

Digital Zuhd from the Qur'anic Perspective

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Abstract

In the age of social media, flexing (the public display of wealth and material success) has emerged as a contemporary social pathology. This study aims to analyze the phenomenon of flexing through the Qur'anic concept of zuhd (ascetic detachment) and to formulate its ethical implications and resolutions within the context of modern digital life. Employing a thematic (*maudhu'i*) library research approach, the study draws primarily on Hamka's Tafsir Al-Azhar and M. Quraish Shihab's Tafsir Al-Misbah, complemented by relevant secondary literature. The findings reveal that the Qur'anic notion of mukhtāl signifies visual manifestations of arrogance expressed through material symbols and status displays, whereas fakhūr refers to verbal self-glorification aimed at gaining social recognition. These concepts demonstrate a strong correspondence with contemporary flexing practices, which are closely linked to social comparison mechanisms and may contribute to adverse psychological consequences, including Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). As its principal contribution, this study proposes the concept of digital zuhd, understood not as a rejection of technology but as the capacity to maintain psychological and spiritual autonomy amid the pressures of digital culture. The implementation of digital zuhd is grounded in three fundamental pillars: rejecting the pursuit of validation through digital metrics, cultivating social empathy in the public display of personal blessings, and reorienting social media toward the dissemination of collective benefit. This recontextualization offers an alternative paradigm for the development of Islamic digital ethics while simultaneously contributing to the promotion of mental well-being in cyberspace.

Keywords: *Digital Zuhd; Flexing; Qur'anic Exegesis.*

Abstrak: Era media sosial *flexing* (pamer kekayaan) telah menjadi patologi sosial kontemporer. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis fenomena *flexing* melalui pemaknaan konsep *zuhud* dalam Al-Qur'an serta merumuskan resolusi etisnya di era modern. Metode yang digunakan adalah studi kepustakaan tematik (*maudhu'i*) dengan sumber primer *Tafsir Al-Azhar* karya Buya Hamka dan *Tafsir Al-Misbah* karya M. Quraish Shihab, didukung oleh data

sekunder kepustakaan yang terkait. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa konsep zuhud dari tafsir tentang *mukhtāl* merepresentasikan kesombongan visual melalui simbol dan atribut materi, sedangkan *fakhūr* merujuk pada kebanggaan verbal demi pengakuan sosial. Temuan ini menegaskan keterkaitan erat antara *flexing* dengan mekanisme perbandingan sosial yang memicu dampak psikologis negatif seperti *Fear of Missing Out* (FOMO). Sebagai kontribusi penelitian ini merumuskan konsep zuhud digital, yang bukan berarti menolak teknologi, melainkan kemampuan mempertahankan kedaulatan psikologis dan spiritual. Implementasi zuhud digital bertumpu pada tiga pilar utama; penolakan terhadap validasi semu metrik digital, penguatan empati sosial dalam publikasi kenikmatan, dan pengalihan fungsi media sosial sebagai sarana distribusi kemanfaatan. Reaktualisasi ini menawarkan paradigma alternatif bagi pembentukan etika digital Islami sekaligus penguatan kesehatan mental di ruang siber.

Kata Kunci: *Zuhud Digital; Flexing; Tafsir Al-Qur'an*

Introduction

The rapid advancement of information and communication technologies in the digital era has fundamentally transformed the landscape of religious and social interactions (Khamis, 2024). Social media, once primarily serving as a virtual space for maintaining interpersonal relationships, has increasingly evolved into a performative arena where individuals construct and negotiate their social identities. From the perspective of Islamic ethics, every material and immaterial blessing bestowed upon human beings constitutes both a divine trust (*amānah*) and a test of piety. The Qur'an provides a normative framework for responding to worldly blessings by cultivating emotional balance—neither succumbing to excessive grief over loss nor becoming arrogant in times of prosperity. Within the Islamic spiritual tradition, this balanced disposition is embodied in the concept of *zuhd*, which emphasizes detachment of the heart from excessive worldly attachment rather than the rejection of worldly life itself (Nadia & Ridho, 2021).

