

## FROM SANAD TO ALGORITHM: AUTHORITY, RATIONALITY, AND PARTICIPATORY INTERPRETATION OF UŞŪL AL-DĪN IN CYBERSPACE

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**Abstract:** *The proliferation of digital media has fundamentally transformed the production, circulation, and legitimation of religious knowledge, including the discipline of uşūl al-dīn as the foundation of Islamic theology. Traditional structures of authority rooted in scholarly chains of transmission (sanad) and institutional recognition are increasingly mediated by algorithmic visibility, engagement metrics, and participatory interaction within networked digital environments. This study examines how these transformations reshape both the authority and rationality of Islamic theological discourse in cyberspace. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in digital discourse analysis, data were collected through non-participant observation of theological content and interactions on social media platforms, and analyzed using thematic and critical discourse frameworks. The findings reveal a significant epistemic shift from sanad-based legitimacy toward forms of performative and algorithmic authority, where visibility, emotional resonance, and communicative accessibility play central roles. The rationality of kalām, traditionally characterized by systematic and deductive argumentation, has been rearticulated into concise, modular, and visually mediated forms adapted to digital communication structures. Furthermore, theological interpretation emerges as a participatory and dialogical process involving both content creators and audiences, resulting in fluid authority and the distributed production of meaning. Based on these findings, this study proposes the concept of Participatory-Digital Hermeneutics of Uşūl al-Dīn as a conceptual framework for understanding contemporary theological interpretation. This model highlights four key features: collaborative interpretation, fluid authority, narrative-performative rationality, and networked meaning production. While the normative foundations of 'aqidah remain intact, their articulation and public negotiation are increasingly shaped by digitally mediated interaction.*

**Keywords:** *Digital Hermeneutics; Uşūl al-Dīn; Islamic Theology; Religious Authority; Digital Rationality.*

**Abstrak:** *Proliferasi media digital telah secara fundamental mengubah produksi, sirkulasi, dan legitimasi pengetahuan agama, termasuk disiplin uşul al-din sebagai fondasi teologi Islam. Struktur otoritas tradisional yang berakar pada rantai transmisi ilmiah (sanad) dan pengakuan kelembagaan semakin dimediasi oleh visibilitas algoritmik, metrik keterlibatan, dan interaksi partisipatif dalam lingkungan digital jaringan. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana transformasi ini membentuk kembali otoritas dan rasionalitas wacana teologis Islam di dunia maya. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang didasarkan pada analisis wacana digital, data dikumpulkan melalui pengamatan non-partisipan terhadap konten teologis dan interaksi di platform media sosial, dan dianalisis menggunakan kerangka wacana tematik dan kritis. Temuan ini mengungkapkan pergeseran epistemik yang signifikan dari legitimasi berbasis sanad menuju bentuk otoritas performatif dan algoritmik, di mana visibilitas, resonansi emosional, dan aksesibilitas komunikatif memainkan peran sentral. Rasionalitas kalām, yang secara tradisional ditandai dengan argumentasi sistematis dan deduktif, telah diartikulasikan ulang menjadi bentuk ringkas, modular, dan dimediasi secara visual yang disesuaikan dengan struktur komunikasi digital. Selanjutnya, interpretasi teologis muncul sebagai proses partisipatif dan dialogis yang melibatkan pembuat konten dan audiens, menghasilkan otoritas yang cair dan produksi makna yang terdistribusi. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, penelitian ini mengusulkan konsep Hermeneutika Partisipatif-Digital Uşul al-Din sebagai kerangka konseptual untuk memahami interpretasi teologis kontemporer. Model ini menyoroti empat fitur utama: interpretasi kolaboratif, otoritas cair, rasionalitas naratif-performatif, dan produksi makna jaringan. Sementara fondasi normatif aqīdah tetap utuh, artikulasi dan negosiasi publik mereka semakin dibentuk oleh interaksi yang dimediasi secara digital.*

**Kata kunci:** *Hermeneutika Digital; Uşul al-Din; Teologi Islam; Otoritas Agama; Rasionalitas Digital.*

## **Introduction**

The phenomenon of digitalization has profoundly transformed the way religion, particularly Islam, is practiced in contemporary society. Whereas theological knowledge in the classical period was transmitted through *halaqah*, *majelis taklim*, and formal religious institutions, over the past two decades this process has increasingly shifted toward cyberspace characterized by openness, decentralization, and algorithmic mediation.

