



Title: **Digital Waswasah: Reexamining the Medieval Islamic Thought in Light of the Contemporary Context of Algorithmic Manipulation and Spiritual Disruption**

Author (s): Reda Abdelgalil

Affiliation (s): University of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

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Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization, School of Social Science and Humanities
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Digital *Waswasah*: Reexamining the Medieval Islamic Thought in Light of the Contemporary Context of Algorithmic Manipulation and Spiritual Disruption

Reda Abdelgalil*

Department of Fundamentals of Religion,
University of Sharjah,
United Arab Emirates

Abstract

This study incorporates the insights of the medieval Muslim scholars and modern scholarship into the exploration of the concept, roots, and mechanisms of Satan's *wasāwis* (whisperings) in the past, and the contemporary digital context. Drawing on its comparative and qualitative analysis approach, the article draws a parallel between the traditional forms of *wasāwis* and their modern digital patterns presented in the algorithmic systems that disrupt human spiritually and influence their behavior and conduct in online and offline spaces. The study argues that these systems function as a modern form of misguidance based on whisperings, driving people away from their religious obligations and jeopardizing their well-being at the spiritual, intellectual, ethical and social levels. The study also shows how today's algorithm-driven content—when used negatively—aligns with the concept of Shayṭān's whisperings, as presented in the classical literature of Al-Ghazālī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Ibn Al-Qayyim. These scholars explained how Shayṭān takes advantage of man's weaknesses, such as desire (*shahwa*), anger (*ghadab*), and heedlessness (*ghafla*), to achieve his evil goals. Similarly, algorithms are used in the design of social media platforms to captivate users and provide highly personalized content that shapes their beliefs and thoughts. These classical writings introduced by the aforementioned scholars, therefore, can provide a strong foundation for addressing the *wasāwis* (whisperings) of modern algorithms in today's digital world. Furthermore, this study seeks to contribute to scholarly discourse on how we grasp spirituality and knowledge in the age of digital media. It also pinpoints that not only are these scholars' insights into human weaknesses undying, but they also provide practical guidance for engaging with algorithm-driven social media platforms in a balanced and thoughtful way.

Keywords: algorithmic influence, artificial intelligence, digital era, medieval Islamic thought, social media, spiritual disturbance, *waswasah* (whispering)

Introduction

Over the past two decades, social media has become a powerful force that permeates and shapes every corner of daily life. The active users of social media spend an average of almost 2-3 hours daily on the internet, profoundly reshaping many facets of their lives, including their connections, interactions, beliefs, behaviors, and social engagement.¹ The recent integration of AI technology into social media platforms has further influenced the users' experiences, making it more engaging than

*Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to Reda Abdelgalil, Associate Professor, Department of Fundamentals of Religion, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates at rabdelgalil@sharjah.ac.ae

¹Stacy Jo Dixon, "Number of Social Media Users Worldwide from 2017 to 2030," *Statista*, 2025, accessed April 20, 2026, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>.

ever before.² The AI-based algorithmic systems underlying social media platforms can now identify users' preferences and analyze their interests based on their browsing patterns, online history and interactions (through likes, shares, views, clicks, search engines, and posts) on digital platforms, feeding its recommendation system.³ They can systematically recommend online content catering to the users' interests, shape their interactions and experiences, and serve as trendsetters of youth culture.⁴

Several studies emphasize that the increasing usage of social media has given rise to psychological problems, anxieties, suicidal thoughts, and negligent behaviors, particularly among teenagers.⁵ With the rising challenges of AI-based social media platforms and their curated content, revisiting the Islamic classical scholarship is instrumental to develop a pivotal framework within an Islamic context which is effective for addressing the complexities of human psychology and spirituality in today's fast-paced digital age and modern world.

Building on this concern, it is noteworthy to mention that medieval Islamic scholars (2nd-9th Centuries AH), most notably Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (450-505 AH), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (543-606 AH), Ibn Taymiyyah (661-728 AH), and Ibn al-Qayyim (691-751 AH), identified the mechanisms of *waswasah* (whispers of Shayṭān) and offered timeless and profound analyses of Satan's endeavors and dual traps to push an individual beyond the bounds of the straight path. Satan does it either by making one develop the habit of neglecting one's religious obligations or adopt extravagance, fanaticism, and extremism. The selection of these particular classical Muslim scholars is grounded in a thematic and conceptual relevance standard rather than an extensive historiographical analysis. Their cognitive thoughts and moral observations of Satan's *waswasah* and its mechanisms remarkably echo the challenges of today's advanced technology, aligning classical theological psychology and spirituality with the contemporary context of digital influence and algorithmic manipulation.

In the digital space, Satan's whispers, prompting the individual to neglect his religious duties or resort to extremism, are being digitized and automated. Smitarani and Srikanta demystified that social media is engineered by AI and is operated through predictive algorithms and curated feeds, making it very powerful and even misused.⁶ The social media platforms which are powered by AI-algorithmic systems strikingly replicate the dynamic and long-standing dual traps of Satan to misguide and manipulate humans. The algorithm-powered platforms can foster a spiritual vacuum by overwhelming users with distracting, irrelevant, and superficial content designed to be more and more attractive through its endless novelty. These contents are instantly pleasurable but spiritually

²Matthew N. O. Sadiku et al., "Artificial Intelligence in Social Media," *International Journal of Scientific Advances* 2, no. 1 (2021): 15–20, <https://www.ijscia.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Volume2-Issue1-Jan-Feb-No.36-15-20.pdf>.

