

# DEVELOPING AN ISLAMIC EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING DIGITAL RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND KNOWLEDGE CREDIBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM SOCIETIES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Received: 24 August 2026; Revised: 14 Sept 2026; Accepted: 20 Oct 2026; Published: 01 Nov 2026

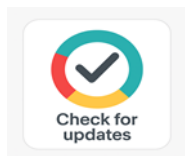
**Vol: 4, Issue 3 (2026)**

**Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.23491081**

## Abstract

### Keyword:

Islamic epistemology, digital religious authority, knowledge credibility, sanad, tabayyun, digital da'wah, qualitative study



The rapid migration of Islamic religious discourse to digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, podcasts and AI-driven chatbots has fragmented traditional structures of religious authority and complicated how Muslims judge the credibility of religious knowledge. Existing studies on digital religion largely describe the shifting landscape of online preachers and audiences, but rarely offer an evaluative framework grounded in the Islamic intellectual tradition itself. This study addresses that gap by developing an Islamic epistemological framework for evaluating digital religious authority and knowledge credibility. Adopting a qualitative exploratory design, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with nine purposively selected participants comprising Islamic scholars, academics in Islamic studies, digital da'wah practitioners, a mufti office officer and university students in Malaysia. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis assisted by NVivo. Five major themes emerged: (1) sanad and scholarly lineage as the anchor of authority; (2) 'adalah and moral integrity of the digital preacher; (3) methodological soundness (manhaj) and textual fidelity; (4) the influence of algorithms, popularity and the attention economy on perceived credibility; and (5) tabayyun and community-based verification as epistemic safeguards. Building on these themes and on classical concepts of 'ilm, sanad, 'adalah, dabt and tabayyun, the study proposes the Digital Islamic Epistemic Credibility Framework (DIECF), a five-dimensional model that integrates source legitimacy, character integrity, methodological rigour, contextual awareness and verification practice. The framework offers practical guidance for religious authorities, educators, platform regulators and lay Muslims in navigating religious knowledge online, and contributes theoretically by bridging classical Islamic epistemology with contemporary digital religion scholarship.



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## 1. Introduction

The digital transformation of the twenty-first century has profoundly reshaped how Muslims seek, receive and transmit religious knowledge. Where knowledge was once acquired primarily through

the *halaqah*, the mosque, the *pondok* and the face-to-face relationship between teacher and student, a growing share of Muslims now encounter Islamic teaching first through a smartphone screen. Short-form video, livestreamed sermons, podcasts, Islamic mobile applications and, increasingly, generative AI chatbots have become everyday sources of religious guidance (Campbell, 2013; Fakhrurroji, 2019). Scholars of digital religion describe this shift as a mediatisation of religion, in which media logics of visibility, speed and popularity increasingly shape how religion is practised and understood (Hjarvard, 2013; Hoover, 2016). In Muslim-majority societies such as Malaysia and Indonesia, where internet penetration is high and young people are heavy users of social media, this transformation is especially pronounced (Slama, 2018).

This transformation has produced a serious problem of religious authority. Classical Islamic scholarship rested on a carefully regulated system of knowledge transmission, in which authority was conferred through *sanad* (chains of transmission), *ijazah* (formal licensing), recognised mastery of the disciplines, and demonstrated moral probity (Brown, 2017; Zaman, 2012). Digital platforms bypass these gatekeeping mechanisms. Anyone with a camera and a following can present themselves as a religious teacher, and algorithms reward charisma, controversy and emotional appeal rather than depth of learning (Bunt, 2018; Campbell, 2020). Echchaibi (2011) describes this as a delocalisation of authority, in which the geographically and institutionally rooted '*alim* competes with transnational, media-savvy preachers whose credentials are often unclear. The outcome is a fragmented authority landscape in which lay Muslims face an overwhelming volume of competing claims to speak for Islam.

The consequences of this fragmentation are not merely theoretical. Unverified fatwas, fabricated or weak hadith circulated as memes, sectarian polemics, extremist recruitment content and commercialised "spiritual" products have all spread through digital channels (Brown, 2014; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Credibility research shows that online users typically rely on cognitive shortcuts, such as follower counts, production quality, endorsement by peers and perceived confidence, rather than systematic evaluation of the source (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013; Metzger et al., 2010). When such heuristics govern religious information, the risk is that popularity is mistaken for authority and eloquence for knowledge. For religious institutions, educators and families, the central practical question becomes: on what basis should a Muslim judge whether a digital religious source is trustworthy?

Despite a rapidly expanding literature, important gaps remain. First, most digital religion scholarship is descriptive and sociological; it maps how authority is being negotiated online (Campbell, 2012; Cheong, 2017; Larsson, 2011) but does not offer a normative evaluative framework that Muslims themselves could apply. Second, the general literature on information credibility draws on secular communication theory and has seldom engaged with the Islamic intellectual tradition, which possesses a highly developed epistemology of testimony and transmission in '*ulum al-hadith*, *usul al-fiqh* and the ethics of knowledge (Brown, 2017; Kamali, 2015). Third, existing empirical studies in Southeast Asia focus mainly on the strategies of popular preachers and the aesthetics of *dakwah* content (Hew, 2018; Nisa, 2018; Slama, 2017), with limited attention to how scholars, practitioners and ordinary believers actually reason about credibility. Fourth, there is little qualitative work that brings together the voices of multiple stakeholders, namely scholars, regulators, content creators and young consumers, to co-construct criteria for evaluation. Finally, the arrival of AI-generated religious content after 2023 has outpaced scholarship almost entirely, leaving an urgent need for frameworks robust enough to address non-human sources of religious information.

Accordingly, this study aims to develop an Islamic epistemological framework for evaluating digital religious authority and knowledge credibility in contemporary Muslim societies, using Malaysia as the empirical setting. Drawing on in-depth interviews with nine purposively selected stakeholders, the study explores how credibility is perceived, what criteria are applied, what challenges digital environments pose, and how classical epistemic principles can be operationalised for the digital age. The study contributes theoretically by integrating classical concepts such as *sanad*, '*adalah*, *dabt* and

*tabayyun* with contemporary digital religion and credibility theory, and practically by proposing the Digital Islamic Epistemic Credibility Framework (DIECF) for use by religious authorities, educators, platform policymakers and individual Muslims.

