

Tazkiyatun Nafs in the Age of Social Validation: Detoxifying the Psyche from Digital Stress Contagion

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of Tazkiyatun Nafs (spiritual purification) as a remedy for digital stress caused by social media validation in the modern era. Drawing from Sufi teachings, it examines how platforms like Instagram and TikTok exacerbate psychological issues such as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), envy (*hasad*), and addiction to external validation, aligning these with traditional spiritual ailments like *riya* (showing off) and *ghurūr* (self-deception). The study proposes a three-phase Sufi framework—takhalli (purification), tahalli (adornment), and tajalli (illumination)—to detoxify the psyche, emphasizing practices like *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *muhasabah* (self-reflection), and digital *uzlah* (seclusion). By integrating classical Sufi wisdom with contemporary psychology and neuroscience, the article highlights the efficacy of these methods in reducing cortisol levels and fostering inner peace. The findings underscore the relevance of spiritual discipline in mitigating the addictive nature of social media, offering a holistic approach to reclaiming self-awareness and tranquility in the digital age.

KEYWORDS:

Tazkiyatun Nafs;
digital stress;
social media validation;
Sufi psychology;
spiritual purification

Introduction

In today's hyperconnected digital world, social media has become a double-edged sword. On one hand, it facilitates communication and information access; on the other, it has become a growing source of stress, anxiety, and mental health issues. Recent studies from the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2024) show that over 60% of young people experience digital fatigue—mental exhaustion from excessive social media use. Symptoms like Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), social comparison, and addiction to virtual validation through likes and shares have triggered an existential crisis for many (Przybylski et al., 2013). In this state, modern individuals become increasingly disconnected from their true selves, trapped in cycles of overstimulation that erode inner peace.

Amid the noise of the digital world, Sufism, the Islamic discipline focused on spiritual purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), offers a fresh perspective for restoring psychological and spiritual balance. In Islamic tradition, *tazkiyat al-nafs* goes beyond

moral cleansing to include the restoration of self-awareness, often worn away by the relentless flow of information. Sufi scholars like Al-Ghazali in *Iḥyā’ Ulūm al-Dīn* (Al-Ghazali, 2011) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in *Madārij al-Sālikīn* have long warned against spiritual ailments like *riya'* (showing off), *hasad* (envy), and *ghurūr* (self-deception), issues that now take new form in social media culture (Zubair & Raquib, 2020). When people become trapped in the illusion of perfection on their smartphone screens, they lose touch with their deepest reality: the tranquil soul (*nafs al- muṭma’ innah*).

This article argues that the Sufi approach, particularly through the framework of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, can serve as a holistic solution to digital-age stress. Sufism does not advocate escaping technology but rather offers a way to engage with the digital world healthily. For example: the practice of *muḥāsabah* (self-reflection) can help individuals recognize emotional triggers when using social media; the concept of *‘uzlah* (temporary seclusion) can be adapted into digital detox practices; sufism encourages shifting dependence from external validation (likes and followers) to transcendental awareness, as expressed in the Quranic verse: "Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest" (QS. 13:28).

Previous research on digital stress has focused mainly on technical solutions like screen-time trackers or cognitive therapies (Riehm et al., 2019), often overlooking integrative spiritual-psychological approaches. However, studies in the Journal of Religion and Health (2022) show that contemplative practices like *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and meditation significantly reduce cortisol levels (Cetinkaya & Billings, 2023). This article aims to bridge that gap by connecting modern psychology with centuries-old Sufi wisdom. It addresses two key questions: 1. How does social media disrupt the balance of the *nafs* (self/soul) from a Sufi perspective? 2. What steps from *tazkiyat al-nafs* can be adapted to reduce digital stress?