According to Rachman, digital religious interaction has expanded access to sermons, Qur'anic exegesis, and discussions on *'aqīdah*, while simultaneously reshaping the production, distribution, and legitimation of theological discourse.<sup>1</sup> Studies on digital religion further demonstrate that social media has become a participatory space for the construction of religious meaning, where audiences act not only as recipients but also as co-producers of interpretation. In this context, the interpretation of Islamic teachings has shifted from a vertical model of transmission toward

a dialogical and networked pattern.

Abdulloh Hanif et al. argue that digital space creates a new discursive arena in which theological narratives compete, are negotiated, and are openly contested. Consequently, the epistemological structure of *uṣūl al-dīn* a discipline traditionally grounded in systematic rational argumentation and doctrinal stability faces the challenge of technological mediation, which reshapes how texts are understood, articulated, and validated.<sup>2</sup> This transformation is evident in digital da'wah practices, religious podcasts, and online question-and-answer sessions that illustrate a shift in authority from institutional settings to algorithmically mediated spaces.

Various academic perspectives further emphasize that, despite the rapid expansion of Islamic religious content online, traditional religious authority has experienced significant disruption in the cyber era. Contemporary studies indicate a shift in legitimacy from a model based on scholarly chains of transmission (*sanad*) toward one shaped by digital performativity and content popularity, particularly through influencers and high-visibility accounts.<sup>3</sup> This condition reveals a gap between the ideal form of *uṣūl al-dīn* as a systematic and methodologically grounded discipline rooted in scholarly transmission and the dynamic practices of theological interpretation emerging within digital environments.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in hermeneutics as both a science and methodology for interpreting religious texts, which in classical Islamic scholarship emphasizes the relationship between text, context, and scholarly interpretation.<sup>4</sup> However, in digital environments, media characteristics such as hypertextuality, interactivity, and multimodality require a reconfiguration of hermeneutics capable of explaining interpretive practices that are no longer exclusively centered on scholarly authority.<sup>5</sup> This perspective aligns with digital religion studies, which emphasize the need for new approaches to understanding technologically mediated religious practices.<sup>6</sup> A review of the literature shows growing academic interest in digital Islam; nevertheless, studies integrating *uṣūl al-dīn* with digital hermeneutics remain limited. Zaid et al., for example, examine the role of influencers in redefining religious authority but do not formulate a normative theological framework connecting these transformations to *uṣūl al-dīn*.<sup>7</sup> Other studies map trends in digital Islam research but provide limited discussion of their epistemic implications for Islamic theological theory.<sup>8</sup>

The novelty of this study lies in the formulation of the concept of Digital Hermeneutics of *Ushūl al-Dīn* as a framework for understanding the relationship between the traditional transmission of Islamic theology

and contemporary digital interpretive practices. Unlike previous studies that mainly describe digital Islam as a sociocultural phenomenon, this research integrates the epistemology of *uṣūl al-dīn* with the dynamics of digital mediation in online religious practices. This approach contributes to contemporary Islamic hermeneutics by addressing the ontological and epistemological dimensions of theology within digitally mediated environments.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze patterns of Islamic theological interpretation in digital spaces that reconstruct the authority and rationality of *uṣūl al-dīn*, and to formulate a comprehensive model of digital hermeneutics. This objective is intended to deepen understanding of how Muslim communities construct, validate, and practice theological knowledge in the digital era. This study has both academic and practical significance. Academically, it enriches *uṣūl al-dīn* studies by incorporating perspectives from digital religion and expanding theological discourse in response to contemporary challenges. Practically, the findings are expected to provide insights for Muslim scholars, Islamic educators, and digital da'wah practitioners in developing interpretive strategies that are contextual, authentic, and responsible within cyberspace.

