human beings astray. This expression appears in several verses: QS. al-Baqarah (2):168, QS. al-Baqarah (2): 208, QS. al-An‘ām (6):142, and QS. al-Nūr (24):21. In his *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, Ibn ‘Āshūr interprets this notion not merely as a metaphysical symbol but as a psychological and ethical process that unfolds progressively within the human will and social behavior. His reading reflects the intellectual spirit of reform (*iṣlāḥ*) and rationalism that characterizes modern exegetical discourse.

First, in interpreting the phrase *wa lā tattabi‘ū khuthuwāt al-shaytān* (and do not follow the steps of Satan) in QS. al-Baqarah (2):168, Ibn ‘Āshūr explains that the pronoun here refers to humankind, particularly the polytheists who persistently engage in prohibited acts. Through *tamthīl* (metaphorical representation), he likens this behavior to someone who blindly follows footprints on the ground, assuming that they lead to the right destination. Likewise, those who follow others’ customs or opinions without clear proof (*dalīl*) are essentially imitating without insight (ibn ‘Āshūr, 1984).

Hence, the verse serves as a *tahdhīr* (warning) against *taqlīd ‘amā* (blind imitation). Ibn ‘Āshūr emphasizes that Satan’s deception lies not only in the act of sin but in the intellectual surrender of human reason. The warning, though addressed to the polytheists, extends morally to the believers, who are urged to maintain vigilance against any path of deviation. This interpretation demonstrates Ibn ‘Āshūr’s consistent concern with *taḥrīr al-‘aql* (the liberation of reason), aligning with his broader *maqāṣid*-oriented hermeneutic that grounds

ethical conduct in rational discernment rather than blind conformity (ibn 'Āshūr, 1984).

Second, when explaining the same expression in QS. al-Baqarah (2): 208, Ibn 'Āshūr underscores the gradual nature of Satan's enticement. Satan does not immediately lead humans to major sins, he rather begins with seemingly trivial actions that eventually grow habitual and normalized. What begins as minor negligence may evolve into deliberate disobedience. This notion anticipates modern psychological concepts such as *habit formation* or the *slippery slope effect*, where small moral compromises accumulate into major transgressions. Thus, *khutuwāt al-shayṭān* delineates not a single act but a progressive trajectory of moral decay. The verse functions as an epistemological as well as ethical warning, urging believers to maintain total submission (*al-silm*) and to recognize the subtlety of moral corruption that arises from partial obedience or fragmented faith (ibn 'Āshūr, 1984).

Third, in QS. al-An'ām (6):14, *khutuwāt al-shayṭān* appears in the context of legal deviation, namely the human tendency to declare things lawful or unlawful without divine sanction. For Ibn 'Āshūr, this represents a direct usurpation of God's prerogative in *tashrī'* (legislation). He considers such manipulation of divine law as a refined yet perilous manifestation of Satan's influence, one that plants the seeds of *shirk* (polytheism) by replacing divine authority with human desire or custom. Here, Ibn 'Āshūr's rationalist *maqāsid* approach becomes evident. He situates legal transgression within a broader moral and theological framework, emphasizing that the preservation of divine authority in law is integral to safeguarding the intellect (*'aql*) and moral balance (*isti'dāl*) of humankind. The struggle against *khutuwāt al-shayṭān* therefore entails not only spiritual vigilance but also fidelity to the epistemic principles of revelation (ibn 'Āshūr, 1984).

Fourth, in QS. al-Nūr (24): 21, the verse "Do not follow the steps of Satan" was revealed in connection with the incident of *al-ifk*, the slander against 'Ā'ishah r.a. Ibn 'Āshūr interprets *khutuwāt al-shayṭān* here as the inclination of the heart toward the circulation of indecent or scandalous speech. Whoever participates in spreading, enjoying, or even silently approving such discourse is, in effect, following Satan's steps. Linguistically, Ibn 'Āshūr notes that the plural form *khutuwāt* (steps) conveys the idea of a process, a sequence of minor temptations leading toward greater corruption. Each whisper (*waswasah*) is a single step that, if followed, results in *fāḥishah* (indecent) and *munkar* (manifest evil). He differentiates between the two. *Al-fahshā'* denotes morally repugnant acts or speech, while *al-munkar* refers to deeds that are universally recognized as wrong by both revelation and sound reason (ibn 'Āshūr, 1984).

