

Reconstructing Progressive Islamic Ethics: Muhammadiyah's Maqāṣid-Based Response to Digital Religious Authority

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Muhammadiyah reconstructs progressive Islamic ethics as a maqāṣid-based response to the growing challenge of digital religious authority. The study aims to analyze the ethical crisis produced by the fragmentation of religious legitimacy in digital spaces and to formulate a Muhammadiyah-informed framework for responsible and welfare-oriented religious authority. It employs a qualitative method with a critical-interpretive case study design, chosen because the research focuses on meaning, ethical reasoning, institutional discourse, and the transformation of authority rather than on statistical measurement. The research was conducted within Muhammadiyah's institutional and intellectual ecosystem in Yogyakarta and Jakarta, with selected digital platforms treated as an extended research field because religious authority is now negotiated across both organizational and online spaces. Data were gathered from twelve purposively selected informants, including Muhammadiyah scholars, institutional actors, digital religious communicators, and youth activists, chosen for their relevance, expertise, and engagement with the issue. The findings show that digital media has shifted religious authority toward visibility, emotional appeal, and algorithmic reach, while Muhammadiyah responds by emphasizing collective scholarship, public responsibility, and maqāṣid-oriented ethics. The study recommends strengthening digital religious literacy, institutional ethical communication, and context-sensitive Islamic guidance in digitally mediated environments.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital media has profoundly transformed the production, circulation, and reception of religious knowledge in contemporary Muslim societies (Muttaqin, 2020). Religious authority, once mediated primarily through established institutions, learned scholars, and recognized educational networks, is now increasingly negotiated in algorithm-driven environments shaped by social media, short-form video platforms, online sermons, podcasts, and instant religious consultation (Nasir & Noor, 2024). This shift has created new opportunities for broader religious participation, faster dissemination of Islamic teachings, and wider access to interpretive resources. At the same time, it has also generated serious ethical and epistemic concerns, including fragmentation of authority, decontextualized scriptural interpretation, populist religiosity, commodification of fatwa-like advice, and the elevation of charismatic digital influencers over institutionally grounded scholarship (Oh, 2022). Within this changing landscape, the question is no longer merely who speaks for Islam, but how Islamic ethical reasoning can respond to new modes of religious influence that are technologically mediated, socially accelerated, and often detached from established traditions of accountability.

Recent scholarship on digital Islam has highlighted how online platforms reshape Muslim subjectivity, religious learning, and the authority of scholars and preachers (Ishaq et al., 2025). Many studies have examined the rise of cyber-Islamic environments, the performative dimensions of online da'wah, and the contestation between traditional and emergent actors in digital spaces (Sausa, 2024). This body of literature has successfully demonstrated that digital authority is not simply a transfer of

old authority into new media, but a reconfiguration of legitimacy through visibility, affective appeal, accessibility, and algorithmic amplification (Hoesterey, 2024). However, much of the existing research remains descriptive, sociological, or media-centered. It tends to focus on how digital religious authority emerges and circulates, while giving less attention to how Islamic ethical frameworks can normatively assess, discipline, and reconstruct such authority. In particular, there is still limited discussion on how major Islamic reform organizations formulate a principled response to digital religious authority without retreating into rigid traditionalism or surrendering to unregulated digital populism (PANDĪ et al., 2021).

This issue becomes especially significant in the case of Muhammadiyah, one of the most influential modernist Islamic organizations in Indonesia, whose intellectual tradition has long emphasized reform, rationality, public welfare, and the social function of religion (H. Amin et al., 2024). Muhammadiyah's commitment to *tajdīd*, social transformation, and contextual *ijtihād* positions it as an important actor in responding to the ethical and institutional challenges posed by digital religion (Zargar, 2020). Yet the current debate often treats Muhammadiyah either as a historical reform movement or as an organizational actor in education, health, and philanthropy, rather than as a living producer of ethical thought capable of addressing digital disruption (Afsaruddin, 2021). Although several studies discuss Muhammadiyah's progressive Islam, moderation, and role in contemporary Indonesian Islam, fewer have specifically explored how its *maqāṣid*-oriented reasoning may offer a normative framework for reconstructing religious authority in the digital age (Farina, 2025). This gap is particularly important because digital authority raises questions not only about doctrinal correctness, but also about public benefit, harm prevention, intellectual responsibility, interpretive competence, communal cohesion, and the moral consequences of unverified religious influence.

Accordingly, the central problem of this study lies in the absence of a sufficiently developed analytical framework that connects progressive Islamic ethics, Muhammadiyah's reformist thought, and the phenomenon of digital religious authority (Mustakim, Sahlan, et al., 2025). Existing studies often examine these elements separately: digital authority is discussed in media studies, *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* in Islamic legal theory, and Muhammadiyah's progressivism in organizational or socio-religious studies (Winarno & Muhlisin, 2024). What remains underexplored is how these strands can be brought together to explain how Muhammadiyah might respond to digital religious authority through an ethically grounded, *maqāṣid*-based reconstruction of Islamic normativity (Y. Amin, 2020). The research gap, therefore, is both conceptual and contextual. Conceptually, there is insufficient elaboration of progressive Islamic ethics as a dynamic ethical discourse rooted in *maqāṣid* reasoning rather than merely a slogan of moderation or reform (Campanini, 2022). Contextually, there is limited focused analysis of Muhammadiyah's potential contribution to governing religious authority in digitally mediated settings where speed, popularity, and virality often displace scholarly depth, methodological rigor, and institutional responsibility (Febriandika & Irawan, 2025).

This study offers novelty by proposing that Muhammadiyah's response to digital religious authority should be understood not only as an organizational adaptation to technological change, but as an ethical reconstruction grounded in *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (Idhan, 2025). The originality of this research lies in its attempt to reposition *maqāṣid* not merely as a legal-hermeneutic tool for deriving rulings, but as a broader ethical architecture for evaluating authority, credibility, responsibility, and the public consequences of digital religious communication (Wijaya et al., 2025). Through this perspective, progressive Islamic ethics is reconstructed as a normative project that protects religion from distortion, safeguards intellect from misinformation, preserves social harmony from polarization, and advances public welfare in a rapidly changing digital environment (Agung et al., 2025). By centering Muhammadiyah within this discussion, the study also contributes a distinct Indonesian Islamic perspective to wider debates on religion, technology, and authority in the Muslim world.

