



Gender Interaction (Ikhtilat) in Online Gaming from the Perspective of the Qur'an: A Thematic Interpretation Study

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ABSTRACT

Juristic discourse on ikhtilat has been built almost entirely around physical space: who may share a room, a classroom, or a workplace with whom. Online multiplayer gaming dissolves that premise, since players who never occupy a common physical space nonetheless interact intensively through voice chat, avatars, and teamwork, and empirical research documents that women in these environments face sustained sexual and general harassment. This article asks what the Qur'an actually regulates when it addresses cross-gender interaction, whether that regulation can be applied to environments without shared physical space, and what normative framework follows for Muslim participation in online gaming. Using the thematic (mawḍūʿī) method of interpretation, it assembles a corpus of twenty-one verses on cross-gender interaction, reads them against classical and contemporary exegetical works, and analyses them alongside peer-reviewed research on gender in online games and on digital Islamic practice. The study finds, first, that the Qur'an nowhere prohibits cross-gender presence as such and contains no term corresponding to the juristic category of ikhtilat; second, that it regulates four elements of conduct rather than space, namely gaze, speech, consent to enter another's domain, and the trajectory towards illicit intimacy; and third, that its narratives depict licit and purposeful cross-gender interaction. The article argues that Qur'anic regulation of gender interaction is conduct-based rather than space-based, and proposes the concept of conduct-governed interaction to show why the Qur'anic framework becomes more, not less, applicable once physical separation ceases to be available.

Keywords: Ikhtilat, Online Gaming, Thematic Interpretation, Gender Interaction, Qur'anic Ethics

ABSTRAK

Wacana fikih tentang ikhtilat nyaris seluruhnya dibangun di atas kategori ruang fisik: siapa boleh berada satu ruangan, satu kelas, atau satu tempat kerja dengan siapa. Permainan daring multipemain meruntuhkan premis itu, sebab pemain yang tidak pernah berbagi ruang fisik tetap berinteraksi secara intensif melalui obrolan suara, avatar, dan kerja sama tim, sementara riset empiris mendokumentasikan bahwa perempuan di lingkungan tersebut menghadapi pelecehan seksual dan pelecehan umum yang berkelanjutan. Artikel ini menanyakan apa sebenarnya yang diatur Al-Qur'an ketika berbicara tentang interaksi lintas jenis kelamin, apakah pengaturan itu dapat diterapkan pada lingkungan tanpa ruang fisik bersama, dan kerangka normatif apa yang mengikutinya bagi keterlibatan Muslim dalam permainan daring. Dengan metode tafsir mawḍūʿī, penelitian ini menghimpun korpus dua puluh satu ayat tentang interaksi lintas jenis kelamin, membacanya melalui karya tafsir klasik dan kontemporer, serta menganalisisnya bersama penelitian bertelaah sejawat tentang gender dalam permainan daring dan praktik keislaman digital. Temuannya ada tiga. Pertama, Al-Qur'an tidak pernah melarang kehadiran lintas jenis kelamin itu sendiri dan tidak memuat istilah yang sepadan dengan kategori fikih ikhtilat. Kedua, yang diatur adalah empat unsur perilaku, bukan ruang, yakni pandangan, tutur kata, izin memasuki wilayah orang lain, dan arah gerak menuju keintiman terlarang. Ketiga, narasi Al-Qur'an justru menampilkan interaksi lintas jenis kelamin yang sah dan bertujuan. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa pengaturan Al-Qur'an bersifat berbasis perilaku, bukan berbasis ruang, dan mengajukan konsep interaksi terkendali perilaku (conduct-governed interaction) untuk menunjukkan mengapa kerangka Al-Qur'an justru menjadi lebih relevan ketika pemisahan fisik tidak lagi tersedia.

Kata Kunci: Ikhtilat, Permainan Daring, Tafsir Tematik, Interaksi Gender, Etika Al-Qur'an

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I. INTRODUCTION

Online multiplayer gaming has become one of the most socially dense environments in which young Muslims now spend their time. A player joining a team-based match enters a setting that is cooperative, competitive, and continuously communicative: teammates coordinate by voice, strangers are assigned to one another by matchmaking algorithms, and play unfolds over months of repeated contact. Research on player experience in massively multiplayer games documents how central social interaction is to what players actually do there rather than being incidental to the game (Fox et al., 2018). The composition of these spaces is mixed, and the interaction is unavoidable: a player cannot choose the gender of those the system places on the team.

