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Ethical Values and Social Etiquette in Surah Al-Ḥujurāt:A Qur'anic Framework for Addressing Contemporary Social Challenge

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ABSTRACT

Although the chapter is short (18 verses), it contains one of the most detailed ethical codes for social life in the Qur'anic corpus: Surah al-Ḥujurāt (49). It was revealed in Madinah during the final years of the Prophet's ministry and discusses the way in which one should act to respect legitimate authority, verification of information (tabayyūn), settling of intra-communal conflict (iṣlāḥ), forbidding mockery, suspicion, backbiting, and spying, and ends with the principle of universal human equality based upon piety (taqwā) and not genealogy. This paper offers a thematic-exegetical (tafsīr mawḍūʿī) analysis of the surah's ethical architecture and explores its relevance to urgent social issues today, such as the spread of misinformation and hate speech, racial prejudice and tribal animosity, and communal conflict and interfaith and intercultural discord. The study, informed by classical exegesis and contemporary scholarship, asserts that Surah al-Ḥujurāt provides a coherent and linear moral argument, from epistemological responsibility through interpersonal restraint to social equality, which continues to be directly relevant for today's task of constructing resilient, pluralistic and morally grounded societies.

KEYWORDS: Surah al-Ḥujurāt, Qur'anic ethics, social etiquette, tabayyūn, human equality, contemporary society

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INTRODUCTION

Human beings are social creatures whose well-being requires high-quality relationships and norms that tie them together. All civilizations have tried to formulate codes of behavior that limit dissension and promote cooperation. In the Islamic context, the Qur'ān is not just a book of theology, but it is also a complete guide (hudā) to the fullness of life, including its social aspects. Surah al-Ḥujurāt is unique in the Qur'an: a very short surah that offers a tight set of instructions on manners, communication, conflict and community cohesion (Nisa & Ghozali, 2025).

The surah gets its name from al-ḥujurāt, the private apartments of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, as mentioned in verse four, which relates to the etiquette believers should have when approaching the Prophet. The surah was revealed in Madinah around 9 AH, among the very last parts of the Qur'an that came down, and it has been responding to specific social situations and incidents that were taking place in the fledgling Muslim community, particularly the rude response of a delegation from Banū Tamīm to the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace), who were shouting outside his private chambers (Quran.com, 2024). From this event, the surah broadens its scope into a series of universal rules: respect for authority, epistemic modesty, conflict resolution, the elimination of interpersonal cruelty, and, ultimately, the principle that the value of the human person is not determined by descent, race, or ethnicity, but by piety.

These teachings have become even more relevant today. In contemporary societies, information is transmitted instantaneously and largely unchecked, and racial and identity-based animosity is on the rise, while communities and sects remain a source of conflict and interfaith relations are precarious in ever-diversifying, urbanizing societies. The digital explosion has expanded the force and volume of unverified claims, ridicule and slander, and prejudiced communities have been polarized along ethnic and tribal lines (Aïmeur et al., 2023). In this context, this study explores Surah al-Ḥujurāt not only as a historical text but also as a living ethical resource. What moral values and etiquettes can be read in Surah al-Ḥujurāt? And how can these moral values be translated into the social issues of today? The paper then places the surah in its historical setting, reviews recent scholarship, analyzes the dominant thematic units verse by verse and applies this analysis to four contemporary areas in which the surah remains relevant: digital misinformation and hate speech, racial and tribal prejudice, conflict mediation and interfaith harmony.