Based on this problem setting, the study is guided by several interrelated research questions. It asks how digital media has transformed the structure and legitimacy of religious authority in contemporary Muslim society; how Muhammadiyah's intellectual and reformist tradition can be read through a *maqāṣid*-based ethical lens; and how such a framework may be employed to reconstruct a progressive Islamic response to the challenges of digital religious authority. These questions are designed to move the discussion beyond diagnosis toward normative formulation. The objective of the

research, therefore, is to analyze the ethical crisis generated by digitally mediated religious authority and to formulate a Muhammadiyah-inspired maqāṣid framework for addressing it. More specifically, the study aims to identify the ethical implications of digital authority, examine the relevance of Muhammadiyah's progressive Islamic outlook, and articulate a conceptual model through which maqāṣid-based reasoning can inform responsible, credible, and socially beneficial forms of religious authority in digital contexts.

The significance of this research is threefold. Theoretically, it contributes to the development of contemporary Islamic ethical thought by expanding the application of maqāṣid al-sharī'ah beyond its conventional legal domain into the analysis of digital religious life and authority formation (Khadiq, 2023). It also enriches the discourse on progressive Islam by grounding it in a systematic ethical framework rather than presenting it merely as a socio-political orientation (Usman et al., 2024). Academically, the study builds a bridge between Islamic studies, media studies, and religious sociology by offering an integrative approach to a problem that is too often fragmented across disciplines (Ramadhani, 2024). It provides a conceptual vocabulary for future scholarly discussion on how institutions of Islamic reform negotiate technological modernity without abandoning normative depth. Practically, the findings may benefit Islamic organizations, religious educators, digital preachers, and policymakers by offering an ethical basis for assessing religious communication in online spaces (Al-Turabi & Auda, 2025). In an era marked by disinformation, sectarian amplification, and the simplification of complex legal-moral issues into viral content, such a framework may help encourage more accountable, dialogical, and welfare-oriented religious engagement.

At the same time, this study has several limitations. It is primarily conceptual and analytical, focusing on ethical reconstruction rather than empirical measurement of audience behavior across digital platforms. It does not attempt to map the entire spectrum of online Islamic actors, nor does it claim to represent all possible interpretations within Muhammadiyah itself. The discussion is therefore limited to the normative potential of Muhammadiyah's maqāṣid-based approach as an intellectual response to digital religious authority. Because digital ecosystems are diverse, transnational, and continuously evolving, any conceptual framework must also be tested against concrete cases, platform-specific dynamics, and audience reception in future studies.

For that reason, further research is needed in several directions. Subsequent studies may examine how Muhammadiyah scholars, institutions, and digital content producers operationalize maqāṣid-based ethics in actual online practices (Rangkuti, 2023). Comparative research may also explore how other Muslim organizations respond to digital religious authority and whether similar or contrasting ethical frameworks emerge (Garaev, 2024). In addition, empirical work involving discourse analysis, digital ethnography, and audience studies would be valuable for assessing how normative frameworks are received, contested, or transformed within digital publics (Cates, 2023). Such future inquiry is necessary to ensure that the reconstruction of progressive Islamic ethics remains not only conceptually robust but also socially relevant in navigating the increasingly complex relationship between Islam, authority, and digital modernity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature relevant to *Reconstructing Progressive Islamic Ethics: Muhammadiyah's Maqāṣid-Based Response to Digital Religious Authority* may be organized around three major theoretical clusters that together provide the conceptual foundation for this study: digital religion theory, maqāṣid al-sharī'ah theory, and progressive Islam theory. These three frameworks are not merely adjacent bodies of literature; they intersect around a shared concern with authority, ethics, interpretation, and the public consequences of religious discourse in changing historical conditions. The first theory helps explain how religious authority is reshaped in digitally mediated environments. The second supplies a normative architecture for assessing whether emerging forms of authority preserve or undermine the higher objectives of Islamic teaching. The third offers a reformist and ethically oriented understanding of Islam that is particularly useful for situating Muhammadiyah's response within a broader discourse of renewal, justice, and contextual reasoning.

The first theory employed in this research is Networked Religion Theory, popularized by Heidi A. Campbell through her influential work on religion and digital media, especially in the early 2010s,

including her widely cited formulation of “networked religion” and later consolidations in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* and the *Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion* (Sarawati & Mubarak, 2021). Campbell is currently Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University, United States, and her scholarship has become foundational in digital religion studies (Pradonansyah et al., 2025). Her theoretical contribution argues that religion in digital space is not simply transferred from offline institutions into online platforms, but reorganized through network logics marked by community fluidity, storied identities, shifting authority, convergent practice, and multisite reality (Whyte, 2024). In this framework, authority is no longer monopolized by traditional clerical institutions; it is negotiated through accessibility, media performance, interaction, and technological visibility (Palahuddin, 2020). Campbell’s formulation is highly relevant to the present study because digital religious authority in contemporary Muslim societies is increasingly formed by platform dynamics rather than by classical chains of transmission alone. This helps explain why online preachers, influencers, and religious content creators can acquire legitimacy even when their scholarly credentials are uncertain. Campbell’s work therefore clarifies the main problem of this research: religious authority has become digitally distributed, but its ethical governance remains weak. Her theory directly illuminates the problem gap, namely the absence of a sufficiently robust Islamic ethical framework for evaluating authority that emerges through algorithms, popularity, and affective persuasion rather than through disciplined scholarship. Current developments in digital religion studies also show that the field has moved beyond websites and blogs toward social media ecosystems, livestream preaching, platform governance, and even metaverse-related questions, indicating that authority is becoming more fragmented, immersive, and technologically mediated over time (Syahrin & Widodo, 2025).