This creates a problem that Islamic normative discourse is poorly equipped to address. Juristic treatment of cross-gender interaction has been organised around the category of *ikhtilat*, the mixing of men and women, and the debate has been conducted almost entirely in spatial terms. The questions asked concern whether men and women may share a classroom, a workplace, a wedding hall, or a row of seats. Online gaming removes the spatial variable altogether. Players interact intensively while occupying separate physical spaces, often in different cities or countries, frequently without knowing one another's names, faces, or bodies. If *ikhtilat* means physical mixing, no *ikhtilat* occurs. If it means interaction between men and women outside the family, then it occurs constantly and at an intensity that offline life rarely matches.

The difficulty is not merely conceptual. The harms that the juristic discourse on *ikhtilat* was designed to prevent, in particular the sexual objectification and molestation of women, are amply present in these environments. Experimental research in which identical audio clips were broadcast in multiplayer matches found that a female voice drew roughly three times as many negative comments as a male voice or no voice at all (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013). Survey research links sexist attitudes toward women gamers to social dominance orientation and to conformity with particular masculine norms (Fox & Tang, 2014), and a validated scale for measuring such attitudes has since been developed in two languages (Bustos-Ortega et al., 2023). Anonymity and interactivity have been shown to shape how online sexism is expressed and carried into offline attitudes (Fox et al., 2015), and cultivation research links extensive game consumption to hostile sexism and rape myth acceptance (Fox & Potocki, 2016).

Islamic Studies has begun to take digital environments seriously, but along a different axis. A substantial literature now examines how Muslims practise their faith through social media, treating media practice as religious practice rather than as a container for it (Slama, 2018). Studies document Qur'an reading movements organised through messaging applications (Nisa, 2018b), the visual culture of pious self-presentation among young Muslim women (Nisa, 2018a), and the theological anxieties that online piety generates, notably around *riyā'* or ostentation (Husein & Slama, 2018). Others map the acceleration of Islamic charity through social platforms (Kailani & Slama, 2020), the reorganisation of the preacher economy around the temporalities of social media (Slama, 2017), the ambivalences and divides that structure Islamic digital realms in Southeast Asia (Slama & Hoesterey, 2021; Slama, 2021), and the wider field of digital religion in the region (Muslim, 2017). Work on Aceh shows that young Muslims increasingly select religious patrons through digital platforms rather than through established institutions such as the *dayah* (Wati et al., 2022), while research on Indonesian social media documents how algorithmic enclaves can harden group boundaries (Lim, 2017).

A third body of work concerns the method by which the Qur'an is brought to bear on new questions. Thematic interpretation, *tafsīr mawḍū'ī*, gathers the verses relevant to a single subject and reads them as a whole rather than following the order of the *muṣḥaf*, and Indonesian scholarship has examined its procedures and its relation to the analytical, global, and comparative methods (Wahyudi et al., 2023; Masykur & Gunawan, 2021; Maya et al., 2023). Studies of institutional and contemporary exegesis show how interpretive method is adjusted to address present problems (Ferdiani & Said, 2023; Rhain et al., 2022), and analyses of tradition-based exegesis ask how far its reliance on early sources can accommodate current

ethical and social questions (Hasan et al., 2025). Research on online Qur'anic interpretation demonstrates that thematic and comparative methods are already being used on digital platforms to address contemporary women's issues (Rahmawati et al., 2025).

Taken together, this literature establishes three things. Online gaming is a socially consequential environment with documented gendered harms. Muslims are already living substantial parts of their religious lives online, and scholarship has developed tools for studying this. And thematic interpretation offers a recognised method for addressing questions the classical corpus did not anticipate (Slama, 2018; Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013; Wahyudi et al., 2023).

What has not been done is to bring these three together. The scholarship on digital Islam concentrates on devotional practice, preaching, charity, and authority; it says little about gaming, and little about the ordinary cross-gender sociality that digital platforms generate as a by-product rather than as a religious act. The scholarship on gender in online games is almost entirely conducted within communication studies and psychology, with no engagement with religious normative frameworks. And the juristic discourse on *ikhtilat*, where it addresses digital life at all, tends to extend spatial reasoning by analogy, asking whether a chat room resembles a room, which reproduces the assumption the new environment has already dissolved.