³Rose Marie Santini, *O algoritmo do gosto: Os sistemas de recomendação on-line e seus impactos no mercado cultural* [The Algorithm of Taste: Online Recommendation Systems and Their Impact on the Cultural Market], 1st ed. (Curitiba: Appris, 2020), 1:212.

⁴Rob Kitchen, "Thinking Critically about and Researching Algorithms," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 14–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154087>.

⁵Fatima Mougharbel et al., "Heavy Social Media Use and Psychological Distress among Adolescents: The Moderating Role of Sex, Age, and Parental Support," *Frontiers in Public Health* 11 (2023): e1190390, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1190390>.

⁶Smitarani Satpathy and Srikanta Patnaik, "Role of Artificial Intelligence in Social Media and Human Behaviour," *International Journal of Engineering and Advanced Technology* 11, no. 1 (2021): 207–210, <https://doi.org/10.35940/ijeat.A1926.1011121>.

and mentally corrosive.⁷ AI-driven algorithms are engineered to identify users' preferences, and they offer such users an endless display of videos that saturate their interests.⁸ Such a mechanism that prompts people to keep aimlessly scrolling might lead them to forget God's remembrance, forsake their prayers, and procrastinate in fulfilling their significant duties. These algorithmic-based platforms do not care about users' spiritual practices, self-reflection, or personal growth. Their primary goal is to keep people digitally engaged, regardless of whether they are making progress or are uncertain about what steps to take next.⁹

The algorithmic-based platforms could further undermine users' intellectual security and social cohesion by limiting users' exposure to biased perspectives and pushing them into filter bubbles or echo chambers that fuel polarization, anxiety, and ideological rigidity.¹⁰ They might recommend divisive content that fosters racial stereotypes, instills social inequities and mitigates offline violence.¹¹ In 2022, the Supreme Court heard *Gonzalez v. Google*, a case involving allegations that YouTube's algorithmic recommendations contributed to aiding and abetting ISIS in an international terrorist attack.¹² In a study evaluating the users' ability to be controlled on platforms, one of the interviewees added: "If algorithms can control what we see on social media platforms because it's what we like, they might influence our political views also. So, there are a lot of big question marks about that."¹³

Multiple studies have shown a growing focus on digital environments from the perspectives of Islamic traditions. In his work, *Hashtag Islam*, Gary R. Bunt highlights the transformative impact of cyberspaces and digital platforms on shaping religious practices and mediating Islamic authority.¹⁴ Drawing on jurisprudential review, Ahmad M. Khater addresses the contemporary issues related to technological mediation in family law.¹⁵ Furthermore, Brooke Welles et al.'s study is founded on

⁷Peng Lan, "How Will Algorithm Change Us?," *Journalism and Mass Communication Monthly*, no. 3 (2021): 45–53, https://caod.oriprobe.com/articles/60790191/How_will_algorithm_change_us_.htm.

⁸Donghee Shin and Yong Jin Park, "Role of Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency in Algorithmic Affordance," *Computers in Human Behavior* 98 (2019): 277–284, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.04.019>.

⁹Hyunjin Kang, and Chen Lou, "AI Agency vs. Human Agency: Understanding Human–AI Interactions on TikTok and Their Implications for User Engagement," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 27, no. 5 (2022): zmac014, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmac014>.

¹⁰Fernando P. Santos, Yphtach Lelkes, and Simon A. Levin, "Link Recommendation Algorithms and Dynamics of Polarization in Online Social Networks," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 50 (2021): e2102141118, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2102141118>.

¹¹Theodora Lau, and Uday Akkaraju, "When Algorithms Decide Whose Voices Will Be Heard," *Harvard Business Review*, November 12, 2019, accessed January 20, 2026, <https://hbr.org/2019/11/when-algorithms-decide-whose-voice-will-be-heard>.

¹²Jillian Peterson, James Densley, Jamie Spaulding, and Stasia Higgins, "How Mass Public Shooters Use Social Media: Exploring Themes and Future Directions," *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (2023): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231155101>.

¹³Kang and Lou, "AI Agency vs. Human Agency: Understanding Human–AI Interactions on TikTok and Their Implications for User Engagement," zmac014.

¹⁴Gary R. Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

¹⁵Ahmed M. Khater, "Contemporary Fiqh Issues Related to Technology" paper presented at the *18th Annual Imams' Conference, Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America [AMJA]*, (Chicago, September 9–11, 2022).

social relations, providing analysis of friendship-making in a highly engaging virtual space.¹⁶ However, their theological and spiritual impact on human beings from the perspective of medieval Islamic scholars is not fully utilized, although significant focus has been placed on the social, legal, and ethical influence of online spaces.

This study introduces a framework for understanding human-AI interactions, focusing on the relationship between Satanic whisperings and algorithm-driven whispers that operate together within algorithmically curated platforms, and inform their outcomes. It further explains how algorithmic systems function as a form of digital *wasāwis* via tailored content that structures users' patterns of digital engagement. The study utilises two research methods: the comparative and qualitative ones in order to explore the similarities between classical Islamic works on Satan's *wasāwis* (whisperings) and their contemporary forms in virtual spaces. By this approach, the impact of modern algorithmic systems can be assessed in light of medieval accounts of the Devil's deceptions as exposed by Muslim scholars of the time. These algorithm-based structures encourage extended online activity by presenting exploitative content based on recommendations, and promote ideological polarisation, leveraging man's cognitive and spiritual vulnerabilities. Furthermore, this article builds on the insights of medieval Muslim scholars to construct a robust mechanism for resistance against traditional whisperings and their modern patterns of algorithmically curated whispers in the virtual environment, drawing emphasis on the way they disrupt and destabilise man's spiritual, intellectual, ethical and social integrity.