Contemporary realities across social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube reveal a phenomenon that stands in sharp contrast to these Qur'anic ideals. Digital society has increasingly become immersed in a culture of *flexing*—the conspicuous display of wealth, personal achievements, social status, and luxurious lifestyles intended to attract recognition, social validation, and online followers (Hasanah et al., 2026). Rather than representing a simple expression of personal happiness, *flexing* has evolved into a form of lifestyle commodification that fuels social envy, reinforces consumerist values, and intensifies unhealthy competition within digital spaces. From a socio-psychological perspective, this phenomenon reflects a profound existential insecurity,

whereby an individual's self-worth is measured by the extent to which material success and luxury can be publicly displayed in virtual environments (Syah et al., 2025).

From a theological perspective, however, *flexing* encounters a fundamental critique within the Qur'an. Numerous Qur'anic verses emphasize two principal psychological prohibitions: excessive grief and excessive pride. The latter culminates in the assertion that Allah does not love those characterized as *mukhtāl fakhūr*—individuals who are arrogant and boastful. Classical Qur'anic exegesis interprets *fakhūr* as the act of openly boasting about one's advantages to elevate oneself above others or seek public admiration. This theological characterization remarkably corresponds to the defining features of contemporary *flexing*, providing a compelling conceptual framework for understanding the ethical dimensions of self-promotion in digital culture (Azkia, Azizy, & Nasution, 2026).

Previous studies examining Qur'anic perspectives on consumerism have predominantly relied on Surah At-Takāthur to explain the broader phenomenon of human greed and material accumulation (Salamah et al., 2025). Meanwhile, research focusing on Qur'an 57:23 (Surah Al-Ḥadīd, verse 23) has largely confined its discussion to the classical Sufi understanding of *zuhd*, emphasizing physical detachment from worldly affairs as the primary manifestation of ascetic spirituality (Farhan, 2023; Hidayati, 2016). Consequently, a significant research gap remains. The concept of *zuhd* articulated in Qur'an 57:23 has rarely been contextualized as an ethical framework for critically examining digital culture, particularly the contemporary phenomenon of *flexing* on social media. Addressing this gap, the present study reconceptualizes the classical notion of *zuhd* as a form of digital ethics capable of providing a moral response to the growing culture of online self-display and excessive self-promotion.

Against this background, this study aims to examine the phenomenon of *flexing* on social media through the interpretive lens of Qur'an 57:23. Specifically, it investigates the conceptual relationship between the Qur'anic notion of *mukhtāl fakhūr* and the psychological motivations underlying *flexing*, while also exploring how the concept of *digital zuhd* derived from this verse may serve as an ethical framework for fostering responsible, dignified, and spiritually grounded engagement with social media in contemporary society.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design based on a **library research** approach. Given that the material objects of the study comprise both the Qur'anic text and the contemporary phenomenon of cyberspace, the research adopted a contextual Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) with an *adabī ijtīmāī* (socio-ethical) orientation. This approach was selected because it enables the normative teachings of the Qur'an to be

interpreted considering contemporary social realities, particularly the phenomenon of *flexing* on social media.

The data sources were categorized into two groups. The primary data consisted of Qur'an 57:23 (Surah Al-Ḥadīd, verse 23) together with its interpretations in authoritative classical and contemporary Qur'anic commentaries, particularly *Tafsir Al-Misbah* by M. Quraish Shihab and *Tafsir Al-Azhar* by Buya Hamka. The secondary data comprised recent scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles addressing the phenomena of *flexing*, digital consumer psychology, and digital ethics.

Data were collected through documentary research by systematically identifying, reviewing, selecting, and organizing relevant literature directly related to the research objectives. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using descriptive content analysis, which enabled the researcher to examine both the textual meanings of the Qur'anic verses and their relevance to contemporary digital behavior.

The analytical procedure was conducted in three sequential stages. First, the semantic meanings and exegetical interpretations of the key Qur'anic expressions *lā tafrah* ("do not exult excessively") and *mukhtāl fakhūr* ("the arrogant and boastful") in Qur'an 57:23 were examined. Second, the defining characteristics of *flexing* behavior on social media were identified and analyzed based on contemporary scholarly literature. Finally, the ethical values derived from the Qur'anic verse were contextualized to formulate a Qur'anic framework of digital zuhd, positioning it as a moral and ethical response to the culture of conspicuous self-display and excessive self-promotion in virtual spaces.