HISTORICAL AND TEXTUAL CONTEXT OF SURAH AL-ḤUJURĀT

Scholars unanimously agree that Surah al-Ḥujurāt is Madinan, meaning it was revealed after the migration to Madina and is generally believed to have been revealed in the ninth year after the Hijrah, or Emigration, placing it among the latest surahs in the Qur'an (Quran.com, 2024). At this time, the Muslim community in Madinah had grown from a persecuted minority to a united community with different tribal, ethnic, and even recently converted groups and communities not fully integrated, with old rivalries and hierarchical structures, which had not come to an end. The eighteen verses of the surah are traditionally recited as a whole as a code of conduct (dustūr al-mujtama') for this developing community, covering, in order, the codes of conduct towards the Prophet and revealed authority (vv. The letter includes the epistemic obligation to establish a report (v. 6) and instructions on how to deal with internal factional disputes (vv. 1–5). The letter includes the epistemic responsibility to establish a report (v. 6) and instructions on how to deal with internal factional disputes (vv. 1–5). 7–10), and personal restrictions regarding mockery, derision, insulting nicknames, suspicion, spying, and backbiting (vv.). The opening statement of universal brotherhood of man before God (v. 11–12), and the final statement of equality of the human family in front of God (v. 13) followed by a distinction between verbal profession of faith (islām) and inward belief (īmān) in the final verses of the surah (vv. 14–18). These verses are set in a variety of occasions of revelation (asbāab al-nuzūl), as are many others in the Quran; for example, verse six is traditionally associated with a report brought to the Prophet by al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah that was later found to be false, highlighting the danger of relying on unconfirmed information, while verses nine and ten point to a physical altercation between two factions of the Quraysh in Medina, and verse thirteen is connected to the calling to prayer by Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ at the conquest of Makkah, when some Quraysh notables showed disrespect for his social origin (Ibn Kathīr, 2000; Quran. is, n.d.). It is important to remember that the ethical guidance in these verses is not abstract moralizing, but a response to actual social conflicts as they were presented; the surah continues to have a diagnostic effect for analogous conflicts today because the moral teachings were given in response to what was actually happening.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recently, however, there has been growing emphasis on studying Surah al-Ḥujurāt through thematic exegesis (tafsīr mawḍūʿī), which focuses on the text's coherence and unity as a comprehensive moral framework. From the epistemic foundations, the surah leads to information ethics, the process of conflict, interpersonal communication norms, and the principles of inclusiveness and equality, thus describing the surah as the building of "a comprehensive system of Islamic social ethics", as put by Nisa and Ghozali (2025) using Nurcholish Madjid's functional-sociological approach. The teachings of the Surah are also presented as a response to the moral void of the pre-Islamic "Age of Ignorance" (Ayyām al-Jāhiliyyah), as Islam is argued to be of universal scope, outpacing religion, race, nationality and time (Islam 2024). Another strand of literature interprets the sixth verse of the surah "In the Qur'an" (God's Book) as meaning that information must be verified before acting on it, especially when discussing digital misinformation. Akhtar (2025) proposes a "tabayyun protocol" for digital communication that can counter fake news and hate speech because the Qur'an treats information not as a neutral product but as a moral trust (amānah). Tang et al. (2024) make a similar argument for a correspondence theory of truth, relating verse six to a call to fight misinformation on the internet. Another strand of work adds another perspective to the analysis, using the higher objectives of Islamic law (maqāṣid al-sharī'ah) to argue that tabayyun safeguards religion, intellect, life, and property from the harms of disinformation roperty (Auda, 2008). A third is verse six, which addresses human equality. Pahlevi and Nasution (2026) conclude that "the equality of human origins, recognition of diversity, and piety as the primary measure of nobility" are supported by the verse, and it can serve as a basis for peaceful, fair, and harmonious relationships between various religious communities without diminishing the theological differences between them. Overall, this literature points to a way of reading Surah al-Ḥujurāt as a programmatic ethical guide that addresses misinformation, prejudice, and social division common in today's societies.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative design and library research method, using thematic exegesis (tafsīr mawḍūʿī) combined with contemporary social analysis. Primary data include Arabic text and English translations of Surah al-Ḥujurāt (Saheeh International, 1997; Ali, 1989), with classical exegetical works such as the commentary of Ibn Kathīr (2000) and al-Ṭabarī, and modern exegesis by Sayyid Qutb (2003) and Ibn 'Āshūr. Secondary sources were selected from peer-reviewed academic journal articles that address the surah's ethical issues and their relevance to the modern world. Verses are arranged thematically in five sections: authority and etiquette, verifying information, resolving conflict, interpersonal restraint, and human equality; each of these sections is descriptively analyzed and then connected to a modern social issue. This aligns with the descriptive-analytical method used in recent tafsir studies, known as themed tafsir (tafsir al-sha'ir) (Nisa & Ghozali, 2025).