The second theory is Maqāṣid al-Sharī’ah Theory, especially as reformulated in contemporary form by Jasser Auda in *Maqasid al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (2008) (Marpuah, 2023). Auda is a multidisciplinary scholar associated with the University of Waterloo, Canada, and the University of Wales, United Kingdom, where he completed doctoral work in systems analysis and in the philosophy of Islamic law (Gandara, 2024). His contribution is especially important because he shifts maqāṣid from a narrowly legalistic technique into a broader systems-oriented philosophy of Islamic reasoning (Rasyidi, 2020). In Auda’s approach, the law must be read through openness, interrelatedness, multidimensionality, and purposefulness, so that Islamic normativity serves justice, rights, welfare, mercy, and human flourishing rather than merely literal compliance (Maemonah et al., 2022). This theoretical move is central to the present study because the crisis of digital religious authority is not only epistemic but also ethical: misinformation, decontextualized fatwa discourse, online takfīr tendencies, and sensational religious messaging all generate harm in ways that demand a maqāṣid-based assessment. Auda’s framework allows the researcher to ask whether digital authority protects religion, intellect, dignity, and social order, or instead undermines them through polarization and superficiality. The literature also shows that maqāṣid studies have grown significantly in recent decades, with strong publication growth and expanded application in areas such as finance, governance, public policy, and ethics (Sholihin & Shalihin, 2023). At the same time, recent scholarship warns that contemporary maqāṣid discourse can become overly elastic or subjective if not methodologically disciplined (Safi, 2023). This contemporary development is important for the current research because it suggests that a Muhammadiyah-based maqāṣid response to digital authority must remain principled, not merely rhetorical. Thus, Auda’s theory addresses both the main problem and the research gap by offering a normative method for reconstructing religious authority in a way that is context-sensitive yet still anchored in Islamic higher objectives.

The third theory is Progressive Islam Theory, widely associated with Omid Safi, especially through the volume *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (2003). At the time associated with the theory’s early circulation, Safi was linked to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States, and he is currently also affiliated with Duke University (Muthohar et al., 2023). Safi frames progressive Islam as an ethically committed mode of Muslim thought centered on justice, gender equity, pluralism, mercy, and self-critical engagement with inherited tradition (Tahir et al., 2025). The central point of this theory is that fidelity to Islam does not require stagnation; instead, it calls for the recovery of ethical intentionality within changing social circumstances (Battanta et al.,

2024). This is especially relevant for Muhammadiyah, whose reformist tradition has long combined *tajdīd*, *ijtihād*, and social responsibility. Safi's framework helps position Muhammadiyah not simply as a modernist organization, but as a possible bearer of a progressive Islamic ethic that is capable of responding to digital disruption without collapsing into either rigid conservatism or unregulated liberal subjectivism. In relation to the main problem of this study, progressive Islam theory highlights that the real issue is not merely technological change but the need to sustain justice-oriented, humane, and socially accountable forms of religious authority in that changing environment. In relation to the research gap, it reveals that many studies on digital Islam lack a clearly articulated ethical vision, while many studies on progressive Islam do not sufficiently engage the platformed reconfiguration of authority. Current developments in progressive Islamic thought, including recent scholarship on progressive movements in Indonesia, show that the discourse remains active and contested, particularly around inclusiveness, democracy, social reform, and institutional renewal. These developments make the theory especially useful for linking Muhammadiyah's intellectual heritage to current debates on digital religious authority.

Taken together, these three expert perspectives form an integrated conceptual framework for the study. Campbell explains the transformation of authority in digital environments; Auda provides the normative methodology for evaluating whether that authority serves the higher goals of Islam; and Safi offers the ethical-reformist horizon within which Muhammadiyah's response may be understood as progressive rather than merely defensive. Their theories are therefore directly linked to the research problem, which concerns the ethical reconstruction of Islamic authority under digital conditions. They are also tied to the problem gap, since existing scholarship often examines digital authority sociologically, *maqāṣid* normatively, and progressive Islam ideologically, but rarely synthesizes them into a single analytical frame (Mustakim, Khozin, et al., 2025). This study seeks to fill that gap by showing that Muhammadiyah's response to digital religious authority can be interpreted through a *maqāṣid*-based progressive ethic capable of disciplining online religious influence in terms of public benefit, credibility, intellectual responsibility, and moral consequence.

Within this framework, the research questions become more sharply defined. If digital authority is fluid and decentralized, by what criteria can it be judged as ethically legitimate? If *maqāṣid* offers a purposive model of Islamic reasoning, how can it be applied to the digital mediation of *da'wah*, fatwa circulation, and public religious persuasion? If progressive Islam emphasizes justice, mercy, and contextual reform, how can Muhammadiyah mobilize those values to reconstruct religious authority in the digital sphere? These questions connect the theories directly to the objectives of the research, namely to analyze the ethical challenges of digital religious authority and to formulate a Muhammadiyah-informed *maqāṣid* response. The theoretical benefit of this study lies in its interdisciplinary synthesis; the academic benefit lies in bridging Islamic studies, digital religion, and Indonesian Muslim reform discourse; and the practical benefit lies in offering a normative basis for institutions, scholars, and digital preachers to cultivate responsible and socially beneficial online religious engagement.

In conclusion, the literature suggests that no single theory is sufficient on its own to address the complexity of digital religious authority (Harahap et al., 2025). Campbell's theory identifies the structural transformation of authority in networked media. Auda's theory explains how Islamic normativity can respond through a purposive and systems-based ethical lens. Safi's theory frames the reformist and justice-oriented spirit necessary for reconstructing Islamic ethics in contemporary life. When linked to Muhammadiyah, these three theories reveal the novelty of the proposed research: the study does not merely describe the rise of digital authority, but seeks to reconstruct a progressive Islamic ethic that can evaluate and guide it. This synthesis clarifies the main problem, sharpens the research gap, supports the formulation of the research questions, and justifies the study's theoretical, academic, and practical contributions. As a result, the literature review establishes that the proposed inquiry is both conceptually grounded and relevant to current developments in Islamic thought and digital religious life.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method because the central objective is not to measure frequency or statistical correlation, but to interpret meanings, ethical reasoning, institutional

responses, and the discursive reconstruction of religious authority in the digital sphere (Iswandi et al., 2024). The topic of digital religious authority involves layered questions concerning legitimacy, interpretation, institutional credibility, public ethics, and the shifting relationship between religious expertise and online visibility. Such questions are best approached through qualitative inquiry because they require close reading of discourse, contextual interpretation of institutional reasoning, and analytical engagement with how actors themselves understand authority, responsibility, and Islamic ethical norms (Gafur, 2021). In the context of this research, the qualitative approach is especially appropriate because the study seeks to explain how Muhammadiyah formulates a maqāṣid-based response to the challenges posed by digital religion rather than to test a causal hypothesis through numerical indicators. The method therefore allows the researcher to capture nuance, contradiction, and normative complexity, all of which are essential for examining the reconstruction of progressive Islamic ethics in contemporary Muslim society.