## 2. Literature Review

**2.1 Classical foundations: 'ilm, competence and the ethics of the knower.** In the Islamic tradition, knowledge (*'ilm*) is not merely information but a trust (*amanah*) whose validity depends on who holds it and how it was acquired. Al-Shafi'i's *al-Risalah*, the founding text of *usul al-fiqh*, made the point structurally: religious rulings must be derived from the Qur'an, the Sunnah, consensus (*ijma'*) and analogy (*qiyas*), and only a person who has mastered the Arabic language, the general and specific meanings of texts, and abrogation is qualified to speak on them (al-Shafi'i, ca. 820/2013). Authority, in this view, is a function of demonstrable competence rather than eloquence or popularity. Al-Ghazali's *Kitab al-'Ilm*, the opening book of *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, adds a moral dimension. He distinguishes the "scholars of the hereafter" from the '*ulama' al-su'* (evil scholars), who use knowledge to gain fame, wealth and proximity to power, and he devotes extended discussion to the *adab* binding teacher and student (al-Ghazali, ca. 1097/2015). Al-Shatibi, in the premises of *al-Muwafaqat*, offers perhaps the clearest classical test of a trustworthy teacher: knowledge should be taken from those who have truly realised it, recognisable by three signs, namely that they act upon what they know, that they were formed under the guidance of recognised masters, and that they follow the established path of those who preceded them (al-Shatibi, ca. 1380/2011). These three signs anticipate, with striking precision, the dimensions of lineage, character and method that recur throughout this study.

**2.2 Hadith criticism as an epistemology of testimony.** The hadith sciences developed one of the most rigorous systems of source criticism in premodern history. Narrators were evaluated through *al-jarh wa al-ta'dil* for '*adalah* (moral uprightness) and *dabt* (precision of memory or writing), chains were examined for continuity (*ittisal al-sanad*), and reports were screened for hidden defects (*'illah*) and anomalies (*shudhudh*) (Brown, 2017). The maxim of 'Abdullah ibn al-Mubarak, preserved in the introduction to *Sahih Muslim*, that the *isnad* is part of the religion and that without it anyone could say whatever they wished, captures the conviction that the identity of the transmitter is itself religious evidence. Importantly, the tradition was not simplistic. Brown (2011) shows that many Sunni scholars permitted the use of weak hadith in exhortation and virtuous deeds (*fada'il al-a'mal*), but only under conditions: the weakness must not be severe, the report must fall under an established principle, and it must not be believed with certainty. This nuance is almost entirely absent in digital circulation, where weak and fabricated reports are shared without grading or conditions. Classical hadith criticism therefore offers not only a vocabulary of credibility but a graded, conditional model of acceptance that is directly applicable to digital content.

**2.3 Modern Islamic thought on the crisis of authority.** Modern scholarship has documented a long process of pluralisation of authority in Islam, driven by mass education, print, the nation-state and new media. Zaman (2012) argues that the '*ulama'* have nonetheless remained resilient, engaging in internal criticism and adapting to new conditions rather than simply losing ground. Abou El Fadl (2014) takes a more critical view, contending that the erosion of juristic institutions and disciplined methods of reasoning left an intellectual vacuum in modern Muslim societies, one filled by puritanical and populist voices that claim to speak directly for God. He calls for reclaiming the Shari'ah as an ethical, reasoned tradition grounded in rigorous scholarship. Hallaq (2013) locates the problem in the modern state's appropriation of law, which dismantled the self-governing scholarly communities that once produced moral-legal authority. Nasr (2010) frames the issue as a rupture with tradition, understood as the living transmission of sacred knowledge, which he sees as threatened by both secular modernism and literalist fundamentalism. Ahmed (2016), by contrast, emphasises that Islam has always been a hermeneutical engagement producing legitimate diversity, a reminder that any credibility framework must accommodate recognised disagreement (*khilaf*) rather than enforce uniformity. Kamali (2015) adds that

the Qur'anic principle of *wasatiyyah* functions as an epistemic as well as an ethical standard, guarding against both laxity and extremism.

**2.4 The democratisation of interpretation.** A key debate concerns whether ordinary Muslims can derive religious understanding directly from scripture. Brown (2015) examines the Salafi claim that Islam is easy to understand, which encourages laypeople to bypass the *madhhab* tradition and read texts directly, and contrasts it with the classical insistence that interpretation requires trained scholars. He argues that this democratisation, while empowering, exposes believers to unqualified readings and ultimately reaffirms the need for the '*ulama*'. In *Misquoting Muhammad*, Brown (2014) further shows that the meaning of texts has always been mediated by interpretive methodology, so that the legitimacy of a ruling rests on both its textual basis and the competence of the interpreter. Hoover (2016) and the contributors to *The Media and Religious Authority* show that media environments accelerate this democratisation, since recognition by audiences increasingly becomes a source of legitimacy in its own right. Digital platforms thus intensify a tension already present in modern Islam, between the accessibility of sacred texts and the expertise required to interpret them responsibly.

**2.5 Digital religion and the reconfiguration of authority.** Campbell's (2012, 2013) work established digital religion as a field, showing that online and offline religious life are interwoven rather than separate. Her later study of "digital creatives" (Campbell, 2020) shows how web designers, bloggers and social media managers act as new mediators who shape religious messages without holding formal religious office. Cheong et al. (2011) found that clergy in wired faith communities negotiate their epistemic authority through strategic arbitration, adapting to congregants who arrive already informed by online sources. Cheong (2017) later argues that new media both challenge and reinforce established authority, depending on how institutions engage with them. Golan and Martini (2019) similarly show that religious institutions use live-streaming to construct authenticity and establish secondary authority. Together, these studies suggest that authority online is relational and contested, but they rarely specify criteria by which its legitimacy should be judged.