THEMATIC-ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF SURAH AL-ḤUJURĀT

Etiquette Toward Legitimate Authority (Verses 1–5)

The surah opens by reminding believers not to "put [themselves] before Allah and His Messenger" (Q. 49:1), meaning that they should not raise their voice above the Prophet's (S). (49:2) saying that this would make their good actions null and void, even though they do not realize it. Verses 3-5 differentiate between those that lower their voice out of respect (people "whose hearts Allah has tested for righteousness" (Q.), and those that lower their voice for other reasons. They called out to the Prophet, and were trivial and uncouth in his private apartments (49:3) — and patience and courtesy would have been more suitable for them. 49:5). At the core, this passage is about manners towards the Prophet, but taken more broadly, it forms a general rule of due respect to legitimate authority, sacred symbols and reasoned argument instead of assertiveness: an idea that has clear implications for the way in which disagreement and address are handled in any community with structure.

Tabayyun: The Epistemic Ethic of Verification (Verse 6)

O you who have believed, if a disobedient person comes to you with information, then investigate; otherwise you may harm a people for whose sins you might never be held accountable and become guilty of what you have done. 49:6, Saheeh International, 1997). This verse is associated with a false report that almost led to an unjust war against an innocent tribe (Ibn Kathīr, 2000). The command to tabayyun – to stop, check, and clarify before taking action on a report – makes knowledge a moral trust, as opposed to raw matter to react to. The verse sets the conditions on which a report is credible: if the source is not reliable, the person is a morally unreliable transmitter (fāsiq) and is worthy of special caution; if there is the possibility of harm from acting wrongly, then the conditions are also set. The ethical implication of the verse is that not only are those who fabricate or twist the information responsible, but so are those who take it and pass it on without questioning it.

Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation (Verses 9–10)

The verses quoted (9 and 10) refer to two camps, each with a faith, at odds with each other, and command the people to "make settlement between the two" (Q. (49:9) and if one party transgresses against the other, then fight, and if the aggressor does obey, then reconcile ‘with justice' and ‘with equity' (Q. 49:9). The principle is then generalized in verse ten: "Make peace among your brothers, the believers are but brothers. 49:10). The significance of this passage is that it makes clear that internal disputes are not to be allowed to escalate, nor are they to be settled by unilateral force, but rather are to be dealt with by a communal process of mediation (iṣlāḥ) that is grounded in justice. Notably, the text does not idealize conflict out of existence, but admits that conflict will happen even amongst believers, and recommends a procedural ethic (impartial mediation with, when necessary, an ethical “proportional correction”) for holding and resolving conflict.

Interpersonal Ethics: Mockery, Suspicion, Backbiting, and Spying (Verses 11–12)

The two verses (eleven and twelve) are the most quoted section of the surah, listing the most offensive interpersonal behaviors: ridiculing other people or communities (the latter may be "better than" the ridiculing), insulting other believers, using offensive nicknames, having too much suspicion (some suspicion is sinful, the verse notes), spying on people, and backbiting, which the Qur'an compares — in a vivid and expressly visceral simile — to eating the flesh of one's dead brother. 49:12). It's a sequence that is noted as being "psychological" by commentators, because it takes the following steps: public ridicule, private insult, internal suspicion, covert surveillance, retrospective slander (Islam, 2024; Themuslimvibe, n.d.). Combined, these verses build a code of interpersonal austerity based on the assumption that others are also worthy, and that private blemishes – real or perceived – cannot be monetized in public discourse.

Human Equality and the Criterion of Taqwā (Verse 13)

The most famous verse of the surah is: "O mankind, We created you from man and woman, and We made you peoples and tribes, that you may know one another, indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you" (Q. 49:13). The verse is addressed to humanity at large (al-nās) not only to believing Muslims but also to non-believers, affirming the diversity of blood, ethnicity, and tribes and making it a divinely willed instrument of mutual "acquaintance" (ta'āruf) – a word that carries no connotation of ranking – but simultaneously putting the nobility of piety or God-consciousness (taqwā) ahead of the nobility of blood, wealth, and color, as the only proper measure of a man's worth. Classical exegetes link the revelation of the verse to an occurrence at the conquest of Makkah when some Quraysh elites insulted Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ, a freed Abyssinian companion who was selected for the call to prayer (adhān), on being chosen to do this task (Quran.is, n.d.). Comparative exegetical scholarship shows that this is a shared opinion in classical and modern bible commentary traditions, with al-Ṭabarī's textual, hadith-based exegetical interpretation and that of Quraish Shihab's contextual, pluralism-informed interpretation converging on the same conclusion: that humanity has a common origin, where diversity exists descriptively but is non-hierarchical, and distinction is achieved through piety (Pahlevi & Nasution, 2026).

CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

Countering Digital Misinformation and Hate Speech

Al TABAYYUN (Q. It is in this information landscape of the 21st century that social media platforms allow misinformation, or unverified information, to be shared on a scale and pace unimaginable to previous generations (49:6). Empirical studies on fake news diffusion provide empirical evidence of the diffusion of fake news that can spread faster and further than accurate news, partly because fake news is designed to elicit high intensity of emotional responses (Aïmeur et al., 2023). Following the logic of the surah, Akhtar (2025) suggests that while these obligations lie not just with journalists and institutions, they apply to regular citizens, too: verify the source and credibility of what you're reading, take a step back before you reshare something emotional, and think about how you can minimize the harm of spreading an unverifiable report. Complementary scholarship proposes to situate tabayyun as one of the moral pauses exercised "before speaking, posting, forwarding, or framing", and to couple it with the communicational ideals of the Qur'ān, qawlan sadīdan (straightforward, truthful speech) and qawlan balīghan (speech calibrated to its audience), to support responsible circulation of information in digital spaces. This framework provides the Muslim community with a theology-based argument for implementing source-checking, circumspection in sharing and accountability for reputational damage from careless communication and can be viewed as a homegrown solution for Muslim communities, and perhaps other communities seeking to deal with algorithmically propagated misinformation and hateful speech online. Addressing Racism, Tribalism, and Identity-Based Prejudice: The words of verse 13 about nobility being based on piety, not descent, are a direct counter-theological challenge to racial and tribal chauvinism, which continues to be a problem in all parts of the world, manifesting itself in different forms such as ethnic nationalism, caste-based discrimination, and xenophobia against migrants and minorities. The verse's emphasis on diversity, "that you may know one another," suggests that difference is a source of relationship, not rank, and that rejecting any concept of "ancestry" rejects ideologies that assign differential value based on race or descent. This is supported by the literature of hadiths that is read in tandem with the verse, with one of the hadiths narrated by the Prophet in his farewell sermon that "There is no superiority for any Arab over a non-Arab, nor for any white person over a black person, except in terms of piety" (Quranworld, n.d.). Applied to today's social issues, this theological structure can support anti-discrimination campaigns within Muslim communities. It can serve as a scriptural basis for interfaith and civic alliances against racism, xenophobia and caste/tribal marginalization. At the same time, the prohibition against mockery and insulting nicknames (v. 11) extends the prohibition against discrimination into everyday speech and interpersonal interaction.

Confronting Racism, Tribalism, and Identity-Based Prejudice

The fact that nobility is based on piety and not on race or tribe gives a direct theological response to racial and tribal chauvinism, which is present in every place in the world, from ethnic nationalism to caste-based discrimination and xenophobia against migrants and minorities. The emphasis on "difference" (differentia) in the verse is to remind us that difference is not a matter of rank, but a matter of relationship; that ancestry is not a condition of honor but a condition of dishonor. This is supported by hadith literature read alongside the Quran, such as the hadith of the Prophet's last sermon: "There is no Arab superior to a non-Arab, nor any white person superior to a black one, save in piety" (Quranworld n.d.). Applied to contemporary social issues, this theological architecture helps to fight against discrimination within the Muslim community and offers a scriptural foundation for interfaith and civic coalitions tackling racism, xenophobia and marginalization based on caste or tribe and the surah's parallel prohibition of mockery and insulting nicknames (v. 11) extends this equality principle to the realm of everyday speech and interpersonal conduct.