Results and Discussion

The Term 'Flexing' considering Q.S. Al-Hadid: 23

The analysis of the phenomenon of showing off and seeking social validation in digital public spaces must begin with an exploration of the primary normative source in Islam: the Al-Qur'an. In this context, Q.S. Al-Hadid [57]: 23 occupies a strategic position as an epistemological foundation for understanding the relationship between humans, material possessions, and the psychological dynamics that accompany them.

The structure of meaning in this verse indicates that the condemnation of arrogance and self-aggrandizement does not appear in isolation; rather, it is preceded by the principle of emotional balance in responding to the realities of life. Humans are forbidden from drowning in excessive grief over loss, just as they are forbidden from expressing excessive joy over the pleasures obtained. Both prohibitions are rooted in the theological awareness that all life events occur within the scope of Allah's decree (Milsih, Fitri, & Masuwd, 2022).

Thus, this verse asserts that the fundamental problem for humans lies not in the possession of material things itself, but in the excessive emotional attachment to them. The awareness that wealth and various worldly achievements are not absolute human possessions serves as a protective

mechanism that prevents the emergence of arrogance and psychological dependency on material attributes.

The phrase *lā tafraḥū bimā ātākum* (do not rejoice in what He has given you) contains a prohibition against boundless euphoria over the favors received. This prohibition is not directed at expressions of gratitude, which are part of human nature, but at joy that creates an illusion of existential independence—the belief that all success is solely the result of personal ability without the intervention of Divine will. From a theological perspective, this condition is the starting point for a materialistic orientation that places wealth and achievement as the primary sources of self-worth. When an individual fails to manage this euphoria, wealth is no longer understood as a trust (*amanah*) and an instrument for the common good (*kemaslahatan*) but transforms into a symbol of status and social superiority. This transformation of orientation is what leads a person toward the character described by the Al-Qur'an as *mukhtāl fakhūr*.

Based on an examination of authoritative tafsir literature, *mukhtāl fakhūr* is a key concept in understanding spiritual pathology related to material possession. According to M. Quraish Shihab in *Tafsir Al-Misbah*, the word *mukhtāl* derives from the root *khayāl*, meaning imagination or fantasy. Semantically, this term refers to an individual who constructs an excessive perception of themselves, thereby becoming trapped in an illusion of superiority (Salamah et al., 2025).

This psychological condition then manifests in non-verbal expressions, such as body gestures, lifestyle, appearance, or the use of material attributes intended to display social status differences. Thus, *mukhtāl* describes a form of arrogance that is visual and symbolic. Meanwhile, the word *fakhūr* comes from the root *fakhr*, meaning to boast verbally. This term refers to an individual who continuously highlights their advantages, achievements, wealth, lineage, or social status to others. Such actions are not driven by a spirit of gratitude (*taḥadduts bin ni'mah*), but by the urge to obtain recognition, build superiority, and create social hierarchies.

Combining these two terms in a single linguistic construction demonstrates that the Al-Qur'an portrays arrogance as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing internal, visual, and verbal aspects. A person is not only trapped in the illusion of self-superiority but also attempts to express that illusion through material symbols and narratives aimed at gaining social legitimacy. This perspective is reinforced by Buya Hamka in *Tafsir Al-Azhar*. According to Hamka, the prohibition against rejoicing excessively over wealth is not intended to reject worldly pleasure, but to prevent the emergence of an "egocentric" attitude that makes material things the central orientation of life. Wealth is essentially created as a means to achieve the common good, not as the goal of human existence (Hamka, 2015).

Hamka asserts that the primary issue lies not in the amount of wealth owned, but in the position of wealth within the structure of human consciousness. As long as wealth remains in one's hands, a person has

control over it and can use it for productive and social purposes. Conversely, when wealth masters the heart, the relationship is reversed: humans are enslaved by what they possess. In such a condition, an increase in wealth will breed self-aggrandizement, while the loss of material will bring excessive grief. Both emotional responses reveal the fragility of an individual's spiritual foundation because their self-worth is entirely dependent on material possession (Ashfiya', 2024).