Ibn 'Āshūr concludes that divine *faḍl* (grace) and *rahmah* (mercy) are the only means through which humans can resist these temptations. God endows human beings with *'aql* (intellect), *irādah* (will), and *qudrah* (capacity), along with religious guidance as a safeguard. This aligns with the Ash'arī doctrine of *al-kasb* (moral acquisition), according to which human responsibility emerges from the conscious choice between the angelic impulse toward good and the satanic impulse toward evil (ibn 'Āshūr, 1984).

Across these verses, Ibn 'Āshūr presents a coherent pattern. Satan's influence operates gradually through cognitive distortion, legal manipulation, and moral seduction. Yet human beings, endowed with intellect and divine guidance, possess the moral agency to resist. His interpretation situates *khutuwāt al-shayṭān* within a rational-ethical paradigm that bridges classical theology with modern moral psychology. It reflects his broader project of harmonizing revelation, reason, and ethical responsibility, a framework that remains profoundly relevant to contemporary challenges of disinformation, moral relativism, and spiritual distraction in the digital age (ibn 'Āshūr, 1984).

Khutuwāt al-Shayṭān in the Digital and Post-Truth Era

Ibn 'Āshūr interprets *khutuwāt al-shayṭān* not as an act of immediate coercion but as a gradual (*tadarruj*) moral and epistemological deviation, a subtle process that exploits human negligence (*ghaflah*) and habituates individuals to error. What begins as a minor neglect can, step by step, evolve into moral

corruption and spiritual blindness (ibn ‘Ashūr, 1984). In the digital age, these subtle satanic whispers, once confined to the internal realm of the soul, have evolved into externalized temptations mediated by technological systems such as social media algorithms, post-truth narratives, and the normalization of destructive behaviors.

Algorithmic systems now play a decisive role in shaping how individuals encounter, process, and circulate information. Designed to optimize engagement through personalization, these systems reinforce pre-existing cognitive biases by continually exposing users to familiar opinions and emotionally charged content. As a result, individuals find themselves within *echo chambers*, closed communicative environments that amplify agreement, marginalize dissent, and narrow epistemic horizons (Sharma & Verma, 2025). Algorithmic curation thus becomes not merely a technical mechanism but a socio-epistemic force capable of altering users’ emotions, perceptions, and even moral orientations. When left unreflected, these mechanisms lead individuals step by step toward patterns of consumption, validation-seeking, and escapism that mirror the gradual descent described by Ibn ‘Ashūr.

The *post-truth* condition, meanwhile, signals a cultural shift in which truth is no longer the primary criterion for public belief formation. In this epistemic climate, emotions, personal convictions, and group loyalties often outweigh facts and rational evidence. McIntyre (2018) links this phenomenon to human psychological vulnerabilities, describing *psychological blind spots* such as *confirmation bias*, where individuals accept information aligning with prior beliefs while rejecting contradictory evidence regardless of its validity. These biases, when amplified by algorithmic reinforcement, produce fertile ground for epistemic manipulation and moral confusion.

Empirical studies have illustrated the scale of this distortion. Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that over a twelve-year period, 126,000 false news stories were shared 4.5 million times by three million Twitter users, demonstrating how digital environments accelerate the diffusion of misinformation. Social media has thus become a contested space of identity, ideology, and influence, where truth competes with virality and ethical deliberation gives way to emotional spectacle (Arifin & Fuad, 2021). Psychological research identifies this as a form of *mass cognitive bias*, closely related to the *illusory truth effect*—the tendency to believe information merely because of repeated exposure (Urs, 2024). Consequently, truth validation becomes subordinated to popularity, eroding the epistemic foundations of moral (Norris & Brookes, 2021; Rauwolf, 2022).

Within this moral disarray, the digital world facilitates new manifestations of *fahshā* (obscenity) and *munkar* (moral corruption). Studies in digital ethics describe the rise of *toxic online cultures*, social environments that normalize aggression, misogyny, and moral disengagement through repetition and humor (Massanari, 2017). In Ibn ‘Ashūr’s framework, such normalization can be understood as a form of *istidrāj*, a gradual spiritual decline in which individuals grow comfortable with wrongdoing until they lose moral sensitivity. This explains the increasing trivialization of unethical digital behaviors such as pornography consumption, hate speech, disinformation, and online harassment.