Conflict Mediation and Peacebuilding

The procedural ethic of iṣlāḥ, as discussed in verses 9 and 10, anticipates a recurring issue in modern society: how to resolve intra-communal and inter-group conflict without leaving the parties to unmediated force or letting the conflict go unresolved. The verses suggest a graduated process of rebalancing power: a step of neutral mediation; a step of proportional sanctions for the aggressing party if needed; a step of restoring the balance in the process of reconciliation, which is also in line with current approaches to conflict resolution and restorative justice– where neutral third-party mediation, proportionality, and reintegration of the power imbalances are emphasized as a final step, rather than the only step that is punitive or majoritarian. The verses specifically link to a historical dispute and then move into a general principle ("the believers are but brothers"), thus providing a scriptural basis for faith communities to establish mediation mechanisms – ranging from informal communal councils to more formal religious arbitration structures – that are equipped to facilitate the resolution of disputes between sects, factions or neighborhoods before they escalate into sustained communal violence.

Interfaith and Intercultural Harmony

Lastly, the ethical arc of the surah from epistemic caution to interpersonal restraint to universal equality is a resource for dealing with the tensions between religious and culturally plural societies. Acknowledging that verse thirteen focuses on humanity in general, not believers specifically, contemporary exegetes argue that it can underwrite tolerant, respectful religious coexistence without "blurring the distinct principles of each religion's beliefs" (Pahlevi & Nasution, 2026). In other words, interfaith dialogue

and the education of citizens in multicultural communities based on the content of the surah must not involve doctrinal relativism; it must also be possible to state a clear and unchanging theological position without at the same time denying that people have different faiths, that they have equal human dignity, and that they have the right not to be derogated, suspected, or slandered. In recent years, a few studies have suggested that introducing Religious Moderation education on this verse could serve as a solution to the escalating intolerance, polarization and identity conflict in multicultural and digitally-rich societies.

DISCUSSION

Taken as a whole, this Surah al-Ḥujurāt is an ethical code that is more sequential than additive. It starts with the person's attitude toward legitimate authority and the consideration of words (vv. When it comes to getting information about others (vv. 6–5), it moves to the individual's epistemic responsibility; if conflict remains, it turns to the community's procedural responsibility (vv. 6–5). 9–10) control the person's behavior in daily social interactions. It leads to a universal declaration that there are no differences between people (v. 13), a statement that "relativizes all the tribal and status-based hierarchies that give rise to much of this friction in the first place" (11- 12). This is of analytical value, in that it allows us to realize that misinformation and conflict and prejudice are not separate problems that can be solved individually, but three forms of the same failure, namely, the failure to treat other human beings with the epistemic caution, restraint, and equal dignity that the surah calls for. Some caveats are worth noting. Using a seventh-century text to inform twenty-first-century events like algorithmic content amplification inevitably requires interpretive extension and extrapolation that cannot be taken literally, and readers in different theological and cultural contexts will interpret the practical application of these verses differently. Furthermore, it is not enough to exegetethe psurah's principles and thenpractice them ioverthe long term in institutional settings, such as media literacy curricula, mediation bodies, aand nti-discrimination policy, it requires tsustained collaboration amongreligious scholars, educators, and policymakers Yet, the uniform manner in which recent scholarship on different national and academic contexts of reading these verses comes to similar readings of the surah as resources for digital ethics, pluralism and conflict resolution implies that the ethical vocabulary of the surah can still be used to explain and norm contemporary social analysis, not just for retrospective reinterpretation.

CONCLUSION

Surah al-Ḥujurāt offers a beautiful, succinct framework for social ethics, from etiquette in dealing with authority and verifying information to conflict resolution, restraint in interpersonal dealings, and the equality of humanity. This paper suggests that these five thematic clusters are directly linked to five urgent challenges today: loss of epistemic responsibility in digital communication, racial and tribal prejudice, mismanagement of communal conflicts, mockery and slander in social discourse, and fragility in interfaith and intercultural coexistence in plural societies. Surah al-Ḥujurāt is not merely a historically bounded volume of devotional content, but continues to provide a coherent ethical vocabulary—tabayyun, iṣlāḥ, and taqwā-based equality are its most prominent terms—to help both individual conduct and communal policy navigate the social challenges of the present day. Empirical studies of how these principles are being put into practice in Muslim educational institutions, media literacy initiatives, and interfaith efforts could be a helpful extension of this thematic analysis.

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