This study employs a qualitative research design using a phenomenology-informed digital hermeneutics approach combined with critical discourse analysis. A qualitative approach was selected because the research focuses on an in-depth understanding of the experiences and interpretive practices of religious actors in producing and consuming *uṣūl al-dīn* discourse within complex digital environments. The phenomenological orientation enables the researcher to explore the subjective meanings and structures of digital religious experience as lived by the participants. Meanwhile, critical discourse analysis is utilized to examine how linguistic structures, narrative patterns, and social media constructs shape contemporary theological legitimacy and authority.<sup>9</sup>

The subjects of this study are actors involved in Islamic theological discourse on digital social media, particularly Islamic da'wah content creators and active audiences engaged in discursive interactions on theological themes. The primary subjects consist of five selected da'wah content creators on YouTube and Instagram who consistently produce theological material or *uṣūl al-dīn* studies, each with a minimum of 10,000 followers and a high level of engagement in the comment sections.

Data were collected through two primary techniques: non-participant digital observation and digital content documentation. Digital observation was conducted by monitoring content production activities and audience

interactions over a three-month period in order to capture patterns of discourse and forms of digital legitimacy. Documentation in the form of screenshots, video transcripts, and archived comments was analyzed as textual and visual data. The credibility of the data was strengthened through source triangulation and member checking procedures.

Data analysis was conducted in stages using the Miles and Huberman model (data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing),<sup>10</sup> integrated with critical discourse analysis to examine narratives, symbols, and rhetorical strategies within texts and digital interactions.<sup>11</sup> First, the data were coded using an open coding approach to identify major themes. Second, thematic analysis was carried out to develop conceptual categories and construct a typology of discourse. Third, pattern matching was employed to link empirical findings with the epistemological framework of *uṣūl al-dīn*. The final stage involved theoretical reflection to formulate the model of Digital Hermeneutics of Ushūl al-Dīn as a contextual synthesis of the research findings, grounded in and responsive to contemporary digital religious phenomena.

### **Reconfiguration of the Ontology of Islamic Theological Discourse within the Contemporary Digital Media Ecosystem**

Based on digital observation of five Islamic theological content creators on YouTube and Instagram, it was found that the patterns of production and distribution of *uṣūl al-dīn* discourse no longer operate within the linear transmission framework characteristic of traditional physical study circles (*majelis*). The observed creators consistently utilized audiovisual formats, livestreaming features, short-video segmentation, and algorithm-oriented content strategies to increase audience reach and interaction.

For example, Ustadz Adi Hidayat predominantly uploaded long-form theological lectures grounded in Qur'anic exegesis and classical references, whereas Hanan Attaki and Felix Siauw frequently employed short visual clips, motivational quotations, and emotionally engaging narratives optimized for rapid circulation on Instagram reels and YouTube shorts. These findings indicate that digital theological discourse is shaped not only by doctrinal substance but also by platform-specific communicative formats and audience engagement patterns.

Empirical observations further revealed that audience interaction significantly influenced the circulation and reinterpretation of theological content. In several livestream sessions observed during the research period, audience comments frequently redirected the discussion toward contemporary issues such as religious tolerance, Islamic identity, and

political controversies. For instance, comments such as “Ustadz, how should Muslims respond to viral interfaith content on TikTok?” or “Please explain this issue from the perspective of *tawhīd*” prompted creators to reformulate theological explanations in shorter and more contextualized forms. This finding demonstrates that audiences in digital environments do not merely consume theological discourse but actively participate in shaping its direction and articulation.