Two questions therefore remain open. The first is definitional: if *ikhtilat* is understood spatially, does interaction without shared space fall outside it entirely, and if so, does Islamic normativity have nothing to say about a setting where gendered harassment is well documented? The second is textual: the juristic category rests on a reading of a small set of verses, yet it is not obvious that those verses regulate space at all. Whether the Qur'anic regulation of cross-gender interaction is spatial or behavioural has not been examined systematically as a question in its own right, and the answer determines whether the Qur'anic framework can address mediated environments.

This matters for Islamic Studies because the issue is a test case. If Qur'anic norms can only be applied to new environments by analogy from physical settings, then the reach of those norms will contract as social life migrates online. If, on the other hand, the Qur'an regulates conduct rather than location, then its framework travels intact into environments its first audience could not have imagined, and the limitation lies in the juristic elaboration rather than in the text.

This article addresses the gap by returning to the Qur'anic corpus itself. Instead of asking whether online gaming counts as *ikhtilat* under existing juristic definitions, it asks what the Qur'an regulates when it speaks about interaction between men and women, and then examines what follows for an environment in which physical separation is neither available nor relevant. Its central concept is *conduct-governed interaction*: the proposition that Qur'anic regulation attaches to how people look, speak, seek permission, and orient their intentions, not to where their bodies are located.

The novelty of the article is threefold. Substantively, it treats online gaming as an object of Qur'anic ethical analysis, a setting that neither the digital Islam literature nor the Qur'anic studies literature has addressed. Analytically, it reframes the question from classification, whether gaming is *ikhtilat*, to regulation, what the Qur'an actually governs. Conceptually, it proposes conduct-governed interaction as a construct that explains why the Qur'anic framework becomes more rather than less applicable when space ceases to be a usable variable.

The study proceeds on two methodological commitments. The first is that of thematic interpretation, which holds that the Qur'an's position on a subject emerges from the whole set of relevant verses read together, so that verses restricting interaction and verses depicting it must be interpreted in relation to one another rather than in isolation (Wahyudi et al., 2023; Maya et al., 2023). The second is that interpretation for contemporary problems requires attention to the stated rationale (*'illah*) and purpose of a ruling, since it is the rationale rather than the historical form of its application that can be carried into new circumstances.

Together these commitments generate three analytical questions: what the Qur'anic corpus prohibits, what it regulates, and what it permits or commends.

The article accordingly asks three research questions. First, what does the Qur'an regulate when it addresses interaction between men and women, and is that regulation organised around space or around conduct? Second, how do these regulatory elements apply to online gaming, where physical separation is total but social interaction is intense? Third, what normative framework for Muslim participation in online gaming follows, and what does it imply for the juristic category of *ikhtilāṭ*? Its objective is to develop a Qur'anically grounded ethics of mediated cross-gender interaction. The central argument is that the Qur'an regulates conduct rather than space, that online gaming therefore falls squarely within its scope despite involving no physical mixing, and that the documented harms of gendered harassment in gaming correspond precisely to what the Qur'anic regulation aims to prevent. In making this case, the article contributes to Islamic Studies a way of extending Qur'anic ethics into digital environments without relying on spatial analogy.

II. METHOD

This study applies the thematic method of Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsīr mawḍūʿī*), which assembles the verses bearing on a single subject and interprets them as an integrated whole rather than following the sequence of the *muṣḥaf* (Wahyudi et al., 2023). The method was selected because the research questions concern what the Qur'an as a whole establishes about cross-gender interaction, a determination that cannot be reached from any single verse, and because the analytical procedure of the method, which moves from collection to arrangement to synthesis, matches the movement from textual finding to contemporary application that the study requires (Masykur & Gunawan, 2021). The design is qualitative and library-based; it generates no field data and makes no empirical claims about the behaviour of particular players or communities.

The research proceeds in the six stages conventionally associated with the method. The subject is first delimited, here as the regulation of interaction between men and women who are not in a prohibited degree of kinship. Relevant verses are then collected, arranged according to the chronology of revelation where this is established and otherwise thematically, and examined for the relations between them (*munāsabah*) and for reported occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). The verses are then interpreted with reference to exegetical works, and finally synthesised into a coherent account of the Qur'anic position, which is subsequently brought into dialogue with contemporary data.

The corpus of verses was assembled through three procedures. Lexical searching identified verses containing the relevant roots, including those for gaze (*n-ẓ-r*), modesty and concealment (*kh-m-r*, *j-l-b*, *h-j-b*), permission (*'-dh-n*), unlawful intimacy (*z-n-y*), and mutual acquaintance (*'-r-f*). Thematic searching identified verses addressing conduct between men and women irrespective of vocabulary. Narrative searching identified passages depicting actual cross-gender encounters. Verses were included where they bear directly on conduct between men and women outside marriage and prohibited kinship; verses addressing marriage law, inheritance, or testimony were excluded as governing a different subject. The resulting corpus comprises twenty-one verses, set out in Table 1.