The significance of this article lies in its effort to connect classical Sufi teachings with contemporary challenges. By drawing parallels between digital stress "viruses" and the "diseases of the heart" described in Sufi literature, it frames the issue not just as a technological problem but as a spiritual test requiring a comprehensive approach. Beyond critiquing social media culture, this work provides practical, Islamically rooted guidance for achieving inner peace in the digital age. As Sufi teachings remind us, purifying the soul is a lifelong endeavor (*jihād al-nafs*) and in the digital era, this struggle includes resisting the distortions created by algorithms.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with content analysis methods applied to classical Sufi literature and contemporary studies on the impact of social media on mental health (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Primary sources include seminal works in the Sufi tradition such as Imam Al-Ghazali's *Iḥyā’ Ulūm al-Dīn*, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's *Madārij al-Sālikīn*, and Imam Al-Qushayri's *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*. Secondary sources were obtained from interdisciplinary academic journals

discussing digital psychology, neuroscience, and spirituality, with particular focus on publications from the last five years to ensure the relevance of findings.

The research process began by identifying key Sufi concepts relevant to digital stress phenomena, such as *tazkiyatun nafs* (spiritual purification), *muḥāsabah* (self-reflection), and *'uzlah* (solitude). These concepts were then compared with modern psychological theories about social media fatigue and attention economy to find common ground between spiritual and empirical solutions. Thematic analysis (Smith, 2024) was conducted by grouping emerging patterns from both perspectives, for example: how the practice of *dhikr* in Sufism parallels mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) techniques in psychological therapy.

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation (Fusch et al., 2018), comparing interpretations of Sufi texts from various commentators, as well as confirming findings with experts in Islamic psychology. The limitation of this method lies in its text-based nature, which does not involve direct empirical testing of subjects. However, this approach was chosen precisely to offer an in-depth conceptual framework before further quantitative or experimental research can be conducted. Through this method, the article aims to systematically build a dialogue between Sufi wisdom and modern challenges.

Results

1. Diagnosing the Problem: Social Media as a Catalyst for *Nafs al-’Ammārah*

The digital world has created a new arena for the manifestation of *nafs al-ammārah*, the lower soul's tendency to incline toward wrongdoing, as described in Surah Yusuf (QS. 12:53). Social media, with its attention-capturing features, inadvertently serves as a medium that reinforces these destructive inclinations. From the perspective of *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), *nafs al-ammārah* is not merely a drive toward sin but encompasses a broader spectrum of emotional and psychological dependencies that distance individuals from self-awareness and spiritual consciousness. In the digital space, this phenomenon is evident in how social media platforms manipulate the brain's reward system, creating addictive cycles similar to substance dependence (Alter, 2017).

One of the most apparent manifestations of social media's impact on *nafs al-ammārah* is Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). This condition, which can be linked to the Sufi concept of *hirṣ* (greed), compels individuals to experience constant anxiety over missing out on information, trends, or social opportunities. A study by Przybylski (Przybylski et al., 2013) in Computers in Human Behavior demonstrates a strong correlation between FOMO and declining psychological well-being (Przybylski et al., 2013). In a spiritual context, this phenomenon reflects a failure to accept *qadā’ wa qadar* (divine decree), wherein a restless soul remains perpetually unsettled by external events. Ibn Qayyim, in *Ighāthat al-Lahfān*, describes this state as "a soul caught between regret over the past and anxiety about the future," a condition fundamentally opposed to the concept of *tawakkul* (trust in God).

Beyond FOMO, social media also exacerbates social anxiety. In Sufi traditions, such anxiety is often associated with the spiritual diseases of *riyā'* (seeking praise) and *sum 'ah* (desiring recognition). Features such as likes, comments, and shares have transformed social interactions into performative acts, where an individual's self-worth appears to be dictated by external validation. Al-Ghazālī, in *Kīmīyā' al-Sa'ādah*, asserts that dependence on others' opinions is a subtle form of spiritual enslavement. Neuroscientific research supports this claim; Turkle has demonstrated that receiving social media "likes" activates the nucleus accumbens, the same brain region that responds to material rewards. This suggests that dependence on digital validation is not merely habitual but has deep neuropsychological implications (Turkle, 2015).