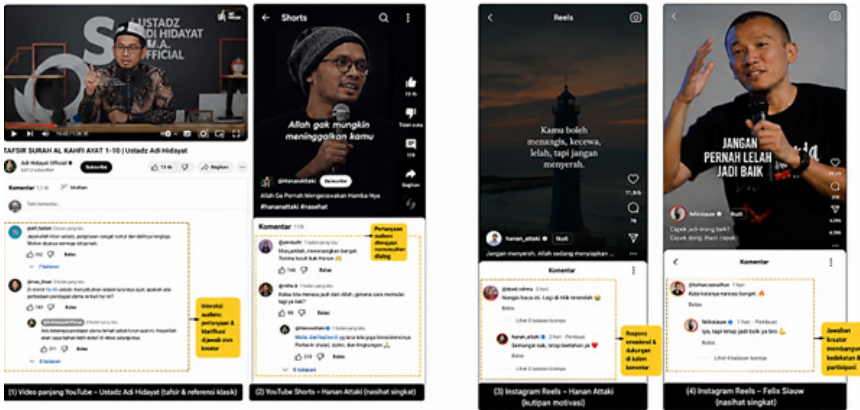


Figure 1. Examples of hermeneutical interaction in digital spaces.

Source: YouTube (Adi Hidayat Official; Hanan Attaki) and Instagram (hanan\_attaki; felixsiauw), accessed May 20, 2025.

The findings reveal a shift from a transmission model based on physical presence to a platform-based model of distribution. From an ontological standpoint, this transformation indicates that theological discourse no longer manifests as a face-to-face event bound by spatial and temporal constraints, but rather as a digital entity that can be replicated, edited, and circulated beyond spatial limitations. Campbell and Tsuria describe this phenomenon as a defining characteristic of *networked religion*, in which religious practices become integrated with the logic of digital connectivity.<sup>12</sup> The present findings support this argument empirically by demonstrating that theological authority and interpretation are increasingly mediated through algorithmic circulation rather than direct institutional transmission.

This transformation was particularly visible in the adaptation of theological content into platform-friendly formats. Several creators intentionally divided long theological lectures into short thematic clips ranging from one to three minutes, accompanied by subtitles, visual highlights, and emotionally resonant titles such as “The Meaning of *Tawhīd* in Modern Life” or “Why Young Muslims Feel Spiritually Empty.”

These clips generated substantially higher interaction rates than longer lectures, as indicated by larger numbers of comments, reposts, and viewer engagement. Such evidence indicates that algorithmic visibility influences not only the dissemination of theological discourse but also the format through which theological meaning is articulated.

<b>Creator Name</b>	<b>Dom- inant Platform</b>	<b>Primary Theologi- cal Focus</b>	<b>Content Charac- teristics</b>	<b>Model of Digital Le- gitimacy</b>	<b>Official Link</b>
Ustadz Adi Hidayat	YouTube	ʿAqīdah & Qurʿanic Exegesis (Tafsīr)	Systematic long-form lectures	References to classical texts and scholarly chains of transmission (sanad)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/@AdiHidayatOfficial">https://www.youtube.com/@AdiHidayatOfficial</a>
Ustadz Abdul Somad	YouTube & Instagram	Tawhīd & Schools of Thought (Madhhab)	Rhetorical sermons and issue-based responses	Personal authority and mass following	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/@UstadzAbdulSomadOfficial">https://www.youtube.com/@UstadzAbdulSomadOfficial</a>
Hanan Attaki	Instagram & YouTube	Spirituality of Tawhīd	Visual-emo- tional presentation style	Youth engagement metrics	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/hanan_attaki">https://www.instagram.com/hanan_attaki</a>
Felix Siauww	Instagram	Tawhīd & Islamic identity	Concise ideological narratives	Personal branding and content virality	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/@FelixSiauww1453">https://www.youtube.com/@FelixSiauww1453</a>

Table 1. Characteristics of Islamic Theological Digital Content Creators

Within the context of this study, the transmission of theology is no longer merely a pedagogical process; instead, it becomes a technologically mediated process dependent upon algorithmic recommendation systems. Consequently, the shift in medium entails a corresponding shift in the ontology of discourse from a doctrinal event to a circulatory object. Research conducted by Hidayatullah demonstrates that Muslim influencers play a central role in redefining religious authority on social media.<sup>13</sup> However, that study does not situate the phenomenon within an ontological framework of theology. The present study extends this discussion by showing empirically that what changes is not only the structure of authority but also the mode of existence of theological discourse itself from stable doctrinal transmission toward circulatory and interaction-dependent discourse.<sup>14</sup>