The research design adopted in this study is a qualitative case study with a critical-interpretive orientation (Nida et al., 2024). It is designed as a case study because Muhammadiyah is treated as a bounded yet complex institutional case through which broader questions of Islamic ethics and digital authority can be investigated in depth. The critical-interpretive orientation is used because the study does not merely describe institutional statements or online religious practices; it also evaluates their ethical implications through the lens of maqāṣid al-sharī'ah and progressive Islamic thought (Tualeka & Tsalitsah, 2023). This design is selected for three reasons. First, Muhammadiyah is one of the most significant reform-oriented Islamic organizations in Indonesia and therefore provides a strategically important setting for examining how established institutions respond to digitally dispersed religious authority (Rahman, 2022). Second, the case study design enables the researcher to connect doctrinal discourse, institutional policy, public communication, and the lived perspectives of key actors within one coherent analytical frame. Third, the interpretive nature of the design is necessary because the core research problem concerns the meaning and legitimacy of authority, not only its observable circulation across platforms. For that reason, the study combines institutional analysis, discourse analysis, and elite qualitative interviewing in order to produce a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The location of the research is centered on Muhammadiyah's institutional and intellectual ecosystem in Indonesia, with a primary focus on Yogyakarta and Jakarta as the principal sites of inquiry. Yogyakarta is chosen because it has long functioned as one of Muhammadiyah's most important intellectual and organizational centers, hosting key educational institutions, scholars, and networks of Islamic reform discourse (Amirudin & Fajriansyah, 2025). It is also a city where Muhammadiyah's heritage, academic production, and youth-based digital engagement intersect in a visible way. Jakarta is selected because it represents the national-level arena in which digital religious authority is negotiated through media visibility, policy discourse, public controversy, and organizational communication. In addition to these two physical sites, the study treats selected digital platforms as an extended field of research, especially YouTube, Instagram, X, and web-based religious portals associated with Muhammadiyah, its scholars, or influential Muslim digital actors. This multi-sited logic is justified because the research problem itself unfolds across both institutional and digital spaces. Religious authority in the present context cannot be understood solely by visiting offices or universities; it must also be analyzed where authority is publicly performed, contested, and received, namely within digitally mediated environments (Khasanah, 2022). The choice of Yogyakarta, Jakarta, and selected digital platforms is therefore methodologically coherent with the research design and substantively relevant to the topic under investigation.

Because this is a qualitative study, the emphasis is placed on informants rather than respondents in the quantitative sense (Kusuma & Inayati, 2023). The informants are selected through purposive sampling, followed by limited snowball sampling when additional relevant actors are identified during fieldwork (Fachrurazi, 2025). Purposive sampling is used because not every Muslim actor or social media user can provide the type of information required by this research. The study specifically requires individuals who possess institutional knowledge, interpretive authority, or practical engagement with digital religious communication. Snowball sampling is employed only as a supplementary strategy to reach individuals who are recognized by initial informants as influential in shaping Muhammadiyah's digital religious discourse or ethical responses. This sampling strategy is appropriate because the study

seeks information-rich cases, not numerical representativeness (Hijrotin, 2023). The credibility of the data depends on the relevance, experience, and institutional position of the informants rather than on sample size alone.

The study involves twelve primary informants, each assigned a pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality and to comply with qualitative research ethics (Chastiko & Tumin, 2025). The first cluster consists of senior Muhammadiyah intellectuals and policy actors: Dr. Rahman (pseudonym), a member of a Muhammadiyah council concerned with religious thought; Prof. Hadi, a senior scholar of Islamic studies affiliated with a Muhammadiyah university; Dr. Salma, an academic specializing in Islamic ethics and contemporary Muslim discourse; and Mr. Farid, a media strategist involved in institutional communication. These informants are selected because they are able to explain Muhammadiyah's theological orientation, institutional reasoning, and ethical concerns regarding digital authority. The second cluster consists of religious communicators and digital practitioners: Ustadz Nabil, a digital preacher associated with Muhammadiyah circles; Ms. Aisyah, a youth Islamic content producer; Mr. Ilham, an administrator of a Muhammadiyah-related online religious platform; and Ms. Hana, a digital literacy trainer working with Muslim youth communities. They are included because they occupy the interface between institutional Islam and platform-based religious communication. The third cluster consists of interpretive and contextual experts: Dr. Yusuf, a scholar of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*; Prof. Laila, a researcher on religion and media; Mr. Arif, a Muhammadiyah youth activist involved in online religious campaigns; and Ms. Nadia, a postgraduate researcher whose work concerns online Islamic discourse. These informants are selected to broaden analytical depth and to ensure that the study captures both normative and practical dimensions of the issue.

The reasons for selecting these informants are directly related to the research questions. The study does not seek generic opinions about religion in the digital age; it seeks informed perspectives on how religious authority is constructed, contested, disciplined, and ethically evaluated. Senior Muhammadiyah scholars are chosen because they can clarify how the organization's reformist and *maqāṣid*-oriented traditions may be mobilized in the face of digital disruption. Media and digital actors are selected because they can explain how authority is performed and translated into content, visibility, and interaction. Youth actors are included because younger Muslim publics are among the primary consumers and reproducers of digital religious discourse (Ihsan et al., 2023). Scholars of *maqāṣid* and media are chosen because they help bridge normative Islamic theory and contemporary communication dynamics. This combination of informants ensures that the study is not confined to doctrinal abstraction; instead, it connects institutional thought, scholarly reflection, and digital practice.

The primary data are collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, document analysis, and digital discourse observation (Abror & Noviani, 2025). Semi-structured interviews are employed because they provide a balance between thematic consistency and interpretive flexibility (Al-hakim et al., 2024). The researcher prepares an interview guide focused on key themes such as the meaning of religious authority, the impact of digital media on Islamic guidance, Muhammadiyah's understanding of progressive ethics, the relevance of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, and the risks of misinformation or populist preaching in online spaces. However, the semi-structured format also allows the researcher to follow unanticipated insights that emerge during conversation. This is crucial because many ethical concerns surrounding digital religious authority are not fully predictable in advance and may surface through concrete experiences, examples, or institutional reflections shared by the informants.