The synthesis of M. Quraish Shihab's thoughts regarding the illusion of superiority in the concept of *mukhtāl fakhūr* and Hamka's view on the human relationship with wealth leads to a central concept in Islamic ethics: *zuhud*. Contrary to popular understanding, *zuhud* is not synonymous with the rejection of the world or intentional poverty. *Zuhud* is the ability to place the world in proper proportion so that material possession does not control one's life orientation (Shihab, 2022b). An individual possessing *zuhud* is still permitted to achieve economic success, utilize technology, and reach high social positions. However, all these achievements must not breed visual arrogance (*mukhtāl*) or the urge to seek recognition through verbal expression (*fakhūr*).

Based on this analysis, Q.S. Al-Hadid [57]: 23 can be understood as a theological construction that offers an alternative paradigm to the measure of success dominant in modern society. This verse deconstructs the materialistic view that gauge's human dignity based on what one possesses and displays. The concept of *mukhtāl fakhūr* serves as a theological warning regarding human vulnerability to the illusion of superiority and dependency on social validation. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the theological anatomy of *mukhtāl fakhūr* becomes an important conceptual foundation in analyzing the phenomenon of 'flexing' on social media. This framework allows research to identify the spiritual roots of such behavior while formulating ethical resolutions relevant to contemporary digital society.

Flexing as a Manifestation of Digital *Mukhtāl Fakhūr*

The theological construction of the *mukhtāl fakhūr* character as inscribed in Q.S. Al-Hadid [57]: 23 finds its empirical relevance in the phenomenon of 'flexing' on social media. To strengthen the analytical argument, primary data sourced from the Al-Qur'an and tafsir literature is correlated with secondary data derived from sociology, social psychology, and digital media studies. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a more comprehensive identification of behavioral transformation regarding 'showing off' from conventional social spaces to digital spaces.

In a sociological perspective, flexing behavior has a strong conceptual link to the theory of *conspicuous consumption* proposed by Thorstein Veblen. Veblen explains that conspicuous consumption is the practice of using or purchasing luxury goods and services not merely to fulfill functional needs, but to display social status, build prestige, and create symbolic differentiation before the public. Thus, the primary value

of an object is no longer determined by its utility, but by its capacity to represent the owner's identity and social superiority (Sahlan & Ma'ruf, 2024).

The development of social media, particularly platforms like Instagram and TikTok, has created new spaces that allow the practice of conspicuous consumption to take place more widely, rapidly, and massively. The characteristics of digital media—which are visual-based, driven by attentional algorithms, and possess feedback mechanisms like likes, comments, and follower counts—mean that expressions of conspicuous consumption are no longer private. Instead, they are institutionalized as social practices that obtain legitimacy through digital interaction.

In this context, Veblen's theory and the theological construction of Q.S. Al-Hadid [57]: 23 reveal a significant intersection. The flexing phenomenon concretely represents the two dimensions of arrogance contained in the concept of *mukhtāl fakhūr*.

The first dimension, *mukhtāl*, is manifested through visual and symbolic aspects. This practice is visible in uploads displaying stacks of cash, branded goods, exclusive travel, luxury vehicles, or other consumptive lifestyles. Such visual representation does not merely function as activity documentation but is consciously constructed to build an image of superiority and obtain social recognition. From the Quranic perspective, this behavior reflects the illusion of self-importance expressed through material symbols (Zaenal Arifin et al., 2022).

The second dimension, *fakhūr*, is present through the verbal narratives accompanying digital content. Various social media psychology studies show that flexing perpetrators often use communication strategies such as *humblebragging*—conveying achievements or personal advantages through expressions that appear humble but are intended to attract attention and gain social validation. Furthermore, narratives such as "just sharing inspiration," "result of hard work," or "motivating others" are often used as justification mechanisms to legitimize the practice of showing off in digital spaces (Zaenal Arifin et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that not every form of publishing achievements or success can be categorized as *fakhūr*. In Islamic ethics, there is the concept of *taḥadduts bin ni'mah*, which is conveying Allah's favors as a form of gratitude and inspiration oriented toward the common good. Therefore, the distinction between expressions of gratitude and flexing lies in the inner orientation, communication purpose, and the resulting social impact. When publication is done to build benefits, encourage solidarity, or inspire without creating superiority, such actions cannot be equated with *fakhūr* behavior.