While the integration of AI-based algorithms into social media brings several benefits to users, the scope of this study is limited to the analysis of these algorithms serving as outlets of modern whispers that manipulate users and steer their addiction to digital platforms. Despite much attention being given to the beneficial functions of algorithmic systems¹⁷, their negative implications have received comparatively little focus. This constitutes the gap this study seeks to address.

2. *Waswasah* in Islamic Thought: Its Nature and Origins

In Islamic tradition, *wasāwis* (whisperings) represent inner ideas and thoughts that are disruptive to the human heart and mind, often causing inner spiritual turmoil and fostering addictive behaviors.¹⁸ They also mean subtle hidden voices and whispers of the soul¹⁹, specifically, the whisperings of the self that bring neither benefit nor good.²⁰ According to the Qur'ān, the origin of *wasāwis* and spiritual agitation is Satan, as he whispers in the human heart, and retreats when the human remembers Allah.²¹ The Qur'ān describes how Satan seeks to ensnare humans in his deceptive schemes by trivializing disobedient actions and making them seem insignificant.²² His primary goal

¹⁶Brooke Foucault Welles, Tommy Rousse, Nick Merrill, and Noshir Contractor, "Virtually Friends: An Exploration of Friendship Claims and Expectations in Immersive Virtual Worlds," *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 7, no. 2 (2014): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.4101/jvwr.v7i2.7024>.

¹⁷Laurent Dessart, "Social Media Engagement: A Model of Antecedents and Relational Outcomes," *Journal of Marketing Management* 33, nos. 5–6 (2017): 375–399, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2017.1302975>.

¹⁸Ahmad Okasha, *Physiological Psychology* (Cairo: Anglo Library, 2014), 317.

¹⁹Al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-ʿAyn* [The Book of the Letter 'Ayn], ed. Maḥdī al-Makhzūmī and Ibrāhīm al-Sāmarrāʾī (Dār wa-Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1986), 7:335.

²⁰Abū Ṭāhir Majd al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Yaʿqūb al-Fayrūzābādī, *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* [The Comprehensive Dictionary], ed. Muḥammad Naʿīm al-ʿIrqūsūī (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risālah, 1426 AH/2005 CE), 748.

²¹An-Nās 114:4.

²²Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn ʿĀshūr, *Al-Taḥrīr wa-al-Tanwīr* [The Verification and Enlightenment], 30 vols. (Tunis: Dār Ṣaḥnūn li-l-Nashr wa-al-Tawzīʿ, n.d.), 12:238.

is to adorn falsehood in their eyes and incite them to ridicule the people of faith, rendering disbelief in God more attractive to them.²³

The Qur'ān has also warned humans against adopting Satan-inspired behaviors and conduct, emphasizing his persistent adversary towards them.²⁴ In his commentary on the verse 2:168, al-Marāghī (d. 1364 AH) highlights the significance of standing firm against Satan's strategies of subtle deception and enticement through his whisperings, allurements, intimidation, and insinuations. Satan is persistent in awakening an individuals' latent desires and prompting them to transgress moral boundaries, fall into sinful deeds, and engage in forbidden activities. The Qur'ān²⁵ states that Satan is the source of all evil thoughts that drive individuals to behave in a wicked manner.²⁶

In several of his renowned writings, Imam Ibn al-Qayyim extensively analyzed Satan's whispers and his traps, critiquing the emphasis placed by Muslim scholars of psychology and their thematic focus on the *nafs* (self), its weaknesses, and its afflictions, rather than the traps of Satan. He substantiated his argument by highlighting the greater focus given by the Qur'ān and Sunnah on Satan's whisperings compared to the *nafs*, emphasizing that the corruption of one's self originates from Satan's whisperings. The *nafs* serves as Satan's platform and the place where he reveals his *wasāwis*.²⁷

In his notable book, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Imām Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī elucidated the inherent nature of *waswasah* in terms of Satan's whispers that are instilled into the individual's heart, stirring internal spiritual struggles and legitimizing specific actions as being virtuous when, in fact, they are disruptive and harmful.²⁸ In the same vein, Imam Ibn al-Qayyim warned against Satan's deceptions and whispers that entrap the individual's heart and intellect by beautifying the detrimental actions until the person sees them as most beneficial, blurring the actual beneficial actions until they appear as most harmful. Additionally, Satan seeks to place a barrier between a person's heart and Islam, uproot his *Imān*, make the truth appear as repulsive and detestable, present shirk (polytheism) in the guise of reverence and glorification, and plunge the person from one ruin to another.²⁹

These deep insights of classical scholars, like al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-Qayyim, on satanic whisperings and how they manipulate the individual's perception and judgment can be profoundly paralleled with the modern algorithmic impact on one's behavior and thoughts. Empirical evidence shows that in these systems, harmful content is cunningly beautified and beneficial guidance is reversely discredited, reshaping users' experiences on AI-based social media platforms.³⁰

The phrase *al-waswās al-khannās* (the whisperer who withdraws), as outlined in the Qur'ān³¹, encompasses both the whispered temptations of jinn and humans. According to verse 114:4, *waswasah* can also be triggered by humans through various means, affecting the human psyche and encompassing emotions, feelings, desires and whims within one's heart. In his notable book *Miftāḥ*

²³Al-Baqarah 2:212; An-Nahl 16:63; and Muḥammad 47:25.

²⁴Al-Baqarah 2:168.

²⁵Al-Baqarah 2:169; An-Nisā' 4:120.

²⁶Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr al-Marāghī* [Al-Marāghī's Exegesis], 30 vols. (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1365 AH/1946 CE), 43.