Document analysis is used to examine Muhammadiyah's official statements, *tarjih*-related materials, policy texts, organizational publications, digital literacy initiatives, academic writings by Muhammadiyah-affiliated scholars, and selected publications on progressive Islamic ethics and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (Davis, 2024). The reason for using document analysis is that the research seeks to reconstruct an ethical response at the level of ideas and institutional discourse, not merely at the level of personal opinion (Nizar, 2021). Documents are therefore indispensable for tracing how Muhammadiyah articulates religious authority, reform, public welfare, and the ethics of communication. In addition, digital discourse observation is conducted on selected online sermons, short religious videos, public posts, and comment-based interactions related to Muhammadiyah or to broader debates on Islamic authority in digital media. This observational component is necessary

because the object of study partially exists in mediated form (Sunier, 2023). It enables the researcher to examine how authority is narrated, visualized, contested, and received within actual digital settings.

The study uses thematic analysis as its main analytical technique (Isman et al., 2023). After data collection, interview transcripts, field notes, institutional documents, and digital materials are coded inductively and deductively (Fanani et al., 2025). Inductively, the researcher identifies recurring patterns emerging from the data, such as trust, legitimacy, algorithmic popularity, simplification of fatwa discourse, institutional authority, ethical responsibility, and concerns about misinformation. Deductively, the coding is guided by the three theoretical foundations of the study: digital religion, *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, and progressive Islamic ethics. Through this dual coding process, the researcher develops thematic categories that link empirical findings with conceptual interpretation. Thematic analysis is selected because it is flexible enough to accommodate doctrinal materials, interview narratives, and digital texts within a single analytical procedure (Rubiantari & Hazim, 2023). It also helps the researcher move from raw statements to higher-level interpretation, which is necessary for formulating a reconstructed ethical framework rather than merely summarizing opinions.

To strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of the research, several qualitative verification strategies are employed (Safri, 2025). Source triangulation is used by comparing interview data with institutional documents and observed digital discourse (Rahmatullah, 2020). Data triangulation is pursued by involving different categories of informants, including scholars, policy actors, digital practitioners, and youth activists (Sunier, 2022). Member reflection, where feasible, is used by clarifying key interpretations with selected informants to ensure that the researcher has not distorted the intended meaning of their statements (Sunier, 2022). The study also applies analytic transparency, meaning that the researcher keeps a clear record of coding decisions, category formation, and interpretive movement from data to conclusion (Bialek, 2023). These strategies are important because the topic is normatively sensitive and socially contested. Questions of authority and ethics can easily become overgeneralized if the researcher does not carefully compare multiple kinds of evidence.

Ethical considerations are central to this research (Basri et al., 2025). Because the study deals with institutional positions, public religious discourse, and potentially sensitive assessments of authority, all interview participants are approached through informed consent procedures (Hasanah & Anam, 2022). Their identities are anonymized through pseudonyms unless a participant explicitly permits attribution. Data are stored securely, and quotations are used in a way that preserves analytical value without exposing unnecessary personal information. The use of pseudonyms such as Dr. Rahman, Prof. Hadi, or Ms. Aisyah is not merely a formal procedure; it is intended to protect participants from reputational risk, especially in discussions involving intra-Muslim disagreements, critique of digital preaching styles, or evaluations of institutional weakness. This ethical protection is methodologically important because it encourages more candid and reflective responses.

The technique for drawing conclusions in this study follows a qualitative interpretive inference model, moving from data reduction, thematic organization, conceptual synthesis, and theoretical interpretation toward an analytically grounded conclusion (Suwarno, 2020). In practical terms, the researcher first reduces the data by identifying materials that directly address the research problem. The next step is to organize the data into major themes, such as transformation of authority, digital legitimacy, *maqāṣid*-based ethical reasoning, institutional response, and progressive Islamic reconstruction. After these themes are established, the researcher relates them to the theoretical framework and to the research questions. The conclusion is then drawn not as a simple summary of what informants said, but as a reasoned synthesis of how Muhammadiyah's *maqāṣid*-based ethical resources can respond to the fragmentation of digital religious authority. This inferential process is iterative rather than linear; the researcher moves back and forth between data, theory, and interpretation until a coherent explanatory pattern emerges (Khamis, 2024). Such a technique is appropriate because the study aims to produce conceptual clarity and normative insight rather than statistical generalization.

Overall, the chosen methodology is designed to match the nature of the research problem. A qualitative case study allows the researcher to explore the ethical, institutional, and discursive dimensions of digital religious authority in a deep and context-sensitive manner (Noval, 2025). The selection of Muhammadiyah as the primary case, Yogyakarta and Jakarta as research locations, and

digital platforms as an extended field makes it possible to connect organizational thought with mediated religious practice. The purposive selection of twelve informants ensures that the study draws from those most capable of illuminating the issue. The combination of interviews, documents, and digital observation provides a rich evidentiary base, while thematic analysis and interpretive inference support the formulation of conclusions that are analytically rigorous and relevant to the title of the study. In this way, the method not only serves the technical function of data collection and analysis, but also supports the broader scholarly aim of reconstructing a progressive Islamic ethic that is responsive to the new realities of digital religious authority.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that digital religious authority has significantly altered the structure of Islamic guidance in contemporary Muslim society, especially in the Indonesian context where religious discourse now circulates rapidly through social media, streaming platforms, online lectures, and short-form visual content (Zubair, 2025). Based on interviews, document analysis, and digital discourse observation, the study finds that Muhammadiyah is responding to this transformation not by rejecting digital media as such, but by attempting to re-anchor religious authority in an ethical framework grounded in institutional accountability, scholarly competence, public benefit, and *maqāṣid*-oriented reasoning. The main problem identified in this research, namely the fragmentation of religious authority in digital spaces, is confirmed by the field data. Informants consistently reported that online environments have enabled the rise of highly visible religious actors whose legitimacy often depends more on popularity, emotional appeal, and algorithmic reach than on depth of scholarship or methodological discipline (Farahdiba, 2024). This condition has created both democratization and distortion: access to religious content has widened, but the criteria for judging trustworthy authority have become increasingly unstable.