Interpretation draws on a purposively selected range of exegetical works spanning periods and orientations. Tradition-based and linguistic exegesis is represented by al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf*, and Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*; juristic exegesis by al-Qurṭubī's *al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*; rational and theological exegesis by al-Rāzī's *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*; and reformist, purpose-oriented, and Indonesian contextual exegesis by Riḍā's *Tafsīr al-Manār*, Ibn 'Āshūr's *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, Hamka's *Tafsīr al-Azhar*, and Quraish Shihab's *Tafsīr al-Mishbah*. This range was chosen so that the analysis registers interpretive disagreement rather than presenting a single reading as the Qur'anic

position, and so that both text-centred and purpose-centred approaches inform the synthesis (Hasan et al., 2025).

Contemporary data are drawn from peer-reviewed research rather than from fieldwork. Two bodies of literature are used. Studies of gender in online gaming supply evidence about what actually occurs in these environments, including experimental, survey, and diary-based work (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013; Fox & Tang, 2014; Fox et al., 2018). Studies of digital Islamic practice supply evidence about how Muslims already inhabit online environments religiously (Slama, 2018; Husein & Slama, 2018). These studies are treated as descriptions of the setting to which the Qur'anic framework is applied, not as sources of normative authority.

Analysis proceeds in three steps. The verses in the corpus are first coded for what each regulates, distinguishing the addressee, the regulated element, the stated rationale where one is given, and the form of the directive. Codes are then grouped into categories describing the structure of Qur'anic regulation. Finally, each category is examined against the affordances of online gaming documented in the contemporary literature, to determine whether the regulated element is present, absent, or transformed in that environment. This third step is where the synthesis of the thematic method is performed.

Three procedures support the credibility of the interpretation. Every interpretive claim is tied to a specified verse and to at least one exegetical work, so that the reasoning can be audited. Verses that appear to support a spatial reading are examined in the same detail as those that support a behavioural one, and the strongest available counter-reading is stated rather than omitted. Where the exegetical tradition is divided, the division is reported rather than resolved by preference. The study's principal limitation, addressed in the conclusion, is that a library-based design cannot establish how Muslim gamers themselves understand their practice.

III. RESULTS

The results are organised according to the three analytical questions: what the corpus prohibits, what it regulates, and what it permits. Table 1 presents the corpus and its distribution across these categories.

Table 1. The Qur'anic corpus on cross-gender interaction and its regulatory function

Regulatory function	Verses	What is regulated
Household-specific directive	Q 33:28-34; Q 33:53	Manner of access to the Prophet's household, with purity of heart given as the rationale
Protection in public space	Q 33:59	Outer dress, with recognition and the prevention of harassment given as the rationale
Conduct: gaze	Q 24:30; Q 24:31	The act of looking and the guarding of chastity, addressed to men and women in parallel
Conduct: speech	Q 33:32	The register of address and the response it invites
Conduct: permission	Q 24:27-28; Q 24:58-59	Consent as the condition of entering another's domain
Conduct: trajectory	Q 17:32; Q 24:19; Q 24:12-16	Movement towards illicit intimacy and the circulation of sexual discourse
Presumption of shared social field	Q 9:71; Q 24:61; Q 49:13; Q 60:12	Mutual alliance, commensality, mutual acquaintance, and direct pledge
Moral parity of agents	Q 3:195; Q 33:35	Equivalent moral standing and accountability of men and women
Narratives of licit interaction	Q 28:23-26; Q 27:23-44	Purposeful cross-gender encounter, speech, and judgement, depicted without censure

Source: Author's thematic classification of the corpus (21 verses).

The Absence of a Spatial Prohibition

The first finding is negative but consequential. The term *ikhtilat* does not occur in the Qur'an, and no verse in the corpus prohibits men and women from being present in the same place. This is not an argument from silence about a marginal matter: the Qur'an legislates in considerable detail on matters of far less social consequence, and the absence of a general rule of separation where such detail is otherwise present is itself significant.