**2.6 Digital Islam and online da'wah.** Within Islamic studies, Bunt (2018) traces how "cyber-Islamic environments" have transformed authority, enabling both reformist and extremist voices to bypass traditional institutions. Larsson (2011) shows that debates over new media are not new in Muslim societies and that each medium has been evaluated through religious ethics. Echchaibi (2011) analyses how audiotapes, satellite television and video blogs delocalised authority, giving rise to lay preachers who appeal to younger, cosmopolitan audiences. Evolvi (2019) highlights how European Muslims use blogs to construct religious identity in secular contexts, while Rozehnal (2019) documents Sufi communities using digital media to extend traditional networks of spiritual authority. These studies confirm that digital Islam is diverse and dynamic, but their focus is primarily on practice and identity rather than on epistemic evaluation.

**2.7 Southeast Asian studies of digital preaching.** Southeast Asia has become a vibrant site for research on digital Islam. Slama (2017, 2018) shows how social media has created a new economy of Islamic preaching in Indonesia, in which preachers' availability, responsiveness and visibility become forms of capital. Nisa (2018) examines how young Indonesian women use Instagram for creative and commercially viable *da'wa*, while Hew (2018) analyses the visual persuasion strategies of the preacher Felix Siau. Fakhruroji (2019) demonstrates how Islamic apps mediatise religious lectures and spread religious authority across new media sites. These studies reveal the importance of aesthetics, personal branding and market logics in shaping who is heard. However, they examine the producers and products of digital *da'wah* more than the criteria by which audiences, scholars and regulators assess their credibility, and Malaysian perspectives remain comparatively under-represented.

**2.8 Information credibility and the gap in Islamic evaluation frameworks.** Credibility research in communication studies identifies source expertise, trustworthiness and message quality as

core dimensions, but finds that online users often rely on heuristics such as reputation, endorsement, consistency and expectancy violation (Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) conceptualise "information disorder" as comprising misinformation, disinformation and malinformation, each of which has religious analogues in fabricated hadith, sectarian propaganda and the selective quotation of texts. These frameworks are useful but culturally neutral; they do not account for distinctively Islamic criteria such as lineage of learning, moral character, or adherence to recognised juristic methodology. Conversely, classical Islamic criteria were designed for oral and manuscript cultures and have not been systematically translated into tools for evaluating algorithmically curated content. The present study sits at the intersection of these literatures, seeking to construct an empirically grounded framework that is faithful to Islamic epistemology and responsive to digital realities.

### 3. Research Questions

1. How do Islamic scholars, practitioners and lay Muslims in Malaysia perceive religious authority in digital spaces?
2. What criteria do they use to evaluate the credibility of religious knowledge disseminated through digital platforms?
3. What challenges do digital environments, including algorithms and AI-generated content, pose to the credibility of religious knowledge?
4. How can classical Islamic epistemological principles be operationalised into a framework for evaluating digital religious authority and knowledge credibility?

### 4. Methodology

#### 4.1 Research design

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design within an interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research seeks to understand meanings, reasoning processes and lived experiences of credibility judgement, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design was also framework-building in orientation: empirical themes were brought into dialogue with classical Islamic epistemological concepts to construct a normative evaluative model.

#### 4.2 Sampling and participants

Purposive sampling with maximum variation was used to select nine participants who could offer information-rich perspectives from different positions in the digital religious ecosystem. Inclusion criteria were: (a) Muslim adults aged 18 and above; (b) active engagement with digital religious content, either as producers, regulators, educators or consumers; and (c) willingness to participate in a 60–90 minute interview. The sample size of nine was guided by the principle of information power, which holds that a smaller sample is sufficient when the study aim is narrow, participants are highly specific and dialogue quality is strong (Malterud et al., 2016). Empirical tests also show that code saturation is frequently reached within 9–17 interviews in relatively homogeneous studies (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Saturation was monitored during analysis, and no substantially new codes emerged after the eighth interview.

**Table 1. Participant profiles**

| Code | Gender | Age | Role / Background                                   | Experience | Main platform       |
|------|--------|-----|-----------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------------|
| P1   | Male   | 52  | Senior lecturer, Hadith studies (public university) | 24 years   | Lectures, YouTube   |
| P2   | Male   | 47  | Professor, Usul al-Fiqh and Islamic thought         | 21 years   | Academic, webinars  |
| P3   | Female | 41  | Senior lecturer, Islamic communication and          | 15 years   | Instagram, research |

| Code | Gender | Age | Role / Background                                       | Experience | Main platform          |
|------|--------|-----|---------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------------------|
|      |        |     | media                                                   |            |                        |
| P4   | Male   | 38  | Religious officer, state mufti department               | 12 years   | Fatwa portal, Facebook |
| P5   | Male   | 35  | Digital da'wah content creator (approx. 400k followers) | 8 years    | TikTok, YouTube        |
| P6   | Female | 33  | Ustazah and podcaster on family and women's issues      | 7 years    | Podcast, Instagram     |
| P7   | Male   | 44  | Imam and pondok-trained teacher with ijazah             | 18 years   | Mosque, Facebook Live  |
| P8   | Female | 22  | Undergraduate student, Islamic studies                  | Consumer   | TikTok, Instagram      |
| P9   | Male   | 24  | Undergraduate student, computer science                 | Consumer   | YouTube, AI chatbots   |

### 4.3 Interview protocol and process

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews guided by a protocol developed from the literature and reviewed by two experts in Islamic studies and qualitative methodology. A pilot interview was conducted with one lecturer (not included in the sample) to refine wording and sequencing. The protocol covered five domains: (1) participants' patterns of engagement with digital religious content; (2) their understanding of religious authority; (3) criteria used to judge credibility; (4) challenges posed by algorithms, popularity and AI; and (5) recommendations for an evaluative framework.