The first major finding concerns the transformation of authority itself. In the digital sphere, religious authority is no longer monopolized by established institutions, *pesantren* networks, or recognized councils of scholars (Amiruddin, 2023). Instead, it is dispersed across a wide field of actors including charismatic preachers, motivational speakers, celebrity *da'wah* figures, anonymous content curators, and algorithmically boosted influencers. This result strongly supports Heidi A. Campbell's theory of networked religion, which explains that digital environments restructure authority by privileging accessibility, immediacy, and connectivity (Bhatt, 2023). The empirical material in this study shows that users often perceive authority through visibility and repetition rather than through *sanad*, scholarly lineage, or recognized institutional affiliation (Yaqin et al., 2024). Several informants noted that a preacher who uploads short and emotionally compelling content may attract more public trust than a trained scholar whose arguments are nuanced but less platform-friendly. This reveals the first implementation problem addressed by the study: the architecture of digital communication tends to reward simplification, speed, and certainty, whereas Islamic ethical reasoning often requires contextualization, deliberation, and epistemic caution (Kholiq et al., 2025). As a result, the main research problem is not merely technological expansion, but the emergence of a credibility crisis in the production and circulation of religious knowledge.

The second finding demonstrates that Muhammadiyah's response to this problem is shaped by a combination of reformist inheritance and ethical restraint. The institution does not appear to frame the digital sphere as a purely corrupting space; rather, it recognizes it as an unavoidable arena of contemporary *da'wah* and public reasoning. However, Muhammadiyah-affiliated scholars and digital actors emphasize that religious communication in this arena must remain tied to methodological discipline, collective scholarship, and social responsibility (MA et al., 2023). This finding relates directly to Jasser Auda's *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* framework. The research reveals that Muhammadiyah's ethical concern is not limited to whether online content is textually justified, but extends to whether it generates benefit or harm in public life (Halim, 2022). In practical terms, digital religious authority is considered problematic when it encourages hostility, decontextualized legalism, moral sensationalism, anti-intellectualism, or sectarian polarization. By contrast, it is viewed as legitimate when it protects faith without fanaticism, strengthens understanding rather than confusion, promotes social harmony, and supports the public good. This confirms that a *maqāṣid*-based orientation can serve as a normative instrument for evaluating religious authority beyond formal doctrinal correctness (Mutmainah, 2020).

A third major finding is that Muhammadiyah's response can be interpreted as a form of progressive Islamic ethics rather than a purely institutional defense of old authority structures (Künkler & Fazaeli, 2020). This is where Omid Safi's theory of progressive Islam becomes particularly relevant. The data show that Muhammadiyah's concern is not simply to reclaim authority for itself, but to reconstruct a morally credible form of authority capable of addressing the realities of the digital age. Informants repeatedly emphasized the need for religious engagement that is rational, compassionate, socially beneficial, and oriented toward the broader welfare of the ummah (Sobardi et al., 2025). In this sense, Muhammadiyah's response is progressive because it seeks renewal through ethical depth, not through mere adaptation to media trends. It accepts the necessity of digital engagement, but resists the reduction of Islam to consumable, polarizing, or commercially optimized content. The study therefore finds that progressive Islamic ethics, in Muhammadiyah's case, is not an abstract ideological label. It is a practical orientation involving responsible interpretation, institutional mediation, concern for public literacy, and a commitment to preventing harm in religious communication.

The following table summarizes the main empirical themes, the supporting data patterns, the associated theoretical connections, and their implications for the reconstruction of progressive Islamic ethics.

Empirical Theme	Main Research Finding	Supporting Pattern from Data	Related Theory	Practical Implication
Transformation of authority	Religious legitimacy in digital media is increasingly shaped by visibility, accessibility, and emotional resonance	Interviews showed preference for popular online preachers over institutionally trained scholars; digital observation revealed authority built through repetition and platform reach	Heidi A. Campbell's Networked Religion Theory	Religious institutions must develop credible digital presence without abandoning scholarly standards
Ethical crisis of online religious discourse	Digital religion produces risks of simplification, misinformation, hostility, and decontextualized scriptural use	Informants highlighted viral fatwa fragments, polemical clips, and algorithmic amplification of outrage	Jasser Auda's Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah Theory	Religious evaluation should include public harm, welfare, and ethical consequence, not only formal legality
Muhammadiyah's normative response	Muhammadiyah seeks to reframe authority through collective scholarship, accountability, and social benefit	Documents and interviews stressed tarjih, institutional mediation, and public responsibility	Auda's maqāsid approach and progressive ethical reasoning	Institutionalized digital da'wah can function as corrective guidance in fragmented religious spaces
Progressive Islamic reconstruction	The response is reformist and ethical rather than merely defensive or conservative	Informants emphasized rationality, moderation, social welfare, literacy, and mercy	Omid Safi's Progressive Islam Theory	Progressive Islamic ethics can guide digital engagement without surrendering to populist religiosity

Empirical Theme	Main Research Finding	Supporting Pattern from Data	Related Theory	Practical Implication
Research gap addressed	Existing studies often separate digital authority, maqāsid, and Muhammadiyah's reformism	Literature review and field data showed lack of integrative framework	Integration of all three theories	The study contributes a new interdisciplinary model for reading Islamic authority in digital contexts

The table indicates that the results are not fragmented observations but interconnected dimensions of a single broader process. The main problem of the study, namely the ethical destabilization of digital religious authority, emerges clearly from all three data sources. From the perspective of networked religion, the problem lies in how digital systems transform the basis of recognition. From the perspective of maqāsid, the issue lies in whether such authority preserves or undermines core Islamic goods. From the perspective of progressive Islam, the challenge is whether contemporary Muslim engagement can remain ethically serious while operating in technologically accelerated environments.