Two verses are commonly read as establishing separation, and both require close attention. The first is Q 33:53, which instructs that when believers ask the Prophet's wives for something they should do so from behind a partition (*hijāb*), and states the rationale that this is purer for the hearts of both parties. The addressee here is explicit. The verse concerns the household of the Prophet, and its immediate context, extending through Q 33:28-34, addresses his wives as a category expressly distinguished from other women. Exegetical works from al-Ṭabarī onward locate the verse in the circumstances of the Prophet's household, and while later jurists extended its principle by analogy, the text itself does not generalise it. What the verse does supply is a rationale, purity of heart, which is a statement about interior disposition rather than about architecture.

The second is Q 33:59, instructing believing women to draw their outer garments over themselves, with the stated purpose that they will be recognised and so not be harassed or abused (*fa-lā yu'dhayn*). The construction is significant for the present argument. The verse does not command withdrawal from public space; it presupposes that women are in public space and legislates for their protection there. The rationale given is social recognition and the prevention of molestation, which locates the concern in the conduct of those who would harass rather than in the presence of those who might be harassed. Ibn 'Āshūr's purpose-oriented reading of such verses, which attends to the social objective a directive serves, brings this dimension into focus.

Against these, the corpus contains verses that presuppose ordinary mixed presence without disapproval. Q 24:61 removes any blame attaching to eating together or separately in a list of households including those of relatives and friends. Q 9:71 describes believing men and believing women as allies (*awliyā'*) of one another who jointly enjoin right and forbid wrong, a formulation that presumes a shared social field in which such mutual enjoining can occur. Q 60:12 records the Prophet receiving the pledge of allegiance from believing women directly. Q 49:13 grounds human diversity in the purpose of mutual acquaintance (*li-ta'ārafū*). Read as a whole, the corpus does not construct a norm of separation that specific verses then qualify; it constructs a norm of regulated interaction.

A counter-reading deserves statement at its strongest. It could be argued that Q 33:53 and Q 33:59, although addressed to particular women, articulate a principle whose rationale applies generally: if a partition is purer for the hearts of those around the Prophet's household, it is purer for others as well, and the reasoning by analogy is neither arbitrary nor weak. The response is not that the analogy is invalid but that it carries a specific implication. If the operative rationale is purity of heart and the prevention of molestation, then those rationales, rather than the partition itself, are what must be secured. A partition is one instrument for securing them under particular conditions. Where it is unavailable, as in mediated environments, the rationale persists and must be served by other means.

Four Regulated Elements of Conduct

The second finding concerns what the corpus does regulate. Four elements recur, each attaching to conduct rather than to location.

The first is the gaze. Q 24:30-31 directs believing men, and then believing women, to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, with the men addressed first. The parallel structure is notable: the same directive is issued to both, in the same terms, with the male addressee taking precedence in the order of

revelation. The verse continues with instructions on the display of adornment, and it is here that the exegetical tradition divides most sharply, al-Qurṭubī recording the well-known disagreement over the scope of what may be apparent. That disagreement, however, concerns the second clause. The first clause, on the gaze, is not disputed and is addressed symmetrically. What is regulated is an act of looking, which a person performs and controls.

The second is speech. Q 33:32 instructs that speech should not be softened in a manner that invites the desire of one in whose heart there is disease, and directs instead speech that is upright and appropriate (*qawlan ma'rūfan*). The verse is addressed to the wives of the Prophet, but unlike Q 33:53 it articulates a general principle of the relation between manner of speech and the response it invites, and it does so by reference to the interior condition of the listener. The regulated object is the register of address, not the fact of address; the verse assumes speech between men and women takes place and legislates for its manner.

The third is permission. Q 24:27-28 prohibits entering houses other than one's own until one has sought familiarity and greeted the occupants, and directs withdrawal if entry is refused. The classical discussion of *isti'dhān* treats the household as a bounded domain over which its occupants hold a right of admission. The principle is not gender-specific in its wording, but its function in the corpus is to establish that access to another's space is conditional on that person's consent, and Q 24:58-59 extends the requirement of seeking permission to within the household itself at times of privacy.

The fourth is the trajectory of conduct. Q 17:32 directs that one not approach unlawful intimacy (*walā taqrabū al-zinā*), describing it as an indecency and an evil way. The formulation is prohibitive of approach rather than of the act alone, which the exegetical tradition has consistently read as extending the prohibition to what leads towards it. This is the verse that most directly underwrites the juristic concern with mixing, and it is important to be precise about what it establishes. It prohibits movement along a trajectory. It does not identify any particular spatial arrangement as constituting that trajectory; the identification of particular arrangements is the work of jurists reasoning about their own societies. Q 24:19, which warns those who love that indecency should spread among the believers, and Q 24:12-16, which govern the circulation of sexual accusation and rumour, extend the same concern to discourse about sexual conduct rather than to conduct alone.

