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Youth Over Clicks: The Case for Maqasid-Based Social Media Design

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By, Ali Sophian

In various countries, governments are beginning to ask a serious question: should children and young teenagers be allowed unrestricted access to social media platforms that are designed to capture attention, shape behaviour and monetise engagement?

Australia has introduced restrictions to prevent children under 16 from having accounts on age-restricted social media platforms. The European Union is working on age-verification

tools and stronger child online protection. The European Parliament has also proposed a harmonised minimum age of 16 for access to social media, video-sharing platforms and AI companions, with possible parental consent for those aged 13 to 16. More recently, the United Arab Emirates has set the minimum age for social media use at 15, together with age checks and additional protections.

These developments show that the world is slowly recognising a difficult truth: social media is not merely a private matter between parents and children. It has become a public concern involving health, education, family stability, moral development and the future of society.

The danger of social media is not simply that young people spend too much time on their phones. The deeper danger is that many social media platforms are designed around an economic model that rewards prolonged attention. The longer users stay, the more data is collected, the more advertisements can be shown, and the more profitable the platform becomes.

For young people, this is especially worrying. Children and teenagers are still developing their emotional maturity, self-control, identity and worldview. Yet they are placed inside digital environments that use infinite scrolling, autoplay videos, algorithmic recommendations, likes, comments, notifications and viral trends to keep them engaged for as long as possible.

This can weaken concentration and discipline. Students who are constantly interrupted by notifications may find it harder to read deeply, think carefully or focus on learning. Their minds become accustomed to short bursts of stimulation rather than sustained reflection.

Social media can also harm mental and emotional wellbeing. Young users are often exposed to unrealistic beauty standards, social comparison, cyberbullying, public judgement and the constant pressure to be seen, liked and approved. A teenager who measures his or her worth through likes, followers and comments may slowly develop anxiety, insecurity and low self-esteem.

There is also a moral and spiritual dimension. The online environment often rewards what is sensational, provocative, immodest, mocking, angry or extreme. Content that is calm, truthful, beneficial and morally uplifting may not spread as quickly as content that triggers emotion. Over time, young people may absorb their values not from parents, teachers, religious guidance or community, but from algorithms designed to maximise engagement.

This is why the issue must not be reduced to parental control alone. Of course, parents have a major responsibility. But we must also admit that individual parents are often facing systems far more powerful than themselves. A mother or father trying to limit screen time is not merely dealing with a child's preference; they are dealing with platforms designed by some of the world's most advanced behavioural, data and technology experts.

Therefore, the real question is not only, "How do we control children's use of social media?" The deeper question is, "Why were these platforms designed in a way that can harm children in the first place?"

This is where maqasid al-shariah offers an important ethical framework, guided by foundational Islamic legal maxims (qawaid fiqhiyah).

Maqasid al-shariah refers to the higher objectives of Islamic law. It seeks to secure benefit and prevent harm. At the core of this objective lies a profound legal maxim: Dar' al-mafasid muqaddam 'ala jalb al-masalih (averting harm takes precedence over acquiring benefits).

When applied to digital design, this maxim delivers a clear verdict: a tech company's pursuit of profit, user engagement, and data monetisation—no matter how lucrative—cannot be given priority if it causes psychological, moral, or cognitive harm to its users. If a feature drives revenue but damages young minds, a second foundational maxim applies: Ad-dararu yuzal (Harm must be eliminated).

Traditionally, scholars have described the essential protections of maqasid as the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage and wealth. While all are relevant, three are particularly urgent when evaluating the digital environments we build for our youth.

First, the protection of religion (hifz al-din) requires us to ask whether digital platforms strengthen or weaken the moral character of young users. A maqasid-based design would not normalise vulgarity, narcissism, envy, immodesty, mockery or moral confusion. Algorithms optimised for outrage and virality actively erode the spiritual tranquility (sakinah) that Islam seeks to cultivate in a believer's heart. Instead, ethical platforms would encourage dignity, truthfulness, modesty, respect and beneficial knowledge.

Second, the protection of intellect (hifz al-aql) is directly threatened by how social media exploits attention. The Islamic tradition places a high premium on deep reflection (tafakkur), focus, and the pursuit of truth. Yet, a mind conditioned by endless scrolling and 15-second videos struggles to engage in sustained contemplation. A maqasid-based platform would not deliberately weaken concentration through addictive design, nor would it reward misinformation simply because it is sensational. It would support reflection, critical thinking and exposure to reliable knowledge.

Third, the protection of life and wellbeing (hifz al-nafs) requires platforms to actively reduce harm to children's mental, emotional and physical health. This includes stronger protection from cyberbullying, harmful challenges, exploitation, and content that encourages self-destructive behaviour. A platform that profits from emotional distress or compulsive usage cannot be considered ethically neutral.

From this perspective, ethical social media design should begin with a simple principle: children must not be treated as adult users, and human wellbeing must not be sacrificed for engagement.

A maqasid-based social media design would include safety by default. The most protective settings should be automatic for young users, not hidden inside complicated menus. Harmful content should not be recommended to children simply because it is popular. It would also include attention protection. Infinite scrolling, autoplay traps, late-night notifications and aggressive engagement prompts should be limited for minors, especially. Platforms should be designed to help young people leave after beneficial use, not to keep them scrolling endlessly.

Beyond regulation, the toxic nature of the attention economy is a clear wake-up call for the builders of our digital world. Engineers, software developers, user experience designers, and technology stakeholders must recognise that code is not morally neutral. There is an urgent need for the tech community to innovate and provide alternative, ethical digital products for society. We need platforms built on humane and ethical design principles—tools that respect user agency, promote genuine human benefit (maslahah), and enrich society rather than strip-mining human attention for profit.

At the same time, we must be balanced. This is not an argument against technology. Social media can be used for learning, da‘wah, creativity, entrepreneurship, community service, and social good. Many young people use digital tools productively. The problem is not technology itself. The problem is technology without ethical limits.

This concern echoes the warning of IIUM Rector Prof. Emeritus Datuk Dr. Osman Bakar, who stated that “technology that is not guided by ethics and moral values can mislead society rather than benefit it.” He further stressed that AI and digital technology must be “guided by human values, ethics and morality” if they are to be safe and beneficial.

The question is not whether young people should live without technology. The question is whether technology should be allowed to shape young people without moral responsibility. Regulation should not focus only on banning access. It should also address harmful design.

A maqasid al-shariah-based framework reminds us that technology must serve human dignity. These are not outdated concerns. They are precisely the concerns that modern societies are now rediscovering after years of allowing digital platforms to grow faster than ethical regulation.

In the end, the measure of good technology is not how much attention it captures, how many clicks it generates or how much profit it produces. True ethical design remembers that averting harm is always a greater priority than chasing profit. The real measure is whether it protects human beings, especially young

minds, and helps them become better intellectually and morally.***

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