The interview process followed six stages:

1. **Ethics and recruitment.** Ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics committee. Participants were approached by email or WhatsApp with an information sheet.
2. **Informed consent.** Written consent was obtained, covering audio recording, anonymity, the right to withdraw and data storage.
3. **Conduct of interviews.** Interviews were held face to face ( $n = 5$ ) or via Google Meet ( $n = 4$ ), in Malay, English or a mix of both, lasting 55–95 minutes (mean 72 minutes).
4. **Probing and member reflection.** Open questions were followed by probes such as "Can you give an example?" and "How did you decide whether to trust that source?"
5. **Transcription and translation.** Recordings were transcribed verbatim. Malay excerpts were translated into English and checked through back-translation by a bilingual colleague.
6. **Member checking.** Summaries of each transcript were returned to participants for verification; seven of nine responded, with minor clarifications.

### 4.4 Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases: familiarisation, initial coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. NVivo 14 was used to organise codes. Coding combined inductive codes emerging from the data with sensitising concepts from Islamic epistemology (*sanad*, *'adalah*, *dabt*, *tabayyun*, *manhaj*). Themes were then mapped onto these concepts to construct the proposed framework.

### 4.5 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through credibility (member checking, peer debriefing), transferability (thick description of participants and context), dependability (an audit trail of coding

decisions) and confirmability (a reflexive journal acknowledging the researcher's position as an academic in Islamic studies) (Nowell et al., 2017).

## 5. Findings

Thematic analysis produced five main themes and fourteen sub-themes. Table 2 presents the thematic structure, and Table 3 shows how each theme was distributed across participants. Each theme is then illustrated with verbatim excerpts. Excerpts originally spoken in Malay are presented in English translation, with key Malay phrases retained in italics.

**Table 2. Themes and sub-themes**

| Theme                                                      | Sub-themes                                                                                                                        | Linked Islamic concept  |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| T1. Sanad and scholarly lineage as the anchor of authority | 1a. Traceable teachers and ijazah; 1b. Institutional recognition; 1c. Limits of credentials alone                                 | Sanad, ijazah           |
| T2. Moral integrity ('adalah) of the digital preacher      | 2a. Consistency between speech and conduct; 2b. Commercialisation and sincerity (ikhlas); 2c. Adab in disagreement                | 'Adalah, ikhlas, adab   |
| T3. Methodological soundness and textual fidelity          | 3a. Referencing Qur'an, hadith and authentic sources; 3b. Awareness of khilaf and context; 3c. Competence in the right discipline | Manhaj, dabt, takhassus |
| T4. Algorithms, popularity and the attention economy       | 4a. Popularity mistaken for authority; 4b. Decontextualised short clips; 4c. AI-generated religious answers                       | Fitnah, ghuluw          |
| T5. Tabayyun and community-based verification              | 5a. Personal verification habits; 5b. Referral to institutions and teachers; 5c. Need for digital religious literacy              | Tabayyun, shura         |

**Table 3. Distribution of themes across participants**

| Theme                                | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 | P6 | P7 | P8 | P9 | Total (n = 9) |
|--------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|---------------|
| T1. Sanad and lineage                | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |    | ✓  | ✓  |    | 7             |
| T2. Moral integrity                  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |    | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | 8             |
| T3. Methodology and textual fidelity | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |    | ✓  | ✓  |    | ✓  | 7             |
| T4. Algorithms and popularity        | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |    | ✓  | ✓  | 8             |
| T5. Tabayyun and verification        | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | 9             |

### 5.1 Theme 1: Sanad and scholarly lineage as the anchor of authority

Seven participants regarded the ability to trace a speaker's learning to recognised teachers as the most fundamental test of authority. For the hadith specialist, this was non-negotiable:

*"In our tradition, you ask first: dia belajar dengan siapa? Who did he learn from? If I cannot trace his teachers, I cannot trust his knowledge, no matter how many followers he has. The sanad is not decoration, it is the guarantee that what reaches you is what was taught." (P1, Senior lecturer, Hadith)*

The *pondok*-trained imam described *ijazah* as a living accountability rather than a certificate:

*"When my teacher gave me ijazah for a kitab, he was not just saying I finished it. He was saying I can be trusted to teach it. If I teach wrongly, it is his name and his teachers' names behind me. Online, many people teach kitab they never read with a teacher. They just read the translation." (P7, Imam)*

The mufti office officer stressed institutional recognition (sub-theme 1b):

*"For official matters, we refer people to tauliah. In our state, to teach religion publicly you need tauliah. But online, there is no tauliah. So the public cannot tell who is recognised and who is not. That is the gap we are struggling with." (P4, Religious officer)*

However, participants also warned that credentials alone are insufficient (sub-theme 1c). The professor of *usul al-fiqh* cautioned:

*"A PhD from a famous university does not automatically make someone a reliable mufti. I have seen people with strong qualifications say very careless things online because they speak outside their field. Sanad must go together with discipline and character." (P2, Professor)*

Even the content creator acknowledged the importance of lineage, though he had built his audience independently:

*"I am honest with my followers. I tell them I am not an ustaz with sanad. I studied syariah at diploma level and I attend classes with a syekh every week. When the question is about hukum, I share what my teacher says, and I tag his name." (P5, Content creator)*

The Islamic studies student indicated that she had only recently become aware of the concept:

*"Before entering university, honestly I never asked who the ustaz studied with. I followed whoever was viral. Now after learning 'ulum hadith I realise the question 'who is your teacher' is very important." (P8, Student)*

## 5.2 Theme 2: Moral integrity ('adalah) of the digital preacher

Eight participants saw moral character as inseparable from credibility. The most frequently cited indicator was consistency between what preachers say and how they live (sub-theme 2a):

*"'Adalah is about whether a person's life matches his words. Online we only see the edited version. But when a preacher who talks about zuhud is always showing luxury cars and branded things, people start to doubt. And they should doubt." (P3, Senior lecturer, Islamic communication)*

Several participants were concerned about commercialisation and its effect on sincerity (sub-theme 2b). The podcaster reflected on her own experience:

*"I get offers for sponsorship every week, skincare, travel, umrah packages. I accept some, but I always ask: will this make my audience doubt my ikhlas? Once your da'wah becomes a marketing channel, the message loses its barakah and people can feel it." (P6, Ustazah and podcaster)*

The computer science student described a loss of trust triggered by commercial behaviour:

*"There was one ustaz I followed for two years. Then every video ended with 'buy my product, link in bio'. I stopped. Not because selling is haram, but because I didn't know anymore if he says something because it is true or because it sells." (P9, Student)*

Adab in disagreement (sub-theme 2c) emerged as another moral indicator:

*"You can see a person's knowledge from how he disagrees. The real 'ulama' respect khilaf. They say 'this is the stronger view in my opinion'. But some online preachers call other Muslims sesat and bid'ah in every video. That arrogance itself is a sign he is not credible." (P1)*

*"The scholars I trust most are the ones who are humble enough to say wallahu a'lam, I don't know. Online, nobody wants to say 'I don't know' because it is bad for engagement." (P2)*

### 5.3 Theme 3: Methodological soundness and textual fidelity

Seven participants emphasised that credible religious content must demonstrate a sound methodology (*manhaj*). The first indicator was accurate referencing of primary sources (sub-theme 3a):

*"For me the minimum is: does he mention the source? Which surah, which hadith, narrated by whom, what is the grading? If somebody says 'the Prophet said' and gives no source, I treat it as mawdu' until proven otherwise. Many viral hadith on TikTok have no basis at all." (P1)*

*"We receive many complaints about fake hadith spread on WhatsApp, especially about Ramadan, Friday, and amalan for rizq. Our unit has to issue clarifications almost every month." (P4)*

The second indicator was awareness of scholarly disagreement and context (sub-theme 3b):

*"A serious scholar will present the issue with its context: the dalil, the views of the mazhab, why the scholars differed, and then what is suitable for Malaysia. A ten-second clip cannot do that. So when someone gives a rigid hukum in ten seconds for a complex issue, I am already suspicious." (P2)*

The third indicator was speaking within one's field of competence (*takhassus*, sub-theme 3c):

*"A doctor of tasawwuf answering questions about Islamic finance, or a motivational speaker issuing fatwa on marriage. The audience does not know these are different disciplines. We need to teach the public that Islam has specialisations, like medicine has specialisations." (P3)*

The podcaster explained how she manages the boundaries of her own expertise:

*"When listeners ask me about divorce rulings or faraid, I say clearly, this is beyond my takhassus, please refer to the Mahkamah Syariah or the mufti office. I only speak about what I studied and what I have experience in, which is family counselling from the Islamic perspective." (P6)*

The imam linked method to the tradition of reading texts with teachers:

*"Kitab turath cannot be understood just by translation. There are terms, there is context, there is syarah. That is why our tradition says, whoever has no teacher, his teacher is syaitan. It sounds harsh, but it is about method." (P7)*

The computer science student, approaching from a technical background, framed methodology as transparency:

*"In computing we always ask: what is your source data? I apply the same thing. If a video shows the Arabic text and the reference, I trust it more. If it is just someone talking emotionally with sad music, I scroll." (P9)*

### 5.4 Theme 4: Algorithms, popularity and the attention economy

Eight participants identified digital platform dynamics as the most significant threat to credibility. The most common concern was that popularity is mistaken for authority (sub-theme 4a):

*"The algorithm does not know who is 'alim and who is not. It only knows who gets more watch time. So the system rewards the loudest, the most emotional, the most controversial. Our young people then think the most viral ustaz is the most knowledgeable." (P3)*

The content creator offered an insider's perspective on the pressures of the algorithm:

*"I'll be honest, the videos with the highest views are not my best content. A video where I explain adab carefully gets maybe five thousand views. A video with a controversial title gets five hundred thousand. There is pressure to make the title more 'spicy'. I have to fight that every day." (P5)*

The Islamic studies student admitted to relying on popularity cues:

*"Sometimes when I see a video has two million views and lots of comments saying MasyaAllah, I automatically think it must be correct. Only later, when my lecturer corrected one of those videos in class, I realised views don't mean anything." (P8)*

Decontextualised short clips (sub-theme 4b) were a recurring concern:

*"People take one minute from my one-hour kuliah and post it with a provocative caption. Then I receive angry messages for something I never meant. The full explanation was there, but the clip removed it." (P2)*

*"Short clips cut the qayd, the conditions. A scholar might say 'this is permissible, with three conditions', and the clip ends at 'this is permissible'." (P4)*

A newer concern was AI-generated religious answers (sub-theme 4c). The computer science student was a regular user of AI chatbots:

*"I ask AI about religious things, like how to perform solat jamak when travelling, because it is fast and gives a structured answer. But I noticed it sometimes mixes mazhab views, or gives a hadith number that does not exist when I check. It sounds very confident, which is dangerous." (P9)*

*"AI is a new kind of sanad problem. With a human, at least I can ask who his teacher is. With AI, the chain is completely hidden. It is knowledge without a narrator, and in hadith science, a narration without a known narrator is rejected." (P1)*

*"Our department has started discussing guidelines for AI. Some people now screenshot chatbot answers and ask us whether it is correct. We need a position before this becomes widespread." (P4)*

## 5.5 Theme 5: Tabayyun and community-based verification

All nine participants identified verification, grounded in the Qur'anic command of *tabayyun* (al-Hujurat 49:6), as the essential safeguard. Personal verification habits (sub-theme 5a) varied according to background:

*"My rule is simple: before I share any religious content, I check three things: the source of the text, the background of the speaker, and whether recognised scholars or institutions say the same. If I cannot verify, I don't share. Tabayyun is an obligation, not an option." (P3)*

*"I usually cross-check with the official fatwa website or with two or three different ustaz. If they all agree, I'm more confident." (P8)*

*"When I'm unsure about an AI answer, I search for the original hadith on a hadith database and check the grading. If I still don't understand, I ask my friend who studies syariah." (P9)*

Referral to institutions and teachers (sub-theme 5b) was presented as a communal dimension of verification:

*"Verification should not be a burden on each individual alone. In our tradition, there is always a teacher or a community to refer to. The masjid, the surau, the mufti office must be present online and responsive, so people know where to ask." (P7)*

*"We launched a WhatsApp and portal service for public questions. The response is overwhelming, which shows people want an authoritative reference. The challenge is speed: a viral video spreads in hours, our official answer takes days." (P4)*