²⁷Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ighāthah al-Lahfān min Maṣāyid al-Shayṭān* [Relief for the Distressed from the Traps of Shayṭān] (Mecca: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 1432 AH), 1:155.

²⁸Abū Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* [The Revival of the Religious Sciences], 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rīfah, n.d.), 3:142.

²⁹Muḥammad Ibn Abī Bakr Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ighāthah al-Lahfān fī Maṣāyid al-Shayṭān*, 1:130.

³⁰Kang and Lou, "AI Agency vs. Human Agency: Understanding Human-AI Interactions on TikTok and Their Implications for User Engagement," zmac014.

³¹An-Nās 114:4.

Dār al-Sa‘ādah, Ibn al-Qayyim portrayed such individuals as having a human appearance but in reality, being demonic in nature.³² This insight offered by Ibn al-Qayyim is remarkably pertinent to the contemporary digital landscape dominated by AI-powered algorithms. While the whispers of Satan are limited to the individual’s innermost notions and thoughts, algorithm-powered social media platforms now prioritize content and display online materials that hold people’s attention more than promoting their moral and spiritual growth. These platforms have the potential to introduce users to online personas who are perceived as wise and morally upright, though they deceptively promote fanaticism, extremism, and social discords.³³ In the same vein, in his well-known book *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā*, Ibn Taymiyyah emphasized that an individual’s self (*nafs*) is also subject to its own whisperings.³⁴ This is the self’s internal monologue, referred to as ‘inner thoughts’ (*ḥadīth al-nafs*).³⁵ The Prophet Muhammad said: “Indeed, Allah has graciously forgiven my nation for what their souls whisper to themselves, provided they refrain from verbalizing or acting upon their temptations.”³⁶

Based on the aforementioned discussion, the origins of *wasāwis* can be one’s own inner self, the evil jinn, and malevolent human beings. In a digital context, one’s inner self can be influenced and triggered by online content, which shapes their personal preferences and desires. Algorithmic systems are also designed by humans whose personal agendas can amplify malicious actions by quietly influencing individuals’ detrimental behaviors through strategically planned nudges. The algorithmic recommendation is an invisible force that resonates with the hidden influence of Shayṭān al-jinn, which whispers to the user in their stream of attention and then disappears from sight. Pursuing refuge solely from the whispers of the jinn would be futile, as the whispers of one’s inner self and those of malevolent human influences can be even more harmful.³⁷

3. Shayṭānic Misguidance Vs. Algorithmic Manipulation

In his theory of individual differences, Carl Hovland emphasized that people respond differently to the mass media to satisfy their psychological needs or fill their spiritual emptiness.³⁸ Likewise, in his masterpiece *Al-Wābil al-Ṣayyib Min al-Kalim al-Ṭayyib*, Ibn al-Qayyim brought into focus the diverse patterns of people’s behaviors and thoughts, emphasizing that people are affected by reason, emotions, love of wealth, and pursuit of self-aggrandizement—all of which serve as gates for Satan to ensnare souls through temptation and whisperings (*wasāwis*). Satan cunningly perceives the flaws in human nature and finds his way into the heart through the gates of desires, anger, and heedlessness. He persistently draws near to the souls from multiple directions,³⁹ ultimately seeking to distort their

³²Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Ibn al-Qayyim, *Miftāḥ Dār al-Sa‘ādah wa-Manshūr Wilāyat al-‘Ilm wa-al-‘Irādah* [The Key to the Abode of Happiness] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 114.

³³Muḥammad Faiz bin Mokhtar, Wan Allef Elfī Danial bin Wan Sukeri, and Zulkifli Abd Latiff, “Social Media in Propagating Influence on Spreading LGBT Movements in Malaysia,” in *Proceedings of the 5th Conference on Communication, Culture and Media Studies* (Yogyakarta, April 14–16, 2019), 267–274, <https://journal.uin.ac.id/CCCMS/article/download/12637/9124>.

³⁴Qāf 50:16.

³⁵Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā* [Collected Fatwas], ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Qāsim (Medina: Majma‘ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibā‘at al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, 1416 AH/1995 CE), 510–511.

³⁶Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Muḥammad Zuhayr ibn Nāṣir al-Nāṣir, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāt, 1422 AH/2001 CE), 8:135.

³⁷Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā*, 17:510–511.

³⁸Carl I. Hovland, “Changes in Attitude through Communication,” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 46, no. 3 (1951): 424–437, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0055656>.

³⁹Al-A‘rāf 7:17.

thinking and inherent instincts.⁴⁰ Ibn al-Qayyim argues that Satan, desire, and the inner self are marked as three entities that function as authoritative forces on human life. The bodily systems serve to accomplish their intended goals, operating as compliant parts that are entirely unable to defy their directives and that remain submissive to their instructions.⁴¹

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī considers lust and rage as Satan's primary methods of *waswasah* (whisperings), using lust as means to drive Adam and Eve out of paradise and utilizing rage to sow discord and enmity among their descendants.⁴² Ibn al-Qayyim mentioned in his work, *Al-Dā' wa al-Dawā'*, that the eye, ear and tongue are the portals of the human soul through which Satan finds his way into the human heart. Through these gates, desire is sown, temptation is cultivated, and clarity is clouded.⁴³ Shayṭān's tactics of misguidance remain unaltered—only the tools have changed.