Classically, the transmission structure of *uṣūl al-dīn* was hierarchical, grounded in *sanad*, institutional authority, and recognized scholarly legitimacy. Within the digital ecosystem, however, this structure increasingly operates through open network configurations. Content creators and audiences are interconnected through comment sections, livestream interactions, and rapid-response communication tools. During observation, audience comments frequently functioned as interpretive interventions, including requests for clarification, doctrinal correction, or contextual application of theological arguments.

In several cases, creators responded directly to audience critiques and reformulated explanations in subsequent uploads, indicating that theological interpretation in digital environments is partially shaped through participatory interaction.<sup>15</sup> In the context of Islamic theology, this decentralization produces a configuration of legitimacy that no longer rests exclusively on scholarly authority or institutional recognition. Instead, legitimacy is increasingly influenced by interaction intensity, audience participation, and public resonance measured through comments, reposts, and algorithmic visibility.

According to Siti Rohmawati et al., the fragmentation of religious authority on Indonesian social media is characterized by the emergence of new influential actors who acquire legitimacy primarily through digital networks.<sup>16</sup> The empirical findings of this study reinforce this argument by demonstrating that creators with strong visual communication and emotionally engaging narratives frequently generated broader theological influence than creators relying exclusively on formal scholarly exposition.

Subsequent findings also reveal a transformation in the status of theological texts. In classical Islamic scholarship, creedal texts and works of *kalām* functioned as relatively stable normative references. In digital environments, however, these texts undergo processes of remediation through segmentation into short clips, visual summaries, infographics, and simplified contextual narratives. For example, excerpts from classical theological discussions on divine attributes (*ṣifāt Allāh*) were often condensed into brief motivational statements accompanied by aesthetic visual backgrounds and subtitles designed for rapid circulation on Instagram and TikTok. This process shifts theology from a text anchored primarily in scholarly authority toward content shaped by circulation dynamics and platform visibility.

Theoretically, this condition aligns with Bernier's argument that social media transforms religion into a performative practice shaped by the logic of visibility.<sup>17</sup> However, the empirical data in this study suggest that the

transformation also affects the epistemic and ontological dimensions of theological discourse, because doctrinal validity increasingly depends on circulation, engagement, and audience interaction rather than solely on methodological coherence. Theology therefore no longer operates exclusively as a stable doctrinal entity, but increasingly as a discursive process mediated through digital circulation.

Accordingly, this article positions itself as an empirically informed conceptual study. The theoretical claims concerning ontology and epistemology are derived from observed patterns of digital interaction, content circulation, and participatory theological interpretation among selected creators and audiences. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that Islamic theological discourse within the digital ecosystem undergoes a significant transformation from a relatively stable doctrinal entity toward a discursive form mediated by algorithms, interaction, and digital circulation. Nevertheless, *uṣūl al-dīn* does not lose its normative foundation; rather, its articulation and public mediation increasingly operate within technologically structured communicative environments.

### **Transformation of Religious Authority: From *Sanad*-Based Legitimacy to Algorithmic Authority and Digital Popularity**

The findings of this study indicate that the legitimacy of theological discourse on the observed creator platforms is not constructed solely through explicit references to scholarly chains of transmission (*sanad*) or institutional affiliation. Rather, it is also and in some cases primarily shaped by performative indicators such as follower count, comment intensity, frequency of shares, and the positioning of content within platform recommendation systems. During the observation period, creators employing concise theological narratives combined with emotionally engaging visual presentation consistently generated higher interaction rates than creators presenting longer and more systematic doctrinal explanations.

For example, short Instagram reels discussing themes such as “Islamic identity,” “meaning of *tawḥīd*,” or “spiritual anxiety among youth” frequently accumulated thousands of comments and reposts within a relatively short period, while long-form theological lectures received comparatively lower engagement despite containing more extensive argumentative elaboration. This finding demonstrates empirically that digital metrics function as mechanisms of selection and amplification for theological discourse.