Finally, participants highlighted the need for digital religious literacy (sub-theme 5c):

*"We teach students how to evaluate journal articles, but we never teach them how to evaluate a TikTok ustaz. Universities and schools should include a module on digital religious literacy, using our own tradition of naqd and tabayyun." (P2)*

*"Content creators also need training. Many of us started with good intentions but no guidance. If there were a framework, a checklist from scholars, I would follow it and share it with my followers." (P5)*

*"I think every Muslim family needs simple guidelines: who to follow, how to check, when to ask. My listeners are mothers, and they are worried about what their children watch." (P6)*

## 5.6 Summary of key insights by participant

**Table 4. Core position of each participant**

| Participant | Dominant criterion                    | Key concern                                         | Proposed safeguard                          |
|-------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| P1          | Sanad and source grading              | Fabricated hadith; AI as narration without narrator | Mandatory referencing; hadith verification  |
| P2          | Manhaj and takhassus                  | Context lost in short clips                         | Digital religious literacy in curricula     |
| P3          | 'Adalah and transparency              | Algorithms rewarding controversy                    | Three-step tabayyun before sharing          |
| P4          | Institutional recognition (tauliah)   | No online accreditation; slow official responses    | Responsive official channels; AI guidelines |
| P5          | Honest self-disclosure of credentials | Pressure of engagement metrics                      | Scholar-endorsed checklist for creators     |
| P6          | Ikhlas and staying within expertise   | Commercialisation of da'wah                         | Family-level guidelines                     |
| P7          | Ijazah and learning with teachers     | Self-taught teaching of turath                      | Mosque and surau presence online            |
| P8          | Cross-checking with institutions      | Popularity heuristics among youth                   | Education on hadith and source criticism    |
| P9          | Source transparency                   | Confident but inaccurate AI answers                 | Database verification; peer consultation    |

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Perceptions of digital religious authority (RQ1)

The findings show that participants did not view digital authority as entirely new. Rather, they judged it through inherited categories of *sanad*, *ijazah* and institutional *tauliah*. This supports Zaman's

(2012) argument that traditional authority remains resilient and adaptive, and it nuances Echchaibi's (2011) thesis of delocalisation. While authority has indeed moved beyond its geographical and institutional base, participants actively attempted to re-anchor it in traceable lineages. P1's question, "who did he learn from?", is a direct contemporary echo of Ibn al-Mubarak's insistence on the *isnad*, and P7's description of *ijazah* as an accountability carrying "his teachers' names behind me" reflects al-Shatibi's (ca. 1380/2011) second sign of a trustworthy scholar, namely formation under recognised masters.

At the same time, the findings reveal the limits of re-anchoring. The absence of any online equivalent to *tauliah*, raised by P4, confirms Bunt's (2018) observation that cyber-Islamic environments bypass established gatekeeping, and it gives empirical weight to Abou El Fadl's (2014) diagnosis of an authority vacuum. Where institutions are absent or slow, audiences fill the gap with popularity cues. The content creator's practice of disclosing his limited credentials and tagging his teacher (P5) is particularly instructive. It illustrates what Campbell (2020) calls the role of digital creatives as mediators who borrow legitimacy from established authorities rather than replacing them. This suggests a hybrid model of authority in which digital creators function as transmitters (*naqil*) rather than independent sources, provided they make their chain of learning visible. Such transparency could become a practical norm for digital *da'wah*.

P2's warning that academic qualifications alone do not guarantee reliability is equally significant. It aligns with al-Shafi'i's (ca. 820/2013) linkage of authority to competence in specific disciplines rather than to general prestige, and it cautions against replacing the old gatekeeping with a purely credential-based one. Authority, in participants' view, is cumulative: lineage, discipline and character must converge.

## 6.2 Criteria for evaluating credibility (RQ2)

Participants' criteria clustered around three classical dimensions: lineage (*sanad*), character (*'adalah*) and method (*manhaj* and *dabt*). These map closely onto the hadith critics' evaluation of narrators (Brown, 2017) and onto al-Shatibi's three signs of a scholar who has realised knowledge: acting upon it, formation under masters, and following the established path. The convergence between participants' intuitive criteria and these classical tests is one of the study's most important findings. It suggests that the Islamic tradition does not need to borrow an external standard for evaluating digital sources; it already possesses one that ordinary believers recognise once it is articulated.

The emphasis on consistency between speech and lifestyle (P3, P6, P9) parallels the trustworthiness dimension in communication credibility research (Metzger et al., 2010), but it carries an additional religious meaning. Al-Ghazali's (ca. 1097/2015) portrait of the '*ulama' al-su'*, who turn knowledge into a means of fame and wealth, reads almost as a description of the commercialised preacher that P9 abandoned after every video ended with a product link. P6's question, "will this make my audience doubt my *ikhlas*?", shows that some creators internalise this classical ethic and treat sincerity as a credibility asset. The finding therefore extends secular credibility theory: in an Islamic frame, trustworthiness is not only about honesty in communication but about the inner intention (*niyyah*) and worldly detachment of the speaker.

The emphasis on *adab* in disagreement (P1, P2) echoes Kamali's (2015) account of *wasatiyyah* as an epistemic virtue and Ahmed's (2016) argument that legitimate diversity is intrinsic to Islam. Participants treated the willingness to acknowledge *khilaf* and to say *wallahu a'lam* as positive signals of credibility, while habitual accusations of *bid'ah* and *sesat* were read as markers of unreliability. This inverts a common platform logic in which certainty and polemic attract engagement. Finally, the requirement to speak within one's discipline (P3, P6) provides an Islamic articulation of the expertise dimension of credibility, grounded in the classical recognition of specialisation (*takhassus*).

### 6.3 Challenges of the digital environment (RQ3)

Participants identified algorithmic amplification as the most serious threat, confirming that the attention economy rewards emotional and controversial content over careful scholarship (Hjarvard, 2013; Slama, 2017). The testimony of P5, whose carefully reasoned videos attract a fraction of the views of provocatively titled ones, demonstrates that the problem is structural rather than individual: even creators committed to sound content face constant pressure to compromise. P8's admission that view counts and approving comments shaped her judgement supports Metzger and Flanagin's (2013) finding that users rely on endorsement and bandwagon heuristics. In Islamic terms, this represents a confusion between *shuhrah* (fame) and *'ilm*, which classical scholars repeatedly warned against.