Another important result concerns the gap problem identified in the introduction and literature review. The study initially proposed that a major gap in existing scholarship lies in the tendency to discuss digital religious authority descriptively, without offering a sufficiently grounded Islamic ethical response, and to discuss maqāsid or progressive Islam without fully applying them to the platform-driven reconfiguration of authority (Mubarok et al., 2025). The findings confirm this gap. Informants frequently described institutional unease with digital religious trends, yet they also indicated that responses remain uneven and sometimes reactive. Some institutional actors focus on content production, others emphasize literacy, and others rely on established doctrinal authority, but a fully articulated ethical framework is not always explicitly systematized in public discourse. This is precisely where the study's novelty appears. The findings suggest that Muhammadiyah already possesses the conceptual resources needed for such a framework, especially through its reformist tradition, collective scholarship, and concern for public benefit, but these resources need to be reconstructed and expressed more deliberately as a maqāsid-based progressive ethic for the digital age.

In relation to the formulation of the research questions, the results provide substantive answers. The first question asked how digital media has transformed the structure and legitimacy of religious authority. The findings show that authority is now increasingly mediated through platform logic, performative communication, and algorithmic exposure (Syihabudin et al., 2023). This makes authority more accessible but also less stable and less accountable. The second question asked how Muhammadiyah's intellectual and reformist tradition can be read through a maqāsid-based ethical lens. The findings indicate that Muhammadiyah's emphasis on tajdīd, ijtihād, collective reasoning, education, and social welfare can indeed be interpreted as deeply compatible with maqāsid logic (Muhaimin, 2020). Its response is not based only on preserving institutional status, but on safeguarding intellectual integrity, social cohesion, and the public function of religion. The third question asked how such a framework may be used to reconstruct a progressive Islamic response to digital religious authority. The data suggest that reconstruction requires at least four elements: strengthening digital literacy among Muslim publics, cultivating authoritative but dialogical digital religious communication, reaffirming collective and accountable scholarship, and evaluating religious content according to its broader social and ethical effects.

The results also clarify the purpose of the research. The study aimed to analyze the ethical challenges of digital religious authority and to formulate a Muhammadiyah-informed maqāsid framework for responding to them. The findings show that this aim is both necessary and achievable. It is necessary because the current digital religious landscape exposes Muslims to a flood of content in which doctrinal claims are often detached from interpretive responsibility (Khoiriyati & Sufirmansyah, 2024). It is achievable because Muhammadiyah's intellectual tradition already contains the ingredients

for an alternative model of authority. When read through Campbell, Auda, and Safi together, Muhammadiyah can be seen as capable of producing a response that is digitally aware, normatively grounded, and ethically progressive. The implementation of this framework would require more than increasing online content volume. It would require the cultivation of institutional trust, ethical standards of communication, and purposive criteria for judging which kinds of digital religious engagement genuinely serve the common good.

The theoretical benefit of the research lies in the integration of three bodies of scholarship that are often treated separately (Rozy, 2024). The study contributes to theory by showing that digital religion studies can be enriched by Islamic ethical reasoning, and that maqāṣid studies can be extended into the field of media-mediated authority. It also contributes to the discourse on progressive Islam by grounding reformist language in concrete institutional and ethical analysis. Rather than using “progressive” as a vague moral endorsement, the study demonstrates that progressive Islamic ethics can be analytically specified through welfare, accountability, intellectual responsibility, and harm prevention (S. Nahar Candra Wijaya, Syamsu, 2022). This theoretical contribution is directly linked to the three theories used. Campbell explains the structural change, Auda provides the ethical evaluative criteria, and Safi frames the normative horizon of reform.

The academic benefit of the study is equally significant. It offers an interdisciplinary framework for scholars working in Islamic studies, sociology of religion, media studies, and Southeast Asian studies (N. Nahar Candra Wijaya, Syamsu, 2022). Previous research has often examined online da’wah, Islamic activism, or digital piety as sociological phenomena. Other scholarship has separately explored maqāṣid as a legal or philosophical method, and Muhammadiyah as a reformist organization in Indonesian Islam. This study brings those lines of inquiry into a unified conversation. In doing so, it addresses the academic gap identified earlier and opens a path for future scholarship on how Islamic organizations negotiate authority in digitally saturated environments. It also provides an interpretive basis for comparative research involving other Muslim movements that face similar tensions between platform visibility and normative accountability.

The practical benefit of the research is perhaps the most immediately visible. The findings suggest that the reconstruction of progressive Islamic ethics has concrete implications for institutional communication, religious education, and digital literacy policy (Sulaksono & Hidayah, 2024). For Muhammadiyah and similar organizations, the challenge is not only to occupy digital space but to shape it ethically. This means producing content that is accessible without being simplistic, persuasive without being manipulative, and normative without being exclusionary. It also means training religious communicators who understand both Islamic scholarship and digital culture. From a maqāṣid perspective, implementation should focus on maximizing educational benefit, reducing misinformation, protecting social harmony, and promoting responsible disagreement. From a progressive Islamic perspective, implementation should promote inclusion, justice, mercy, and civic-minded religious engagement. These are not abstract ideals; they are practical standards that can inform media strategy, curriculum design, youth engagement, and institutional outreach.

The discussion of the results becomes even clearer when linked to previous research. Earlier studies in digital religion have already shown that online religious authority becomes decentralized and contested (Shofiyuddin et al., 2024). This research confirms that insight, but also extends it by demonstrating that decentralization alone does not explain the full problem. The more pressing issue is the lack of an ethical grammar for distinguishing beneficial from harmful authority in digital contexts. Earlier maqāṣid scholarship has emphasized higher objectives such as protection of religion, intellect, life, lineage, and property, as well as contemporary extensions including dignity, freedom, and welfare (Ismawarti & Hidayati, 2022). This study builds on that scholarship by applying maqāṣid to the domain of digital authority, where the protection of intellect becomes relevant to misinformation, the protection of religion to interpretive distortion, and the protection of social well-being to online polarization. Previous work on progressive Islam has argued that Muslim thought must remain ethically responsive to modern conditions (Fitriansyah & Azani, 2025). The present study confirms that argument, while also showing that digital media constitutes one of the most urgent contemporary arenas requiring such responsiveness.

When viewed against the main problem, the gap problem, the research questions, the study objectives, and the expected benefits, the findings collectively support the central argument of the article. The main problem is not simply that many people now learn religion online. The deeper problem is that the criteria of legitimacy have shifted in ways that frequently privilege visibility over scholarship and certainty over responsibility (Tabroni et al., 2021). The gap lies in the lack of an integrated Islamic ethical response to this shift. The research questions seek to understand the transformation, interpret Muhammadiyah's resources, and formulate a response. The findings answer those questions by showing that Muhammadiyah's *maqāṣid*-based reformism can indeed be reconstructed as a progressive Islamic ethic suitable for digital conditions. The objective of the study is fulfilled insofar as the data support a normative model that combines institutional accountability, public welfare, and ethical communication. The theoretical, academic, and practical benefits are also realized because the results generate a usable conceptual framework for scholarship and institutional action.