The interpretation of these findings points to a shift in the basis of

legitimacy from a model grounded in *‘ilm* scholarly authority verified through *sanad* and collective recognition by the scholarly community toward a model grounded in engagement, measured through digital interaction. In classical *kalām* epistemology, theological validity is determined by rational coherence (*al-nazar al-‘aqli*), consistency of evidentiary proof, and the traceable continuity of intellectual transmission within established scholarly networks.<sup>18</sup>

However, the empirical data in this study show that audience recognition in digital environments is often influenced more strongly by accessibility, emotional resonance, and communicative style than by methodological completeness. Several highly circulated theological contents observed during this study presented simplified doctrinal arguments without extensive textual elaboration, yet still generated substantial public acceptance and audience approval.

Saumantri explains that epistemic authority is both argumentative and normative: it depends on the capacity to construct theological propositions that can be justified rationally and textually.<sup>19</sup> However, within the digital ecosystem, the validity of discourse is no longer filtered exclusively through mechanisms of discursive rationality; instead, it is increasingly shaped by emotional resonance and algorithmic visibility. This tendency became visible in audience interaction patterns observed in comment sections, where responses such as “this explanation is relatable,” “easy to understand,” or “this content represents young Muslims today” appeared more frequently than discussions concerning theological methodology or textual validity. Consequently, what may be described as an epistemic shift emerges within the structure of *uṣūl al-dīn*: the standard of legitimacy moves from argumentative consistency toward performativity and distributive reach.

This transformation can be examined through the distinction between epistemic authority and performative authority. Epistemic authority refers to legitimacy grounded in competence, methodological consistency, and recognition by the scholarly community, whereas performative authority relies on the ability to present oneself persuasively within the public sphere and to cultivate symbolic proximity with audiences.<sup>20</sup> According to ’Ulyan, performative authority among digital da’wah creators manifests through rhetorical style, visual aesthetics, and the capacity to respond rapidly to contemporary issues.

The observed creators demonstrated this performative dimension through the use of emotionally resonant storytelling, visually optimized subtitles, youth-oriented language styles, and rapid responses to viral

social issues. In several cases, audience engagement increased significantly when theological discussion was connected to emotionally charged contemporary topics such as identity politics, interfaith relations, or moral anxiety in digital culture. When these performative indicators intersect with algorithmic recommendation systems, a hierarchy of discourse emerges that does not necessarily correspond to the depth of theological argumentation.<sup>21</sup>

The role of algorithms as non-human actors in constructing hierarchies of discourse becomes crucial in this context. Platform recommendation systems operate through predictive logic that prioritizes content with a high probability of user interaction.<sup>22</sup> As emphasized by Puling, algorithms do not assess theological validity based on evidentiary coherence but evaluate content according to engagement potential.<sup>23</sup>

Empirically, this mechanism could be observed through the repetitive appearance of highly interactive theological clips within recommendation feeds, regardless of whether the content contained extensive methodological explanation. Content characterized by short duration, provocative titles, or emotionally appealing narratives tended to circulate more broadly than academically structured lectures. Consequently, algorithms function as structural mediators determining the visibility of particular discourses. Within technological mediation theory, this condition demonstrates that technology is not neutral but actively shapes the distribution and recognition of knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

This interpretation is further reinforced by Taufan Latif and Kuntoro, who argue that Muslim influencers on social media construct legitimacy through communicative styles adapted to digital culture and personal proximity with audiences.<sup>25</sup> Campbell and Evolvi likewise contend that digital religion generates networked and participatory forms of authority. The present study extends these findings empirically by demonstrating that algorithmic visibility and interaction intensity directly affect the recognition of theological discourse within digital Islamic environments.