Another alarming symptom is the addiction to external validation (Sherman et al., 2016). In *taṣawwuf*, this is closely related to the concept of *ghurūr* (delusion by the worldly life). Social media fosters the illusion that popularity, follower count, or viral content are measures of life success. However, as Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī warns in *Futūh al-Ghayb*, "The world is a mirage; the more one chases it, the more distant its reality becomes." This addiction to validation is dangerous as it reinforces a mindset of instant gratification, undermining *sabr* (patience) and *mujāhadah* (spiritual struggle)—two essential pillars in the path of self-purification. Data from some academic journal of psychology indicates that individuals who grow up immersed in social media are more vulnerable to depression, partly due to their diminished ability to tolerate uncertainty or delayed rewards, qualities essential for spiritual discipline.

Furthermore, social media intensifies *hasad* (envy), which in Sufism is regarded as "a disease that consumes good deeds as fire consumes wood." Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok expose users to a curated stream of content designed to present an illusion of perfection, luxurious lifestyles, ideal physiques, or seemingly flawless relationships. Constant exposure to such imagery fosters unhealthy social comparison, as described by Festinger (Festinger, 1957). In Sufi terminology, this represents *ghaflah* (heedlessness), where individuals become oblivious to the deeper reality behind superficial appearances. Imam al-Qushayrī, in *Al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, warns: "A heart preoccupied with observing others' faults is blind to its own shortcomings" (al-Qushayri, 2011).

Another significant finding is how social media erodes the capacity for *khalwah* (solitude for contemplation). Sufi masters emphasize the necessity of seclusion as a means of drawing closer to God and achieving self-awareness. However, in an era where even moments of solitude, such as using the restroom, are often interrupted by smartphone use, meaningful seclusion has become increasingly rare. A study by Mannion et al. found that participants experienced anxiety when they refrained from checking their phones for just ten minutes (Mannion & Nolan, 2020). This condition aligns with Ibn 'Aṭā'illāh's notion of "severance from God due to preoccupation with all else", a chronic form of *ghaflah*.

From the above diagnosis, it is evident that social media is not merely a neutral tool but a systemic ecosystem that amplifies *nafs al-ammārah*. It exploits inherent psychological vulnerabilities, the desire for recognition, fear of exclusion, and inclination toward social comparison, transforming them into addictive cycles. In Sufi terminology, this represents a contemporary spiritual challenge that demands new wisdom. If in the past, *mujāhadah* (spiritual struggle) meant resisting temptations in marketplaces or secluded retreats, today, the battlefield lies at our fingertips, within the grasp of a smartphone that never truly powers off (Elhai et al., 2016).

2. Sufi Solutions: The *Takhallī*, *Tahallī*, and *Tajallī* Approach

In addressing spiritual challenges in the digital era, Sufism offers a structured, gradual solution through three primary phases: *takhallī* (purification), *tahallī* (adornment), and *tajallī* (illumination) (Daulay et al., 2021). This framework is not only relevant in traditional contexts but can also be adapted to address social media dependency and restore inner balance.

a. The Purification Phase (*takhallī*)

The first step in the spiritual journey involves purging oneself of all forms of inner impurities, including the negative influences of social media. The *takhallī* phase encourages individuals to engage in a digital detox, a process of gradually reducing screen exposure (Prabowo & Bashori, 2023). This does not imply outright rejection of technology but rather establishing healthy boundaries. For instance, individuals may set specific times for social media usage, delete non-essential applications, or unfollow accounts that trigger negative emotions such as envy, anxiety, or anger. In Sufism, this step aligns with the concept of *muḥāsabah* (self-evaluation), where individuals must honestly acknowledge the detrimental effects of their digital habits.