In the contemporary context, the AI-driven algorithms mirror Satan's strategies in steering people's thoughts and influencing their cognition by infiltrating the entirety of their experience in digital contexts, ultimately leading to an absolute impact on people's habits, behaviors, lifestyles, choices, and decisions. Satan's methods to infiltrate human souls through *waswasah* demonstrate notable parallels with AI-driven algorithms and their function of luring users, diverting their attention, and inflating their ego.⁴⁴ The three portals of the human soul—gaze, speech, and hearing—serve as the main conduits for digital *waswasah* on online platforms, yielding excessive scrolling, visual overstimulation driven by clickbait, digitized tongue in the form of online posts, impulsive comments, reactive emojis, and superficial sounds which flood the auditory senses. Traditional manifestations of Satanic *waswasah* have been reconfigured into technology-mediated interventions in the modern era, flooding users with constant online influences and provocations that hinder them from being actively engaged in the real world.

In his book *Al-Fawā'id*, Ibn Al-Qayyim stated that Satan's deceptive whisperings and thoughts negatively affect humans and distance them from critical reflection on their authentic well-being.⁴⁵ Applied to the digital context, this insight from Ibn al-Qayyim illuminates the influence of algorithmic systems on users' online interactions in virtual spaces. These algorithms track users' online activities, analyse their surfing behaviours and gently promote content that may interfere with their meaningful engagement. Subsequently, the users' focus is redirected to materials that are either trivial or distracting. Through this mechanism, users are nudged into continuous scrolling and are drawn into an unending loop of digital consumption, allowing algorithmic whispers to affect their spirituality and shape their online responses.⁴⁶

In a study evaluating the users' ability to be controlled by platforms, one of the interviewees added: "In general, unless I can really see how a social media platform is controlling me, I will just

⁴⁰Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Ibn al-Qayyim, *Al-Wābil al-Ṣayyib min al-Kalim al-Tayyib* [The Flowing Rain of Good Words] (Beirut: Maṭābi' al-Mukhtār al-Islāmiyyah, 1400 AH), 21.

⁴¹Ibid., 21.

⁴²Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 3:32.

⁴³Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Ibn al-Qayyim, *Al-Dā' wa-al-Dawā'* [The Disease and the Cure] (Mecca: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 1429 AH), 1:230–233.

⁴⁴Gwendolyn Seidman, "Self-Presentation and Belonging on Facebook: How Personality Influences Social Media Use and Motivations," *Personality and Individual Differences* 54, no. 3 (2013): 402–407, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2012.10.009>.

⁴⁵Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Ibn al-Qayyim, *Al-Fawā'id* [The Benefits] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1973), 175.

⁴⁶Nicole B. Ellison, and danah boyd, "Sociality through Social Network Sites," in *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*, ed. William H. Dutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 151–172, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199589074.013.0008>.

continue to use it.” Another user explained: “You would just keep scrolling, and you don’t know how much time has passed. I see myself constantly wanting to scroll and see new stuff. It’s quite hard to get bored if you constantly just see things you don’t anticipate. So, it’s easy to just get carried away for hours.”⁴⁷

Surprisingly, algorithms have become a digital tool that guides users’ online engagement. They analyze their personal online browsing, and large amounts of their personal data are available on online platforms. These are used to identify their choices, expand their social networks, understand their commercial behavior, and provide personalized recommendations or lists of what and who to follow.⁴⁸ When one browses social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, etc.), algorithms mediate the individuals’ online experience, analyze their interests, make suggestions of videos and ads, provide a selection of news, and give recommendations of shopping products.⁴⁹ Algorithms can even prioritize posts from close friends to appear at the top of the users’ timelines or feeds, thereby deciding their information consumption on each online platform.⁵⁰ Consequently, people are forced to be digitalized, making the protection of personal privacy even more challenging.⁵¹

4. Mechanisms of *Waswasah*

In his significant work *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī illustrated the functional nature of traditional *waswasah* through his reference to the role of Satan in reminding people and bringing the human’s attention to matters beyond his primary focus and interest. Following this reminder, a tendency to act develops, which ultimately leads to an action being taken. The external role of Satan is solely the act of reminding.⁵² Similarly, in digital spaces, a person might be unfamiliar with an immoral or sinful content until a notification, video, image, or social trend brings it to his attention. The algorithm-driven systems function as a reminder to people through their content recommendations, triggering their tendency, igniting their curiosity, awakening their desire, and subsequently prompting the intended action of clicking, watching, and partaking in more online engagement. The algorithmic-powered social media platforms do not coerce users’ behavior, instead, they gently steer it, influencing the individuals’ beliefs and habits by synchronizing nudges to match their desires, inclinations, and preferences.

In his book *Badā’i ‘al-Fawā’id*, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah considered *wasāwis* (whisperings) as the root of every sin, the origin of inner spiritual turmoil, and the most malicious and insidious trait of Satan. In his view, *wasāwis* serve as Satan’s primary stage of forming intentions and the planting of the seeds of sin in the human’s heart and mind. Satan subsequently nurtures the

⁴⁷Kang and Lou, “AI Agency vs. Human Agency: Understanding Human–AI Interactions on TikTok and Their Implications for User Engagement,” zmac014.

⁴⁸Ana Javornik et al., “‘What Lies Behind the Filter?’ Uncovering the Motivations for Using Augmented Reality (AR) Face Filters on Social Media and Their Effect on Well-Being,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 128 (2022): Article 107126, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107126>.

⁴⁹Alessandra Marassi, “Spotify and Its Algorithmic Stimulus: Do We Choose What We Listen To?,” *Palmas* 10, no. 1 (2024): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.20873/UFT.2447-4266.2024V10N1A5EN>.

⁵⁰Taina Bucher, “The Algorithmic Imaginary: Exploring the Ordinary Affects of Facebook Algorithms,” *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 30–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086>.

⁵¹Dallas W. Smythe, “On the Audience Commodity and Its Work,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 230.