The correlation between primary and secondary data yields a synthesis that flexing cannot be understood merely as a digital cultural trend or a personal branding strategy. From a theological perspective, this behavior represents a modern form of the *mukhtāl fakhūr* character—a

condition where an individual makes material possession the primary basis for identity formation and self-worth.

This phenomenon indicates a shift in existential orientation: from treating wealth as a means to making, it a source of social legitimacy. Consequently, individuals become dependent not only on material possession but also on public recognition obtained through digital interaction. This dependency on social validation contradicts the principle of *zuhud* in Q.S. Al-Hadid [57]: 23, because the heart is no longer oriented toward Allah, but toward the appreciation and judgment of humans.

Thus, flexing can be understood as a contemporary manifestation of the spiritual pathology warned of by the Al-Qur'an long ago. Social media does not create the *mukhtāl fakhūr* trait, but it expands its space of expression, accelerates its spread, and strengthens its social reproduction mechanism through algorithmic systems based on attention.

Reactualizing Digital Zuhud as an Ethical Resolution

The convergence between the theological construction of Q.S. Al-Hadid [57]: 23 and the social reality of digital social media brings this discussion to the need for an ethical formulation relevant to the challenges of the age. If the flexing phenomenon is understood as a contemporary manifestation of the *mukhtāl fakhūr* character, then a framework of values is needed that is not only normative but also operational in the context of digital life. In this perspective, the concept of *zuhud* needs to be reactualized so that it can function as an ethical resolution to the various psychological and social problems arising from the culture of showing off on social media. This reactualization is subsequently formulated into the concept of "Digital Zuhud."

The formulation of Digital Zuhud begins with the basic premise that the Quranic prohibition against excessive attitudes in responding to material possession aims to maintain human psychological balance. Q.S. Al-Hadid [57]: 23 does not only contain moral messages but also offers a framework of emotional regulation that is preventive. The prohibition against grieving excessively over loss (*lā ta'saw 'alā mā fātakum*) and the prohibition against rejoicing excessively over material gain (*wa lā tafraḥū bimā ātākum*) shows that Islam directs humans not to anchor their emotional stability on temporary external conditions.

The relevance of this message is increasingly apparent when linked to various contemporary research findings in the fields of psychology and mental health. Diverse studies show that the intensity of social media usage, accompanied by exposure to content displaying wealth, luxury lifestyles, and personal achievements, contributes to increased dissatisfaction, social anxiety, and psychological pressure. This phenomenon is generally explained through the concept of *Fear of Missing Out* (FOMO)—the anxiety that arises when individuals feel left behind by the experiences, achievements, or lifestyles displayed by others in the digital space (Sahlan & Ma'ruf, 2024).

FOMO develops through a mechanism of *social comparison* that occurs continuously. Social media users tend to compare the reality of their lives with the ideal representations displayed by other users. Yet, most digital content is curated output that highlights positive aspects and hides the complexity of real life. Consequently, individuals experience a gap between personal reality and social expectations shaped by digital media (Afiyah et al., 2025).

In this context, the phrase *lā ta'saw 'alā mā fātakum* gains highly actual meaning. From the beginning, the Al-Qur'an anticipated the human tendency to experience psychological suffering due to an obsession with what one does not possess. The grief that is forbidden is not natural grief, but grief born from excessive attachment to material and comparative standards of success. Thus, the culture of flexing on social media essentially expands the space for the emergence of the psychological condition warned of by the Al-Qur'an (Salam & Sundari, 2023).

Based on these considerations, Digital *Zuhud* cannot be interpreted as a form of total rejection of technology or social media. Such an interpretation has the potential to create a non-productive dichotomy between religion and technological development. Digital *Zuhud* is also not synonymous with self-exile from digital public spaces, deleting social media accounts, or rejecting all forms of economic and technological advancement.

Referring to Buya Hamka's thought in *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, the essence of *zuhud* lies in the ability to place the world in proper proportion. Wealth, technology, and various facilities of modern life may be owned and utilized, if they do not master one's inner orientation. In other words, the fundamental issue lies not in the existence of social media, but in the individual's psychological and spiritual relationship with that media (Hamka, 2015; Shihab, 2022a).