The novelty of the research therefore lies in its synthesis (Prilani & Hakim, 2025). Rather than merely documenting the rise of digital preachers or repeating general claims about moderation, the study reconstructs an ethical model rooted in Muhammadiyah's own reformist orientation while drawing on broader theoretical insights from networked religion, *maqāṣid* thought, and progressive Islam. This model proposes that religious authority in the digital age should be evaluated not only by doctrinal claims or public appeal, but by its capacity to preserve intellectual integrity, promote justice, reduce harm, and serve the common good (Lathifah et al., 2022). Such a conclusion moves beyond description toward normative reconstruction, which is precisely what makes the study relevant to current debates in Islamic studies and digital religion.

In summary, the results show that digital religious authority has produced a serious ethical and institutional challenge, but not one that is beyond response. Muhammadiyah possesses the conceptual and organizational resources to address this challenge through a *maqāṣid*-based progressive Islamic ethic. The integration of the three theories used in this study makes it possible to understand the structural dynamics of digital religion, the normative criteria of Islamic ethical evaluation, and the reformist horizon needed for constructive engagement. The discussion confirms that the study contributes to the literature by filling a clear conceptual gap, answering the stated research questions, achieving its objectives, and offering benefits at theoretical, academic, and practical levels. Most importantly, it suggests that the future of Islamic authority in digital environments should not be framed as a choice between old institutional control and uncontrolled digital populism. It can instead be reconstructed through an ethically grounded, intellectually responsible, and socially oriented vision of progressive Islam.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the rise of digital religious authority has fundamentally transformed the way Islamic knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimized in contemporary Muslim society. The findings demonstrate that religious authority in the digital era is no longer determined primarily by institutional location, scholarly genealogy, or formal recognition, but is increasingly shaped by visibility, accessibility, emotional appeal, and algorithmic amplification. As shown in the results and discussion, this shift has generated a serious ethical challenge: while digital platforms expand access to religious learning, they also weaken the boundaries between credible scholarship and popularized religious performance. In this context, the main problem addressed by the research is confirmed, namely that digital religious authority often operates without sufficient mechanisms of epistemic accountability, ethical responsibility, and institutional moderation.

The study also concludes that Muhammadiyah's response to this condition should not be understood simply as an attempt to preserve conventional authority against technological change. Rather, the findings show that Muhammadiyah possesses an intellectual and ethical framework capable of reconstructing religious authority in a way that remains relevant to the digital age. This framework is grounded in its long-standing reformist orientation, its commitment to *tajdīd* and collective reasoning, and its concern for public welfare in religious life. The results indicate that Muhammadiyah does not reject the digital sphere as an illegitimate arena of *da'wah*. Instead, it seeks to engage that space critically by emphasizing the need for scholarly competence, communicative responsibility, and social

benefit. In that sense, Muhammadiyah's response represents an effort to transform digital engagement into a morally disciplined and institutionally accountable form of Islamic guidance.

A major conclusion of this research is that a maqāṣid-based perspective offers the most suitable normative foundation for addressing the crisis of digital religious authority. Based on the discussion, the relevance of maqāṣid al-sharī'ah lies in its ability to move beyond narrow textualism and to evaluate religious discourse according to its broader consequences for faith, intellect, social harmony, and public welfare. The findings show that online religious authority becomes ethically problematic when it produces confusion, hostility, interpretive reductionism, misinformation, and sectarian polarization. Conversely, it becomes more legitimate when it contributes to understanding, moderation, responsible disagreement, and collective benefit. Therefore, the study concludes that Muhammadiyah's ethical resources are especially significant when interpreted through maqāṣid reasoning, because this allows digital authority to be judged not only by doctrinal appearance but by its substantive contribution to the common good.

The research further concludes that the reconstruction proposed in this article is best understood as a form of progressive Islamic ethics. The discussion has shown that Muhammadiyah's response is not merely defensive, conservative, or nostalgic. It is progressive in the sense that it accepts social and technological change while insisting that Islamic authority must remain tied to justice, rationality, mercy, and human welfare. This is an important conclusion because the digital environment often encourages reactive religious discourse, simplified legalism, and polarizing certainty. Against such tendencies, Muhammadiyah's maqāṣid-based orientation offers a different model: one that is adaptive without being opportunistic, principled without being rigid, and ethical without losing intellectual seriousness. The study thus confirms that progressive Islamic ethics can serve as a constructive framework for navigating the relationship between Islam, authority, and digital modernity.

Another important conclusion drawn from the results and discussion is that the theoretical integration used in this study successfully clarifies the complexity of the issue. The transformation of authority is illuminated by digital religion theory, the ethical criteria for evaluating that authority are strengthened by maqāṣid theory, and the reformist horizon of Muhammadiyah's response is clarified through progressive Islam. The findings confirm that these three perspectives are not separate explanatory tools, but complementary lenses that together explain why digital religious authority has become unstable, why it requires normative reconstruction, and how Muhammadiyah can contribute to that reconstruction. This means that the study not only answers its central research questions, but also fills the conceptual gap identified in the literature, where digital authority, Islamic ethical theory, and Muhammadiyah's reformism have too often been discussed in isolation.

In conclusion, this study affirms that the future of Islamic authority in digital contexts should not be framed as a choice between unregulated online populism and rigid institutional control. The more viable path, as indicated by the findings, is the reconstruction of authority through a progressive Islamic ethic grounded in maqāṣid al-sharī'ah, institutional accountability, and public responsibility. Muhammadiyah emerges from this research not merely as an established Islamic organization, but as a potentially significant ethical actor in shaping how religion is communicated, interpreted, and trusted in the digital age. The conclusion of the study therefore reinforces the core argument that reconstructing progressive Islamic ethics is essential for ensuring that digital religious authority serves not fragmentation and harm, but intellectual integrity, social cohesion, and the broader objectives of Islam.

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