⁵²Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* [The Keys to the Unseen], 3rd ed., 32 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ihya’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1420 AH), 1:88.

development of the sin, making it more attractive and vivid in one's imagination. Then he strives earnestly to make the sin a captivating desire, drawing the soul towards it and cultivating its growth, ultimately turning it into a firm determination. The tempter goes on to divert attention away from its potential risks and to conceal its negative outcomes, until the person is unaware of anything beyond the sin's captivating appearance and the associated enjoyment. Therefore, desire transforms into a strong determination, and the heart becomes intensely attached to it.⁵³

The process of *wasāwis*, according to Ibn al-Qayyim, begins with a brief intrusive thought sown into the heart, which the mind subsequently grasps, intensifies, and transforms into a desire. This is then forged into inner determination, cemented into a firm decision, and is ultimately demonstrated through action. Each step in this process drives the person further away from a state of spiritually attuned consciousness and makes them become progressively more inclined towards impulsive behavior and conduct. Every step in this process of traditional *wasāwis*, as illustrated by Ibn al-Qayyim, precisely mimics the function of AI-powered algorithms, which are trained to boost the users' engagement on digital platforms, ultimately binding the soul in a spiral of uncertainty and addictive tendencies. YouTube never displays the last video, TikTok's feeds never end—there is only more, Instagram doesn't offer stillness, only scrolls, Spotify instantly begins playing tracks, and even emails refresh automatically. The systems of these platforms, including social media feeds, recommendation engines, or AI-driven personalized services, serve as algorithmic whisperings designed to cultivate thoughts, shape perceptions, stimulate responses, and trigger reactions without the users' consent.⁵⁴ The systems are focused on dissuading the users from making decisions, keeping them digitally engaged and placing them in a state of indecision among various options. Stimulus can be generated by algorithmic functions to motivate people to decide what they see or hear.⁵⁵ These systems fall short of being impartial; they nudge personal inclinations, disrupt focus, and often do not lead to actual progress—instead, they drive users further into mental turmoil.

5. The Impact of *Wasāwis* on Human Experiences

In his book of *Al-Fawā'id*, Ibn al-Qayyim outlined the influence of Satanic whisperings on humans' lives: "A goal remains unattained and a conclusion untouched—yet the mind is trapped in a cycle of distraction and obsessive thinking."⁵⁶ While the medieval scholar Ibn al-Qayyim cautioned against intrusive thoughts that threatened to disrupt the soul, today, artificial intelligence utilizes engineered algorithmic whispers to capture the individual's focus, nudge notifications, infiltrate personal data, and shape one's personal identity. Each swipe or scroll is a micro-whisper that besieges users into an endless cycle of unclear and fragmented ideas and thoughts.

At the same time, algorithmic-based platforms can prioritize content that generate the most reaction, even if it sparks outrage or promotes extremism, often with serious consequences.⁵⁷ This mechanism of AI-powered algorithms has the potential to undermine the intrinsic functions of the intellect, weakening its creative thinking abilities and aptitude to analyze, gradually giving control to the automated minds over the human minds. The users of algorithmically driven social media platforms might seek spiritual guidance and begin their online search with genuine intentions, but

⁵³Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Ibn al-Qayyim, *Badā'i' al-Fawā'id* [Marvels of Benefits] (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, n.d.), 2:257.

⁵⁴Kang, and Lou, "AI Agency vs. Human Agency: Understanding Human–AI Interactions on TikTok and Their Implications for User Engagement," zmac014.

⁵⁵Richard H. Thaler, and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁵⁶Muḥammad Ibn Abī Bakr Ibn Al-Qayyim, *Al-Fawā'id*, 1:176.

⁵⁷Smythe, *On the Audience Commodity and Its Work*, in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, 230.

are gradually diverted to online content that is extremely zealous, divisive, or characterized by *Takfiri* ideology, aggressively labeling others as disbelievers and apostates. This is because such online content spreads faster and further.⁵⁸ These platforms do not nurture spiritual growth; rather, they isolate and radicalize, ultimately posing a threat to both the intellectual and spiritual well-being. In digital spaces, algorithms monitor users' behaviors and predict their social, political, and educational preferences, fuel their consumption tendencies, and present information that can reinforce their opinions and views, leading to the polarization of society.⁵⁹

The Qur'an unveils Satan's adversary plans of sowing discord, envy, and conflict among the people.⁶⁰ He desires for humanity to be divided, to be locked in an unresolved argument and endless disputes, and to develop more turbulent hostilities and conflicts, result in him ultimately and tirelessly seeking to dismantle them, inducing their collapse, and then witnessing their fall.⁶¹ In the same vein, algorithmic recommendation systems may pose risks to national security by exploiting political instability and disseminating content that induces conflicts and incites protest or violence. They may also threaten social cohesion by promoting narratives that challenge established religious beliefs and societal values.⁶²

Given the waning impact of religious institutions, educational systems and family structures, algorithmic-powered social media platforms seem to increasingly suggest online content that normalizes non-traditional lifestyles and promotes behaviors deemed socially unacceptable and religiously detrimental.⁶³ These platforms steadily intensify users' online engagement and steer their pursuit of superficial entertainment, ultimately ending up making individuals feel more isolated and more detached from a balanced familial and communal life. They can also undermine balance in careers and personal wellness through their endless online content that has the potential to consume users' time and money, fostering negligence of their personal and professional commitments, and eroding their overall wellness because of prolonged device use and excessive screen time.⁶⁴

The *Sunnah* (Islamic Prophetic traditions) highlights how Satan amplifies his whispers and triggers insidious suggestions in an individual's heart at times of being socially distanced and isolated. The Prophet (PBUH) said: "Satan is with the one [alone] and he is further away from two."⁶⁵ And he (PBUH) said: "Satan dominates the one who splits away from the *Jama'ah* (Muslim Ummah), swiftly creating dissension among them."⁶⁶ The Qur'an affirms that Satan's *waswasah* can nurture

⁵⁸Gergely Gosztonyi, *Censorship from Plato to Social Media: The Complexity of Social Media's Content Regulation and Moderation Practices* (Cham: Springer, 2023).