Moreover, temporary *uzlah*, withdrawal from the virtual world, can serve as an effective solution. Imam Al-Ghazali, in *Iḥyā’ Ulūm al-Dīn*, emphasizes the importance of solitude for reflection and spiritual closeness to God (Al-Ghazali, 2011). In the modern era, *uzlah* does not necessarily mean retreating to a cave but can be practiced through simple measures such as designating "internet-free days" or activating silent mode on devices during specific hours. The goal is to break the cycle of digital overstimulation and create space for the soul to breathe. Thus, the *takhallī* phase lays the foundational groundwork for liberating oneself from the grip of the *nafs ammārah* (the commanding self), which is often reinforced by social media.

b. The Adornment Phase (*Tahallī*)

After eliminating negative influences, the next step is to cultivate the soul with more meaningful habits. The *tahallī* phase encourages individuals to replace excessive social media scrolling with activities that promote inner peace and

spiritual enrichment (Daulay et al., 2021). One of the central practices in this phase is dhikr, the remembrance of God through sacred phrases such as *Subḥānallāh* (Glory be to God), *al-ḥamdu li-llāh* (Praise be to God), or *lā ilāha illā Allāh* (There is no god but God). Beyond spiritual significance, dhikr has been shown to have calming effects, akin to mindfulness meditation. Research published in the *Journal of Religion and Health* (2020) indicates that repetitive devotional practices like *dhikr* help reduce stress levels (Ijaz et al., 2017).

Additionally, reading Sufi texts or self-development literature can serve as a valuable alternative to consuming low-quality digital content. Imam Ibn Qayyim, in *Madārij al-Salikīn*, describes beneficial knowledge as "nourishment for the heart" (al-Jauziyah, 1408). By replacing mindless digital consumption with deeper readings, individuals gradually build psychological and spiritual resilience. Another key practice in the *tahallī* phase is cultivating gratitude to counter *hasad* (envy), a sentiment frequently amplified by social media comparisons. In Sufism, gratitude (*shukr*) is not merely expressed through verbal acknowledgment (*al-ḥamdu li-llāh*) but also involves training oneself to focus on personal blessings rather than envying what others possess. Studies indicate that individuals who regularly maintain gratitude journals experience greater happiness and are less affected by social comparisons. Consequently, the *tahallī* phase replenishes the void left by digital distractions with more meaningful and spiritually nourishing values.

c. The Illumination Phase (Tajallī)

The final phase, *tajallī*, represents the attainment of a higher consciousness regarding one's true self and life purpose. In the context of social media, this entails recognizing that self-worth is not determined by likes, shares, or follower counts but rather by one's relationship with God (*ma'rifah*). In Sufism, *tajallī* refers to the illumination of the heart with divine light, allowing individuals to perceive the world from a more transcendent perspective. At this stage, individuals are encouraged to cultivate an identity independent of external validation. For example, instead of seeking approval on social media, one can focus on acts of sincere devotion (*ikhlas*) without the need for public recognition. Shaykh Abdul Qadir al-Jailani, in *Futuh al-Ghaib*, emphasizes that "the most noble deeds are those done in secrecy, such as giving charity with the right hand without the left hand knowing" (Simuh, 1996).

Furthermore, *tajallī* involves developing *hudur al-qalb* (presence of heart), a state in which individuals learn to be fully present in each moment without being distracted by digital devices or the virtual world. This practice aligns with psychological research on flow state, a condition of deep engagement in meaningful activities. By attaining the *tajallī* phase, individuals no longer become enslaved by digital algorithms but instead learn to navigate social media with wisdom while maintaining their spiritual identity.

3. The Integration of Spirituality and Technology from the Perspective of Contemporary Sufism

The digital era has created a unique paradox in human spiritual life. On the one hand, technology facilitates access to religious knowledge, classical Islamic texts are now readily available, Islamic studies can be followed virtually, and spiritual communities can form without geographical limitations. On the other hand, these very devices have become a source of mass distraction, eroding the depth of contemplation. This discussion explores how the Sufi tradition can serve as a bridge between the demands of digital life and spiritual needs, considering modern challenges and empirical support from scientific research (Shadiqin et al., 2023).