The problem of decontextualised clips (P2, P4) represents a specific religious form of what Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) term malinformation: authentic content distorted by the removal of conditions and context. P4's observation that clips cut the *qayd*, the qualifying conditions of a ruling, is significant because Islamic legal reasoning is inherently conditional. Brown's (2011) analysis of weak hadith shows the same pattern: the classical permission to use such reports was hedged with conditions that disappear when content is reduced to a shareable fragment. Digital formats therefore do not merely spread wrong information; they strip correct information of the qualifications that made it correct.

The most novel finding concerns AI-generated religious answers. P9 described AI responses as fast, structured and confident, yet sometimes mixing *madhhab* positions or citing non-existent hadith numbers. P1's description of AI as "knowledge without a narrator" offers a powerful conceptual bridge. In *'ulum al-hadith*, a report transmitted by an unknown narrator (*majhul*) is not accepted, and a chain with a missing link (*munqati'*) is weak. By analogy, AI outputs lacking a traceable chain to authenticated sources should be treated as unverified until confirmed. This framing allows Islamic epistemology to address AI without either rejecting the technology outright or accepting its outputs uncritically. It also extends existing digital religion literature, which has scarcely addressed generative AI, and it underlines P4's call for institutional guidelines before such use becomes widespread.

### 6.4 Towards an Islamic epistemological framework (RQ4)

Synthesising the themes with classical concepts, this study proposes the **Digital Islamic Epistemic Credibility Framework (DIECF)**. The framework consists of five interdependent dimensions, each grounded in an Islamic concept and operationalised through practical indicators (Table 5).

**Table 5. The Digital Islamic Epistemic Credibility Framework (DIECF)**

| Dimension                            | Islamic foundation        | Guiding question                                                 | Practical indicators                                                                                    |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| D1. Source legitimacy                | Sanad, ijazah, tauliah    | Who taught this person, and who recognises them?                 | Named teachers; ijazah or formal training; institutional tauliah or affiliation; honest self-disclosure |
| D2. Character integrity              | 'Adalah, ikhlas           | Does the person's conduct support trust?                         | Consistency of speech and conduct; transparent sponsorship; absence of exploitation; humility           |
| D3. Methodological rigour            | Manhaj, dabt, takhassus   | Is the content built on sound method and within expertise?       | Cited Qur'an and hadith with grading; presentation of khilaf; speaking within specialisation            |
| D4. Contextual and ethical awareness | Wasatiyyah, adab, maqasid | Does the content respect context, diversity and the public good? | Full context retained; respectful tone; local fatwa awareness; avoids sectarian incitement              |
| D5. Verification practice            | Tabayyun, shura           | Has the content been checked before acceptance                   | Cross-checking with authorities; source databases; consultation with teachers; AI                       |

| Dimension | Islamic foundation | Guiding question | Practical indicators                     |
|-----------|--------------------|------------------|------------------------------------------|
|           |                    | or sharing?      | outputs verified against primary sources |

The five dimensions operate at two levels. D1 to D3 evaluate the **source and content**, mirroring the classical evaluation of narrator and text (*isnad* and *matn*), and corresponding to al-Shatibi's three signs of formation, practice and method. D4 and D5 address the **digital ecosystem and the receiver**, reflecting participants' insistence that credibility is co-produced by audiences and communities, not only by speakers. D5 in particular operationalises the Qur'anic command of *tabayyun* (al-Hujurat 49:6) as a concrete practice, while its communal component reflects the principle of consultation (*shura*) and P7's view that verification should not burden the individual alone.

The dimensions are interdependent rather than additive. A speaker with strong lineage (D1) but poor conduct (D2) fails the test, as al-Ghazali's warning about the '*ulama' al-su'* makes clear. Likewise, a well-meaning creator with sound character but no methodological grounding (D3) should be treated as a transmitter whose content requires verification against qualified sources. The framework is therefore best applied as a sequence of questions rather than a numerical score: Who taught this person? Does their conduct support trust? Is the content built on sound method and within expertise? Does it respect context and diversity? Have I verified it before accepting or sharing it? This dual structure responds directly to the gap identified in the literature. It is normative and rooted in Islamic epistemology, yet empirically derived and sensitive to platform dynamics.

## 6.5 Positioning the DIECF against existing credibility models

Table 6 compares the DIECF with two reference points: the general online credibility model in communication studies and classical hadith criticism. The comparison shows that the DIECF retains the moral and lineage criteria of the classical model, which secular models lack, while adding attention to platforms, audiences and AI, which the classical model could not anticipate.

**Table 6. Comparison of the DIECF with existing credibility models**

| Aspect               | Online credibility models (Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013) | Classical hadith criticism (Brown, 2017)             | DIECF (this study)                                      |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Unit of evaluation   | Website, message, source                                                   | Narrator and report ( <i>isnad</i> and <i>matn</i> ) | Speaker, content, platform context and receiver         |
| Source criteria      | Expertise, trustworthiness, reputation                                     | 'Adalah, dabt, continuity of chain                   | Sanad, ijazah, tauliah, 'adalah, takhassus              |
| Moral character      | Implicit or absent                                                         | Central                                              | Central, including ikhlas and commercial transparency   |
| Treatment of context | Limited                                                                    | Conditions of acceptance and 'illah                  | Explicit: retention of qayd, khilaf and local fatwa     |
| Role of audience     | Heuristic processor                                                        | Scholarly critics only                               | Active verifier through tabayyun and community referral |
| AI and algorithms    | Partly addressed                                                           | Not applicable                                       | Explicitly addressed as narration without a narrator    |

## 6.6 Tensions and critical reflections

The findings also reveal tensions that a framework must acknowledge. The first is between accessibility and gatekeeping. Digital media have widened access to Islamic knowledge for women, young people and Muslims far from traditional centres, and P6's podcast is one example of a female voice that might have struggled for a platform in older structures. A credibility framework must not

become a tool for silencing legitimate voices; it should ask for transparency of learning and method, not uniformity of background. The second tension concerns the state. P4's emphasis on *tauliah* reflects the Malaysian model of state-regulated religious authority, yet Hallaq (2013) warns that state control of religious knowledge can itself weaken the independent scholarly ethic. The DIECF therefore treats institutional recognition as one indicator within D1, not as the sole criterion of authority. The third tension lies between certainty and diversity. Users seek clear answers, but Ahmed (2016) and Kamali (2015) remind us that recognised disagreement is part of the tradition. A credible source, in the DIECF, is one that presents *khilaf* honestly rather than one that offers the most certain-sounding answer.