⁵⁹Marassi, "Spotify and Its Algorithmic Stimulus: Do We Choose What We Listen To?," 1–14.

⁶⁰Al-Baqarah 2:208; An-Nisā' 4:60; Al-Mā'idah 5:91; Yūsuf 12:5 & 12:100; and Al-Isrā' 17:53.

⁶¹Alā' al-Dīn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Khāzin, *Lubāb al-Ta'wīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* [The Essence of Interpretation in the Meanings of the Revelation], ed. Muḥammad 'Alī Shāhīn, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1415 AH), 2:284.

⁶²Ihab Khalifa, *Post-Information Communities: The Impact of Fourth Industrial Generation on National Security* (Beirut: Dār al-'Arabī li-l-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2019), 67–68.

⁶³Ibid., 48.

⁶⁴Maria Alessandra Golino, "Algorithms in Social Media Platforms," *Institute for Internet and the Just Society*, April 24, 2021, accessed February 11, 2026, <https://www.internetjustsociety.org/algorithms-in-social-media-platforms>.

⁶⁵Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūt, 'Ādil Murshid, and others, 1st ed. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1421 AH/2001 CE), 1:269.

⁶⁶Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān Aḥmad ibn Shu'ayb al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan al-Nasā'ī*, ed. 'Abd al-Fattāh Abū Ghuddah (Aleppo: Maktab al-Maṭbū'āt al-Islāmiyyah, 1406 AH/1986 CE), 7:92.

grief and trouble, and trigger sadness and ill feelings.⁶⁷ Similarly, algorithmic systems powered by AI have significantly contributed to the expansion of social media engagement, increased users' social isolation and disconnection from the physical world, and led to sleep disruption and high depression rates.⁶⁸ Morrison and Gore emphasize the relationship between excessive internet use and depression, ultimately inducing insomnia and obsessive-compulsive disorder.⁶⁹

According to the Qur'ān,⁷⁰ Satan strives hard to promote immorality and push humans away from the path of righteousness.⁷¹ In the virtual world, when users engage with online content promoting indecent scenes, AI algorithms treat this as a signal of interest and start to pump similar content into their browsers. If the user increases their engagement, the system broadens the recommended videos until all suggested material fully corresponds to the user's inferred interest.⁷² This process functions as an avenue of *waswasah* whereby people may be drawn into the Devil's deceptive influences when content facilitates illicit behaviour that potentially undermines their moral and spiritual integrity. Therefore, AI-powered technologies should serve as tools to strengthen humans' morality and religiosity, safeguard their *fiṭrah*, improve the quality of their life, and boost their capabilities, not to replace them.

6. Resilience Amidst Digital Manipulation

The renowned work *Ighāthat al-Lahfān Min Maṣā'id al-Shayṭān* of Ibn al-Qayyim identified certain aspects, a lack of knowledge, weak faith, losing sight of one's goal, a fragile character, deficient reasoning, and failure to maintain a balanced and moderate lifestyle, as serving as gates for Satan to whisper into the human heart. In this way, he blurs the lines between truth and falsehood, diverts one's focus away from spiritual elevation, makes one more susceptible to being affected by external influences, and evokes one's intense negative emotional responses, such as anger, envy, and desire.⁷³ However, some individuals remain resolute, and vigorously counteract Satan's deceitful tactics and subtle persuasions, forcing him to withdraw, whereas others simply surrender and comply.⁷⁴ Imam Ibn al-Qayyim classified *Wuḍū'* (ritual ablution) and *Ṣalāh* (prayer) as the most effective means of confronting *waswasah* and extinguishing the negative emotions of anger, envy and lust.⁷⁵

Ibn al-Qayyim's insights remain significantly pertinent to resisting *waswasah* in digital spaces—the more one is firm in knowledge, steadfast in faith, devoted to virtues and values, and has clear goals, the less susceptible one is to unsubstantiated recommendations—whether from devils or

⁶⁷Al-Mujādilah 58:10.

⁶⁸Ahmed Abdel-Khalek, Mayssah El-Neyal, and Gamal Megahed, "Internet Addiction and Its Relationship to Personality among a Sample of University Students in Lebanon," *Journal of Social Sciences* 47, no. 1 (2019): 38–69, <https://doi.org/10.34120/jss.v47i1.2425>.

⁶⁹Catriona M. Morrison, and Helen Gore, "The Relationship between Excessive Internet Use and Depression: A Questionnaire-Based Study of 1,319 Young People and Adults," *Psychopathology* 43, no. 2 (2010): 121–126, <https://doi.org/10.1159/000277001>.

⁷⁰Al-A'raf 7:20; Al-Isrā' 17:64.

⁷¹Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* [Compendium of Explanation on the Interpretation of Qur'anic Verses], ed. 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, 26 vols. (Cairo: Dār Hajr, 1422 AH/2001 CE), 8:193.

⁷²Kang, and Lou, "AI Agency vs. Human Agency: Understanding Human–AI Interactions on TikTok and Their Implications for User Engagement," zmac014.

⁷³Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ighāthat al-Lahfān min Maṣā'id al-Shayṭān* [Relief for the Distressed from the Traps of Shayṭān], 1:139.