It is worth noting how these four elements are distributed. Two of them, gaze and speech, govern what a person emits into an encounter. The third, permission, governs entry into a domain that belongs to another. The fourth, trajectory, governs the direction in which a sequence of acts is moving. None of the four can be satisfied by arriving at a permitted location, and none of them ceases to apply once a location is reached. This is the structural feature on which the argument of this article turns.

Alongside these four, the corpus establishes moral parity between the sexes as agents. Q 33:35 enumerates ten qualities in matched pairs of believing men and believing women, and Q 3:195 states that the work of any worker among them, male or female, is not lost. These verses do not regulate interaction directly, but they establish that both parties to an interaction are addressed as responsible agents, which bears on how the regulated elements are distributed.

Narratives of Licit Interaction

The third finding comes from the narrative portions of the corpus, which depict cross-gender encounters without censure and with instructive detail. Q 28:23-26 recounts Moses arriving at the water of Madyan and finding two women holding back their flocks. He addresses them, they answer him, he waters their flocks, and one of them later returns to him walking with modesty (*tamshī 'alā istiḥyā'*) to convey her father's invitation. The passage closes with her recommendation that her father hire him, on the ground that the best person to hire is one who is strong and trustworthy (*al-qawiyy al-amīn*). Several features of the narrative matter here. The interaction is initiated by need and conducted for a purpose. It involves speech

in both directions. It is marked by a bearing described approvingly as modest. And it issues in a woman's assessment of a man's competence and character, an assessment the narrative endorses.

Q 27:23-44 presents the extended account of the queen of Sheba, who consults her council, corresponds with Solomon, tests him, travels to him, and finally declares her submission. Her speech is reported at length and her judgement is treated as consequential throughout. The narrative depicts sustained cross-gender interaction in a political register, conducted through correspondence, delegation, and face-to-face audience.

These narratives are significant for the thematic method precisely because they are not legislative. They show the corpus depicting, without disapproval, the kinds of interaction that a spatial reading of the regulatory verses would render problematic. Contextual exegesis in the Indonesian tradition, including Hamka's *Tafsir al-Azhar* and Quraish Shihab's *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, has drawn on such narratives in discussing women's public roles. When the narrative and regulatory portions of the corpus are read together, as the thematic method requires, the regulatory verses appear as conditions on interaction rather than as barriers to it.

IV. DISCUSSION

From Space to Conduct

The first finding, that the Qur'an regulates gaze, speech, permission, and trajectory rather than location, reframes what the juristic category of *ikhtilat* rests on. The category is not baseless: it is a reasonable inference from Q 17:32, since if approach to unlawful intimacy is prohibited then arrangements that facilitate such approach fall within the prohibition. What the analysis shows is that the inference is mediated. Between the verse and the rule stands a judgement about which arrangements constitute approach, and that judgement was made by jurists reasoning about the societies they knew, in which physical proximity was effectively the only channel through which unregulated intimacy could develop.

Recognising this mediation matters because it identifies what is textual and what is contextual in the received position. The prohibition of approach is textual and permanent. The identification of physical mixing as the paradigm case of approach is contextual and, being an inference about social conditions, revisable when those conditions change. This distinction is what allows the Qur'anic framework to be applied to environments where the inference no longer holds, and it locates the difficulty in the juristic elaboration rather than in the text, which is the opposite of how the problem is usually posed.

The finding also bears on how the exegetical tradition is read. That tradition is not uniform on these verses; al-Qurtubī's record of disagreement over Q 24:31 and Ibn 'Āshūr's attention to the social purposes of directives both indicate an interpretive practice more attentive to rationale than the settled juristic category suggests. The contribution here is methodological: a thematic reading that includes the narrative portions of the corpus alongside the regulatory ones yields a different structure from one built on the regulatory verses alone, which is the standard way the question has been approached (Wahyudi et al., 2023; Maya et al., 2023).

Applying the Framework to Online Gaming

The second finding follows from applying each regulated element to the gaming environment. The result is not that the framework applies partially but that it applies with unusual directness, because each element has a clear correlate in the medium.