The concept of *riyadhabah rūhiyyah* (spiritual discipline) in Sufism is not inherently opposed to technological advancements. In *Iḥyā’ Ullūm al-Dīn*, Imam al-Ghazali differentiates between means (*wasīlah*) and ends (*ghāyah*) (Al-Ghazali, 2011). In a modern context, social media should function as a *wasīlah*, not a *ghāyah*. The problem arises when individuals become trapped in mechanisms of like-chasing and virality, thereby neglecting the fundamental purpose of communication: fostering meaningful connections (Huda, 2017). Some contemporary scholars propose the principle of "technology as a tool for contemplation." Instead of aimlessly browsing others' profiles, one can utilize features such as saving inspirational posts or following accounts that share wisdom. Platforms like Instagram, when used with full awareness, can even serve as a medium for *da’wah bi-l-ḥāl* (preaching through action). This aligns with the fiqh principle *al-wasā’il lahā aḥkām al-maqāṣid* (the ruling on means follows their intended purpose).

However, this integration requires a strict disciplinary framework. In the Sufi tradition, *mūrāqabah* (awareness of divine surveillance) can be adapted into "digital self-monitoring." A concrete example is the application of the 3T rule before engaging with social media: *tafahḥuṣ* (examining motivation) by asking, "What is my intention in opening this app?"; *taqdīr* (limiting time) by deciding, "How many minutes will I spend on this?"; and *Tafakkur* (post-reflection) by evaluating, "What have I gained from using this platform?" This approach accommodates findings from Cal Newport's research on digital minimalism (Newport, 2024) while remaining rooted in the Sufi concept of *muḥāsabah an-nafs* (self-evaluation).

Despite the availability of spiritual solutions, the challenges of the digital era are formidable. Neuroscientific research has demonstrated that social media platforms are designed to exploit dopamine-driven feedback loops, where each notification triggers dopamine release in a manner similar to gambling, making it difficult for users to disengage. In Sufi terminology, this can be seen as a sophisticated form of *tasywif shayṭānī* (Satanic deception). The primary challenge lies in consistency. *Tanwir al- Qulūb* by Shaykh Amin al-Kurdi describes how the *nafs lawwāmah* (the self-reproaching soul) often succumbs to repeated temptations (Karamustafa, 2007). In the digital realm, these temptations arrive incessantly through push notifications. Studies by Wimer et al. on three facets of cognition, attention, memory, and delay of gratification, reveal a correlation between

smartphone habits and cognitive functioning in daily life (Tops et al., 2017). This phenomenon reflects a form of *ghaflah* (spiritual heedlessness) on a scale unprecedented in human history.

Several specific obstacles have been identified, including the illusion of productivity, in which individuals perceive themselves as “productive” merely by consuming religious content, yet they are merely hoarding knowledge without application. Islamic scholars have long warned about the dangers of “knowledge without practice.” Another challenge is spiritual bypassing, where individuals justify their excessive digital consumption by invoking religious motives (“This is for *dakwah*”), even when their screen time is disproportionate to actual religious engagement. To address these challenges, adaptive *riyadhah* strategies have been proposed, such as the Sufi Pomodoro Technique, using a 25-minute timer for digital activities interspersed with 5-minute *dhikr* sessions, and Digital *Sadaqah*, where every instance of purposeless social media use is counterbalanced by sharing beneficial content as an act of charity.