⁷⁴Muḥammad Ibn Abī Bakr Ibn al-Qayyim, *Al-Wābil al-Ṣayyib min al-Kalim al-Ṭayyib*, 1:17.

⁷⁵Muḥammad Ibn Abī Bakr Ibn Al-Qayyim, *Al-Fawā'id*, 2:271.

devices. Ibn al-Qayyim's reference to *Wuḍū'* and *Ṣalāh* highlights the significance of spiritual practices in confronting the manipulative whispers of algorithms in digital settings, restoring intellectual focus, cultivating spiritual growth, and fostering a solid sense of God consciousness. The interventions of such ritual practices stimulate inner awareness and switch the individuals from the digital realm to the physical world, and real-life connections and interactions.

According to Imam al-Ghazālī, *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *mukhālafat al-hawā* (disciplining and resisting one's desires) and *isti'ādḥah* (seeking refuge in God against Satan)⁷⁶ are the most fortified ways of taking refuge from Satan and his schemes.⁷⁷ Imam al-Ghazālī highlighted that *waswasah* is triggered by a specific reason and its impact will persist unless its source and relevant causes are confronted and eliminated.⁷⁸ This valuable insight of al-Ghazālī addresses the contemporary context of dealing with algorithmic whispers on digital platforms. The algorithmic systems are engineered to serve commercial agendas by making users more virtually engaged and generating content that is highly clickable, visually stimulating, and emotionally triggering.⁷⁹ They overwhelm users with a stream of distracting and alluring content, often shaping their perceptions and beliefs and subtly affecting their spiritual, intellectual and moral well-being.⁸⁰ To ensure a productive and secure digital experience, it is crucial to identify and interrupt the source of digital *waswasah* and its causes, including rage and lust, to confront algorithmic manipulation in today's technological context. Users of AI-powered algorithmic platforms should stop exploring every suggested video or post, adjust their privacy and recommendation settings, meticulously select and manage their input, choose meaningful content, and engage in focused learning and reading. In this way, users can make algorithms better align with their demands and expectations and reduce aversive responses to algorithms.⁸¹ Kang & Sundar argue that although customization of algorithmically curated content allows users to control the social media feeds, it also entails a high level of cognitive efforts.⁸² In this regard, Ibn al-Qayyim advised: "He who does not occupy his soul with truth, the soul will occupy him with falsehood."⁸³ Consequently, if users fail to occupy themselves with meaningful online content and to manage their online preferences, algorithms and their recommendation systems will, by default, decide their input, personalize their feeds, and shape their internal realities.

7. Conclusion

In the modern digital world, Satan's whispers or *Waswasah* – once hidden and subtle – have emerged in new, resounding patterns embedded in our digital engagement routines. The whisperings that used to come from the unseen only are now protruding from the social media feeds and alerts on

⁷⁶Al-A'raf 7:200-201.

⁷⁷Abū Ḥamid Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 3:28.

⁷⁸Ibid., 69.

⁷⁹Mohammad R. Habibi, Michel Laroche, and Marie-Odile Richard, "The Roles of Brand Community and Community Engagement in Building Brand Trust on Social Media," *Computers in Human Behavior* 37 (2014): 152–161, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.04.016>.

⁸⁰Daniel D. Zeng, Hsinchun Chen, Robert Lusch, and Shu-Hsing Li, "Social Media Analytics and Intelligence," *IEEE Intelligent Systems* 25, no. 6 (2010): 13–16, <https://doi.org/10.1109/MIS.2010.151>.

⁸¹Berkeley J. Dietvorst, Joseph P. Simmons, and Cade Massey, "Overcoming Algorithm Aversion: People Will Use Imperfect Algorithms If They Can (Even Slightly) Modify Them," *Management Science* 64, no. 3 (2018): 1155–1170, <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2016.2643>.

⁸²Hyunjin Kang, and S. Shyam Sundar, "Depleted Egos and Affirmed Selves: The Two Faces of Customization," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, no. 6 (2013): 2273–2280, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.05.018>.

⁸³Muḥammad Ibn Abī Bakr Ibn Al-Qayyim, *Al-Wābil al-Ṣayyib min al-Kalim al-Ṭayyib*, 82.

our digital devices' screens. The whisperer has developed a new strategy to shape our attention by sending an uninterrupted stream of notifications to undermine our determination, trouble our souls, and silently control our hearts through our devices' screens.

Insightful thoughts of medieval Muslim scholars demonstrate that today's challenges associated with AI-powered algorithmic systems resemble those that were common in the past, fundamentally representing a modern expression of a constant inner and spiritual conflict. By reflecting on the insights of these classical scholars, it becomes clear that Satan's twofold strategy—pushing people either toward carelessness or into extremes—mirrors how today's digital platforms operate. These algorithms shape what we see and how we feel, thereby subtly influencing our thoughts and behaviors in ways similar to the spiritual traps used in earlier times.

The study unveils, through its deep analysis of the medieval Islamic thought and modern scholarship, Satan's tactics of insinuations and their parallels in digital settings, suggesting to resist them through seeking refuge in God (*isti'ādha*) and reinforcing one's spirituality through knowledge (*'ilm*), God's remembrance (*dhikr*) and struggling against the inner self (*mughada*). Furthermore, significant attention needs to be given to digital literacy and moral responsibility while navigating the virtual world. This combination is crucial for the preservation of people's spiritual, intellectual, and moral integrity, and the achievement of social stability in the digital age. Drawing on this study, future research could further investigate digital immortality from the lens of medieval Islamic thought—a novel issue that challenges traditional human beliefs, ethics, and dignity.

Author Contribution

Reda Abdelgalil: Sole Author

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