Even in online gaming communities, actions like flaming and trolling have become normalized aspects of digital interaction rather than moral transgressions (Huston et al., 2023). Thus, *khutuwāt al-shayṭān* should no longer be understood merely as private, internal temptations. It must also be interpreted as a structurally mediated process in which technology, algorithms, and socio-digital systems participate in the gradual erosion of epistemic integrity and moral consciousness. Recognizing this structural dimension allows Qur’anic ethics, particularly Ibn ‘Ashūr’s insights, to contribute meaningfully to contemporary debates on digital responsibility, epistemic resilience, and the preservation of moral sanity in the post-truth age.

Constructing a Safeguarding Fortress: Three Dimensions of Digital Ethics

Recent interdisciplinary studies suggest that the Qur’anic notion of *khutuwāt al-shayṭān* (the steps of Satan) in the digital context can be understood

as a gradual process in which individuals are led into dysfunctional behaviors through mechanisms that appear subtle yet systematic. In behavioral psychology, this phenomenon resonates with *habit formation theory*, which explains the human tendency to form habits through repeated and consistent exposure to stimuli until they become part of everyday behavior (Wood & Runger, 2016). According to this theory, much of human action is not the result of deliberate rational reasoning but arises from automated habits shaped by repetition and situational cues.

Digital platforms, through recommendation systems and behavior-based algorithms, create repeated exposure to certain types of content, thereby unconsciously reinforcing potentially harmful behaviors morally and psychologically. A small misdirected habit may evolve into a destructive pattern. The Qur'ānic message about *khutuwāt al-shaytān*, as interpreted by Ibn 'Ashūr in *al-Tahrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, teaches that major moral deviations often begin with minor steps left unchecked. Satan does not tempt humans through direct confrontation but through gradual persuasion that leads them, step by step, into greater wrongdoing. The gradual nature of this satanic strategy parallels the *slippery slope theory* (Welsh & Ordóñez, 2015), which argues that unethical behavior rarely occurs in sudden, large-scale transgressions but evolves through small deviations that seem trivial.

When minor violations are repeated and rationalized, individuals experience diminished moral resistance. (Gino & Bazerman, 2009). This dynamic also aligns with Bandura's (1991) *moral disengagement theory*, which describes how individuals cognitively disconnect their actions from moral standards, allowing unethical behavior to appear psychologically acceptable. Together, these frameworks emphasize that small, repeated deviations normalize unethical conduct and pave the way for more serious moral decline. From both spiritual and psychological perspectives, this highlights the necessity of early self-restraint before small misbehaviors escalate into entrenched corruption.

Accordingly, a rereading of Ibn 'Ashūr's tafsīr serves not merely as a religious warning but also as a psychological and ethical reflection on how humans can protect themselves from the gradual descent into error. Ibn 'Ashūr affirms that human beings are not created powerless. God has endowed them with intellect (*'aql*), will, and divine law (*sharī'ah*) as tools to resist Satan's deception (ibn 'Ashūr, 1984). In today's digital age, this implies that humans must not surrender to the traps of algorithmic manipulation, illusory life standards, or the misleading narratives of the *post-truth* era. Building on this insight, this study proposes the concept of a safeguarding fortress, a comprehensive framework for digital ethics rooted in Ibn 'Ashūr's tafsīr yet contextualized through contemporary psychology and moral philosophy.

This safeguard integrates three interrelated dimensions: rational, psychological, and ethical-spiritual.

Rational Dimension: Intellect and Critical Thinking

This dimension emphasizes critical thinking as the active realization of human intellect in navigating the digital information landscape. Ibn 'Ashūr defines the intellect as possessing three primary functions: (1) to comprehend reality, (2) to discern right from wrong, and (3) to guide human will toward good action. These correspond with modern conceptions of critical thinking, which focus on the capacity to assess the validity, logic, and ethical implications of information (Paul & Elder, 2012). In the field of digital literacy, critical thinking is considered a core competency for resisting misinformation and post-truth narratives (Moustaghfir & Brigui, 2024). The activation of critical reasoning reflects the Qur'ānic role of the intellect as a divine trust (*amānah*), a conscious-disciplined faculty that protects humans from emotional bias and false authority. Thus, critical thinking is not only a cognitive skill but also a spiritual act of safeguarding truth.