In this context, Digital *Zuhud* can be defined as an individual's ability to maintain psychological and spiritual sovereignty amidst the flow of information, consumer culture, and the demands of social validation developing in the cyber realm. This psychological sovereignty is reflected in the ability to control the urge to seek external recognition and to ensure that self-identity does not depend on the responses of a digital audience. The implementation of Digital *Zuhud* can be realized through at least three ethical pillars.

The first pillar is the rejection of false validation. Social media creates a reward system based on quantitative metrics, such as follower counts, likes, views, and comments. In many cases, these indicators are perceived as measures of self-worth and social success. Consequently, individuals are driven to continue producing content that has the potential to increase audience engagement, even if they must sacrifice authenticity and personal integrity. Digital *Zuhud* teaches that human dignity is not determined by algorithms or public recognition. The self-worth of a Muslim stems from the quality of piety, moral integrity, and social contribution, not

from virtual popularity. This awareness becomes an important foundation for building a healthy relationship with social media and preventing psychological dependency on external validation (Achmad Zain Avicena & Umam, 2026).

The second pillar is the strengthening of social empathy. In a society marked by economic inequality and social vulnerability, excessive publication of personal luxury has the potential to trigger social jealousy, feelings of helplessness, and psychological pressure on others. Therefore, self-control in sharing personal favors is an ethical responsibility aligned with Islamic principles. Social empathy in the context of *Digital Zuhud* does not mean hiding all achievements or successes, but critically considering the purpose, context, and impact of every piece of content published.

The third pillar is an orientation toward the distribution of benefits. The reactualization of *Digital Zuhud* demands a change in the function of social media: from a space for self-representation to a space for social empowerment. Social media can be utilized to share knowledge, spread values of goodness, strengthen solidarity, and initiate social movements that have a positive impact on society.

This transformation is important because social media is essentially a neutral instrument. Its positive or negative impact is highly determined by its users' orientation. When social media is used to strengthen self-existence through material symbols, it becomes a medium for reproducing the *mukhtāl fakhūr* character. Conversely, when utilized to spread benefits and strengthen healthy social relationships, social media can be a means for constructive actualization of Islamic values. Ultimately, the reactualization of *Digital Zuhud* is not an effort to pull humans out of the digital world, but to build the ability to remain spiritually free within it. This concept offers an alternative paradigm to contemporary digital culture, which makes attention a commodity and social validation the primary goal.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the concept of *mukhtāl fakhūr* in Q.S. Al-Hadid [57]: 23 possesses strong relevance in elucidating the phenomenon of flexing on social media as a form of contemporary social pathology. Primary data analysis, through the interpretations of M. Quraish Shihab and Buya Hamka, reveals that *mukhtāl* represents arrogance expressed through symbols, attributes, and visual appearances, while *fakhūr* refers to the tendency to boast through verbal narratives to gain social recognition. These findings are reinforced by secondary data from sociological and digital psychology studies, demonstrating that the practice of flexing is closely linked to the theory of *conspicuous consumption*, social comparison mechanisms, and a culture of digital validation that triggers various psychological issues, such as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), existential anxiety, and self-dissatisfaction. Thus, flexing cannot be understood merely as a lifestyle trend or a personal branding strategy; rather, it serves as a contemporary manifestation of the *mukhtāl*

fakhūr character, rooted in a materialistic orientation and a dependency on public recognition.

Based on the synthesis between normative Quranic values and the sociological realities of digital society, this study formulates the concept of *digital zuhud* as a relevant ethical resolution for addressing the culture of showing off in cyberspace. *Digital zuhud* is not interpreted as a rejection of technology, social media, or material ownership; rather, it is defined as the capacity to maintain psychological and spiritual sovereignty amidst the currents of symbolic consumption and the demands for social validation. Its implementation is realized through three main pillars: the rejection of superficial validation based on digital metrics, the strengthening of social empathy when publishing personal favors, and the redirection of social media's function toward the distribution of benefits. Therefore, the reactualization of *zuhud* values offers an alternative paradigm that contributes not only to the formation of Islamic digital ethics but also supports the strengthening of mental health and the creation of a social media ecosystem that is more humanistic, reflective, and oriented toward the common good.

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