Speech is the most obvious. Voice chat is the primary channel of interaction in team-based play, and it is the channel through which gendered harm is empirically most concentrated. The experimental finding that a female voice attracted three times as many negative comments as a male voice or silence identifies speech as the trigger and the medium of harm (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013). Q 33:32 addresses exactly this

domain, and it does so in a way that is instructive: it links a manner of address to the response it invites, and it names the disposition of the listener rather than treating the speaker as the sole locus of responsibility. Read alongside Q 24:30, which addresses men first, the framework distributes obligation to both parties, with the party inclined to predation addressed prominently.

The gaze has a less obvious but real correlate. Avatars, character design, and the visual presentation of players constitute an economy of looking. Research on sexualised avatars and on the effects of exposure to sexualised game characters indicates that this economy has measurable consequences for attitudes, and cultivation research links prolonged exposure to hostile sexism and rape myth acceptance (Fox & Potocki, 2016). What Q 24:30-31 regulates is the act of looking, which remains fully within the player's control regardless of whether the object of the gaze is a body or its representation. The transposition is direct.

Permission and trajectory map onto the medium in ways that reveal something about the medium itself. The principle of *isti'dhān* in Q 24:27-28 establishes that access to another's domain requires consent. In online gaming, matchmaking systems assign players to one another without consent, direct messaging permits contact with strangers, and voice channels transmit into private homes. Research on women's coping strategies in these environments, which include neutralising gender through screen names and avatars and avoiding communication altogether (Fox et al., 2018), can be read as the improvised construction of exactly the boundary that *isti'dhān* would establish by right. On trajectory, the anonymity and interactivity of these environments have been shown to shape how sexism is expressed and carried beyond the platform (Fox et al., 2015), which is a description of a trajectory of the kind Q 17:32 addresses.

There is also a feature of the medium with no obvious offline analogue. Gender in online gaming is disclosed rather than given: it becomes socially operative at the moment a player speaks, selects an avatar, or chooses a name, and it can be concealed or altered. Research documenting that women neutralise gender cues in order to avoid harassment describes this disclosure as a decision with consequences (Fox et al., 2018). This complicates any framework built on the visible presence of a female body, since there is no body present, and it strengthens a framework built on conduct, since the obligation to lower the gaze and to speak appropriately does not depend on ascertaining who is on the other side of the channel. On the conduct reading, a player's obligations are determined by what that player does, not by what the player has been able to infer about others.

The implication is that the spatial reading and the conduct reading diverge sharply here, and that the divergence is testable. On a strict spatial reading, online gaming involves no *ikhtilat* and requires no regulation, a conclusion contradicted by the documented harms. On the conduct reading, every regulated element is present, and the environment is if anything more exposed than a physical one, since the constraints that physical settings impose through the presence of third parties, reputation, and accountability are weakened by anonymity. The Qur'anic framework becomes more applicable, not less, once space is removed.

Conduct-Governed Interaction and the Limits of Analogy

The third finding supports the concept this article proposes. Conduct-governed interaction names a regulatory structure in which the object of regulation is what a person does in an encounter, so that the regulation is portable across settings, rather than where the encounter occurs, which ties regulation to a particular material arrangement. The concept is offered as a description of the Qur'anic structure recovered here, not as a novel ethical proposal.

The practical difference between the two structures is considerable. A space-based rule generates a binary: an arrangement either is or is not permissible, and once a person is inside a permitted arrangement the rule has no further content. A conduct-based rule remains operative throughout the encounter and can be complied with or violated at any moment within it. In an environment such as online gaming, where the

entry condition is set by an algorithm rather than by the player, only the second kind of rule can do any normative work at all.

This reading also connects to what is known about how Muslims already inhabit digital environments. The literature on digital Islamic practice shows Muslims treating online activity as continuous with religious life rather than separate from it, and generating new forms of religious anxiety in the process, as with the revival of concern over *riyā'* in online piety (Husein & Slama, 2018; Slama, 2018). Gaming has been absent from this literature, but the same continuity applies: if online devotional practice is religiously real, online sociality is religiously real as well, and it requires a framework. Work on Aceh showing that young Muslims increasingly locate religious guidance on digital platforms rather than in established institutions (Wati et al., 2022) suggests that such a framework will be sought online whether or not scholarship provides it, which raises the stakes of leaving the question unaddressed.