Psychological Dimension: Self-Regulation and Mujāhadah al-Nafs

The second dimension highlights *self-regulation*, the ability to monitor, control, and adjust one's behavior in accordance with moral values. In

psychology, *self-regulation* involves self-awareness, impulse control, and continual self-evaluation (Baumeister et al., 1998). Ibn ‘Ashūr refers to a similar process through the concept of *mujāhadah al-nafs*, a spiritual struggle to discipline one’s inner desires and maintain moral integrity. This form of *mujāhadah* is not a momentary act of suppression but a sustained, conscious effort to uphold righteousness. The self-regulation model also resonates with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that moral endurance and authentic motivation arise when individuals’ basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. In the digital context, this means nurturing autonomous and reflective engagement rather than being driven by external stimuli such as *doom scrolling*, clickbait consumption, or digital envy. By fostering intrinsic motivation, acting from genuine values rather than compulsive impulses, individuals can sustain psychological balance and spiritual well-being amid the constant distractions of online life.

Ethical–Spiritual Dimension: Moral Awareness and Divine Guidance

The third dimension situates digital engagement within a framework of moral responsibility and spiritual accountability. Digital ethics is not merely about compliance with technical norms but about awareness of the moral consequences of every online action. In his philosophy of information, Floridi (2019) argues that technological progress acquires genuine value only when it contributes to human flourishing within the infosphere, the interconnected environment where human and digital agents coexist. Floridi views ethics in the digital age as a form of conceptual design, meaning that our moral responsibility lies in shaping technologies and information systems that enhance, rather than diminish, human dignity and well-being. Thus, digital ethics must move beyond procedural compliance toward a deeper commitment to designing an informational world that sustains both humanity and moral meaning.

In his tafsīr, Ibn ‘Ashūr (1984) reminds that although humans are endowed with intellect, they remain vulnerable to temptation and thus require divine guidance to stay on the right path. Ethical effort without a transcendent dimension risks falling into moral relativism. Therefore, integrating ethical awareness with divine guidance forms a robust foundation for Islamic digital ethics. That not only protects human dignity in this world but also preserves spiritual orientation toward eternal truth.

This aligns with Vallor’s (2016) notion of technomoral virtues, which emphasizes the cultivation of moral character as essential for human flourishing in a rapidly evolving technological world. Vallor argues that technological progress must be guided by virtues such as honesty, humility, justice, and wisdom, qualities that enable individuals and societies to navigate digital complexity without losing sight of moral purpose. In this sense, both Islamic ethics and Vallor’s framework converge on the idea that technology must serve as a means for moral and spiritual growth, not as a force that detaches humanity from its higher ethical and transcendental aims.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that the phenomena of post-truth and digital disinformation represent major challenges that erode public trust and weaken the epistemological foundations of society. Such conditions pave the way for the normalization of behaviors that contradict ethical and spiritual values. From the perspective of Ibn ‘Ashūr, the concept of *khuthuwāt al-shaytān* illustrates that moral deviation does not occur abruptly but unfolds gradually, beginning with seemingly minor transgressions. Re-examining this exegetical insight provides a valuable lens for understanding how social media algorithms, cognitive biases, and digital cultures function as modern “steps” that subtly guide individuals toward destructive patterns of thought and behavior.

The proposed ethical–spiritual safeguard, derived from Ibn ‘Ashūr’s *tafsīr*, offers a holistic paradigm for digital ethics. It integrates rational discernment

(critical thinking), psychological resilience (self-regulation), and spiritual awareness (divine guidance) to confront the post-truth era, in which objective truth is frequently overshadowed by emotion, subjectivity, and manipulation. This framework demonstrates that classical *tafsīr* is not a static intellectual legacy but a living epistemology, one capable of dynamically engaging with contemporary challenges in digital morality.

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