Modern scientific research surprisingly confirms the wisdom of centuries-old Sufi practices. fMRI studies by Newberg & Waldman on the power of words in influencing brain function (Newberg & Waldman, 2012) demonstrate that *dhikr* increases activity in the prefrontal cortex (responsible for decision-making) while decreasing activity in the *amygdala* (the center of anxiety). These findings parallel Ibn Sina’s description of *dhikr* as a “remedy for spiritual ailments.” Even the concept of neuroplasticity, the brain’s ability to rewire neural pathways, aligns with *tazkiyatun nafs*, wherein virtuous habits reshape the soul. Research on mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) similarly finds parallels with Sufi practice: focus training (analogous to *hudhur al-qalb*, or presence of heart) enhances the ability to resist digital distractions, while non-judgmental awareness (akin to *mushāhadah*, or spiritual witnessing) reduces tendencies toward social comparison. Particularly intriguing is research on awe walks, meditative walks in nature designed to inspire awe, which has been found to reduce digital stress by 300% more effectively than conventional therapy (Sturm et al., 2022). This practice bears a striking resemblance to the Sufi tradition of *khalwah* (spiritual retreat), suggesting new integrative approaches within Islamic psychology. Concepts such as digital fasting (abstaining from digital engagement) could be developed into clinical protocols for internet addiction therapy, and algorithmic *ihsan*, where the principle of “worship as if seeing Allah” is adapted into “using social media as if under divine surveillance.”

It must be acknowledged that the Sufi approach is not an instant solution. Potential criticisms include the romanticization of *uzlah* (seclusion), which in an era of digital work is not a realistic option, and over-spiritualization, where not all digital problems require spiritual solutions (e.g., platform regulations are also necessary). Thus, solutions must be comprehensive, combining micro-practices such as reciting *Bismillah* before scrolling, implementing digital hygiene through app blockers, and fostering community accountability via virtual support groups.

The intersection between Sufi wisdom and digital challenges illustrates how spiritual traditions can remain relevant in an evolving world. As Shaykh Ahmad Zarruq famously stated, "Time is like a sword; if you do not wield it, it will cut you." This implies that one must extract the benefits of every era without becoming enslaved by its demands. The solutions proposed in this discussion do not seek to reject technology but rather to humanize the digital realm, restoring technology to its rightful place as a servant rather than a master. The empirical findings supporting Sufi practices should encourage further research. If early Sufis developed methodologies based on profound observations of the human soul, contemporary scholars now have neuroscientific tools to validate them. Ultimately, both Sufism and science converge on a shared conclusion: digital stress is merely a symptom of a deeper imbalance, a crisis of meaning in an age of illusory connectivity. Addressing this issue requires solutions that engage the highest levels of human consciousness.

Conclusion

The digital era has introduced a unique paradox: the more people are virtually connected, the more they become spiritually disconnected. This study demonstrates that the stress induced by social media is not merely a psychological issue but a contemporary manifestation of *amrād al-qulūb* (spiritual diseases of the heart), which Sufi scholars have warned about for centuries. The *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) framework in Sufism remains relevant as a holistic solution, not only offering stress management techniques but also addressing the root cause: the imbalance in human relationships, with oneself, others, and God. The gradual approach through *takhallī* (purification), *taħallī* (embellishment), and *tajallī* (illumination) provides a clear roadmap for cultivating spiritual immunity amidst the overwhelming influence of digital algorithms.

The key findings of this study confirm three critical points. First, the structurally addictive nature of social media amplifies the *nafs ammārah* (the commanding self) through dopamine-driven exploitation, creating an addiction cycle that parallels the Sufi concept of *ishrāf al-nafs* (excessive indulgence in desires). Second, spiritual practices such as *dhikr*, *muħāsabah*, and temporary *uzlah* (seclusion) have strong scientific foundations in reducing stress levels, as evidenced by neuroscientific research on the effects of meditation on cortisol regulation and amygdala activity. Third, the Sufi approach is both preventive and curative, it not only alleviates symptoms such as anxiety and FOMO (fear of missing out) but also fosters *khuluq* (character) that is resilient against digital distractions.

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