One objection should be met directly. It might be argued that a conduct-based reading is permissive by design, dissolving a clear rule into a set of dispositions that cannot be enforced. The analysis does not support this. The conduct-based reading prohibits a great deal that a spatial reading, applied to gaming, would not reach: harassment through voice, the sexualised evaluation of other players, the circulation of sexual talk about them, and the cultivation of private contact that moves towards intimacy outside a licit frame. Q 24:12-16 and Q 24:19, which govern the circulation of sexual accusation and the spread of indecency in speech, are more restrictive of ordinary gaming discourse than any spatial rule could be. What the reading removes is the assumption that mixed presence is itself the violation, which is precisely the assumption the environment has already falsified.

Implications for Islamic Studies

Several implications follow. For Qur'anic studies, the case demonstrates what the thematic method can do when the narrative portions of a corpus are given equal weight with the regulatory ones. The narratives of Madyan and Sheba are not marginal illustrations; they constrain how the regulatory verses can be read, and excluding them produces a systematically different result. This is a methodological point applicable well beyond the present subject (Masykur & Gunawan, 2021).

For Islamic law, the analysis suggests that the treatment of digital questions by spatial analogy is a dead end, since it requires the analyst to decide whether a platform resembles a room, a question with no determinate answer. Identifying the rationale of a ruling and asking whether that rationale is engaged by the new environment is a more tractable procedure and one better grounded in the text.

The argument also carries a caution for its own application. Establishing that a framework is portable is not the same as establishing what it requires in a particular case, and the four elements identified here underdetermine many concrete questions a gamer might ask about voice chat with strangers, mixed guilds, or sustained private contact with a teammate. Answering those questions requires juristic reasoning of a kind this article does not undertake. What the analysis provides is the correct starting point for that reasoning, which is a claim about where the inquiry should begin rather than about where it should end.

For the study of digital religion, the article proposes that Muslim digital life includes not only devotional practice but ordinary sociality with religious stakes, and that the latter has been under-studied because it is not marked as religious by participants (Slama & Hoesterey, 2021; Muslim, 2017). It also suggests that the norms governing cross-gender conduct in any Muslim society are shaped by local social arrangements as well as by scripture, as work on the interplay of Islam, adat, and gender in Aceh has shown (Srimulyani, 2010), which means that the framework developed here will be applied differently across settings. For practitioners and educators, the implication is that guidance to young Muslim gamers framed as prohibition of mixed play is likely to be both ineffective, since the composition of matches is not the player's choice, and misdirected, since it addresses a condition rather than the conduct in which the actual harms consist.

V. CONCLUSION

This article asked what the Qur'an regulates when it addresses interaction between men and women, how that regulation applies to online gaming, and what normative framework follows. In answer to the first question, the thematic analysis finds that the Qur'an contains no term corresponding to *ikhtilat* and no prohibition of cross-gender presence; what it regulates are four elements of conduct, namely the gaze, the register of speech, consent to enter another's domain, and the trajectory of conduct towards illicit intimacy, alongside narratives that depict purposeful cross-gender interaction without censure. In answer to the second, each of these elements has a direct correlate in online gaming, where voice chat, avatar economies, algorithmic matchmaking, and anonymity engage precisely the conduct the Qur'an governs, and where empirical research documents the harms that this governance aims to prevent. In answer to the third, the framework that follows is conduct-governed rather than space-governed, and it is more demanding of ordinary gaming conduct than a spatial rule would be, while declining to treat mixed participation as itself the violation.

The contribution of the article lies in reframing the question from classification to regulation and in proposing conduct-governed interaction as a construct for Qur'anic ethics in mediated environments. Theoretically, it distinguishes the textual prohibition of approach from the contextual juristic identification of physical mixing as its paradigm case, and shows that the thematic method yields a different structure when narrative verses are included. Empirically, it brings a body of communication research on gender in online games into Islamic Studies for the first time. Practically, it suggests that religious guidance for Muslim gamers should address speech, looking, boundary-setting, and intention rather than participation as such.

The study has limitations. It is library-based and therefore cannot establish how Muslim gamers understand or negotiate these questions in practice; the normative framework it develops has not been tested against lived experience. Its engagement with the exegetical tradition is selective, and a fuller treatment would examine the *fiqh* literature on *ikhtilat* in its own terms rather than through its textual foundations alone. The gaming research on which it draws is conducted largely in Western settings, and the extent to which its findings hold in Indonesian or other Muslim-majority gaming communities is unknown. Future research should therefore examine Muslim gamers ethnographically, analyse how online religious authorities currently answer questions about gaming, and extend the conduct-based framework comparatively to other mediated environments.

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