## 6.7 Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, the study demonstrates that classical Islamic epistemology is not obsolete in the digital age. The convergence between participants' criteria and the tests articulated by al-Shafi'i, al-Ghazali, al-Shatibi and the hadith critics shows that the tradition provides a sophisticated and recognisable foundation for evaluating new forms of authority. The study contributes to digital religion scholarship (Campbell, 2012; Cheong, 2017) by moving from description to evaluation, and it contributes to Islamic studies by translating hadith-critical principles into contemporary media literacy, responding to Abou El Fadl's (2014) call to reclaim disciplined reasoning. The concept of AI as "narration without a narrator" offers a new theoretical lens for future work on religion and artificial intelligence.

Practically, the DIECF can inform religious authorities in designing online accreditation that is transparent without being exclusionary. It can guide universities in developing digital religious literacy modules, help content creators adopt ethical standards of disclosure and referencing, and equip lay Muslims with five simple questions for judging online religious content. Because it is expressed in familiar Islamic terms, the framework is more likely to be accepted by Muslim communities than externally imposed media literacy models.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 7.1 Conclusion

This study set out to develop an Islamic epistemological framework for evaluating digital religious authority and knowledge credibility. Interviews with nine stakeholders in Malaysia revealed that, despite the disruptive effects of digital platforms, Muslims continue to judge authority through the classical lenses of lineage, character and method, while recognising new threats from algorithms, decontextualised clips and AI-generated answers. Verification through *tabayyun*, both individual and communal, emerged as the unifying safeguard across all participants. From these findings, the study proposed the Digital Islamic Epistemic Credibility Framework (DIECF), comprising source legitimacy, character integrity, methodological rigour, contextual and ethical awareness, and verification practice. The framework demonstrates that the Islamic intellectual tradition offers not only a critique of digital religious disorder but a constructive path for navigating it.

### 7.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and the proposed DIECF, several recommendations are offered to the main stakeholders in the digital religious ecosystem.

First, religious authorities such as JAKIM, the state mufti departments and the state Islamic religious councils should develop a transparent online verification system for recognised religious teachers, functioning as a digital counterpart to *tauliah*. Such a system could take the form of a publicly searchable registry or a verification badge that displays a teacher's field of specialisation, institutional

affiliation and principal teachers. To avoid the risks highlighted by Hallaq (2013), the system should recognise credible scholars from diverse traditions and should not be used merely to enforce official positions. Authorities should also establish rapid-response channels, staffed by trained officers, that can issue short, well-referenced clarifications on viral religious content within hours rather than days, since participants identified speed as the decisive weakness of current official responses.

Second, universities, schools and religious education institutions should integrate digital religious literacy into their curricula. In Malaysian public universities, this could be embedded within compulsory courses on Islamic civilisation, ethics and Islamic thought, as well as in Islamic studies programmes. The module should teach students to apply the classical tools of *'ulum al-hadith*, *tabayyun* and al-Shatibi's signs of a trustworthy scholar to TikTok, YouTube and AI-generated content. Practical exercises, such as tracing the source of a viral hadith or evaluating a preacher's credentials and method, would translate the DIECF into a usable skill. Training should also extend to teachers in schools and *tahfiz* institutions, who are often the first point of reference for young people.

Third, digital *da'wah* practitioners and content creators should adopt a voluntary code of practice based on the DIECF. At a minimum, creators should disclose their educational background and principal teachers, declare sponsorships and commercial interests clearly, cite Qur'anic verses and hadith with their grading, present recognised differences of opinion fairly, and refer questions beyond their competence to qualified scholars or institutions. Professional associations of preachers and creators could collaborate with universities to provide short certification courses on ethics, referencing and the limits of expertise, responding to P5's wish for a scholar-endorsed checklist.

Fourth, platform providers and policymakers should engage with recognised religious bodies to address the algorithmic amplification of fabricated hadith, sectarian incitement and decontextualised clips. Possible measures include labelling content that has been verified or flagged by recognised authorities, linking short clips to their full original lectures, and reducing the recommendation weight of content repeatedly identified as fabricated. These interventions must be carefully designed to protect legitimate diversity of opinion and freedom of expression, and should be developed through consultation rather than unilateral regulation.

Fifth, developers of AI tools that answer religious questions, together with the religious authorities who advise them, should ensure that AI outputs display their sources, distinguish clearly between *madhhab* positions, avoid issuing definitive rulings on personal legal matters, and direct users to recognised scholars or fatwa bodies. Religious authorities should issue formal guidelines on the use of AI for religious inquiry, treating AI-generated content, in P1's terms, as narration without a narrator that requires verification before acceptance.

Finally, lay Muslims and families should be encouraged to internalise the five DIECF questions as a habit before accepting or sharing religious content online. Mosques, *surau* and community organisations can play a central role by offering short workshops for parents and youth, and by establishing an active and responsive online presence so that the community has a trusted local reference. In this way, *tabayyun* becomes not only an individual obligation but a shared communal practice.

### 7.3 Limitations and future research

This study is limited by its small, Malaysia-based sample, and its findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. Future research could validate the DIECF through a Fuzzy Delphi study with a larger expert panel, develop and test a quantitative DIECF instrument through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, compare perceptions across Muslim societies such as Indonesia, Brunei and the Gulf, and examine in greater depth how Muslims interact with AI-generated religious content.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all those who contributed directly and indirectly to this study.

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