Theological content receiving high engagement frequently gained broader legitimacy among audiences, even when presented in simplified argumentative forms. Whereas classical *kalām* positioned rational coherence and scholarly transmission as primary foundations of legitimacy, digital spaces increasingly recognize visibility, emotional resonance, and algorithmic circulation as additional parameters of theological recognition.<sup>26</sup>

Importantly, this article does not claim that classical epistemic authority has disappeared entirely. Several observed creators, particularly those with

formal pesantren or scholarly backgrounds, continued to employ references to classical texts, *sanad*, and methodological reasoning in constructing legitimacy. However, the empirical findings indicate that these forms of scholarly legitimacy now coexist with performative and algorithmic mechanisms within digital environments. Thus, the transformation of religious authority structures does not merely reflect a diversification of da'wah actors; rather, it signifies a measurable epistemological shift in how theological truth is produced, circulated, and recognized.

### **Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of *Ushūl al-Dīn* in Cyberspace**

The process of theological interpretation observed in digital environments does not conclude with the presentation of arguments or evidences by creators as singular authorities. Rather, interpretation continues within comment sections, livestream interactions, and audience responses that demonstrate active participation in meaning construction. During the observation period, several audience members provided additional Qur'anic references, corrected contextual interpretations, or requested clarification regarding theological concepts discussed by creators.

In one observed interaction, a viewer responded to a short theological clip on divine predestination (*qaḍā' wa qadar*) by citing an alternative interpretation from classical *kalām* literature, prompting further explanation from the creator in a subsequent upload. In another case, audience members requested textual clarification regarding the distinction between *tawakkul* and fatalism, leading the creator to expand the theological discussion in follow-up content. These patterns indicate that interpretation in digital environments is no longer unilateral but increasingly unfolds as a distributed dialogical process. Audiences therefore function not merely as recipients but as active co-participants in the construction of theological meaning.

The interpretation of these findings points to a transformation in the hermeneutical structure of *uṣūl al-dīn*. In the classical tradition, theological hermeneutics was grounded in systematic methodology involving the establishment of premises, the integration of transmitted (*naqlī*) and rational (*'aqlī*) evidences, and argumentative consistency within the framework of *kalām* rationality.<sup>27</sup> In cyberspace, however, the interpretive process becomes fragmented into smaller discursive units such as short videos, infographics, segmented quotations, and simplified argumentative statements that can be reproduced, commented upon, and renegotiated by audiences.

Empirical observation demonstrated that theological arguments

presented in short-form videos were frequently detached from their broader doctrinal context and reinterpreted independently by audiences within comment sections. In several instances, audience interpretations diverged from the creator's original explanation, indicating that meaning production in digital environments is increasingly decentralized and interaction-dependent.<sup>28</sup>

This transformation may be interpreted through the lens of participatory hermeneutics, which emphasizes that meaning emerges through the relationship between text, interpreter, and interpretive community.<sup>29</sup> In digital environments, this interpretive community extends beyond academic circles and formal religious institutions into heterogeneous networks of social media users. Malik Panigoro argues that digital religious practice generates forms of *networked authority*, in which legitimacy emerges through collective interaction rather than centralized institutional structures.<sup>30</sup>

The findings of this study support and extend this argument by demonstrating empirically that audience interaction affects not only the circulation of theological discourse but also the interpretive direction and reformulation of theological meaning itself. In several observed cases, creators modified subsequent explanations after receiving repeated audience criticism, requests for clarification, or alternative theological references in comment sections.<sup>31</sup> Thus, interaction within digital religious spaces influences not merely authority distribution but also the structure of interpretive methodology..

The fragmentation of evidences (*dalil*) and the simplification of *kalām* rationality also constitute significant findings. Complex theological concepts were frequently presented in concise and contextualized forms emphasizing one or two textual evidences without extensive argumentative elaboration. For example, discussions concerning divine attributes (*ṣifāt Allāh*) or theological debates regarding free will were often condensed into motivational statements accompanied by aesthetic visual design, subtitles, and emotionally resonant narratives intended for rapid audience engagement.

Several short-form videos observed during the study presented theological conclusions directly without explaining the broader methodological reasoning traditionally associated with classical *kalām* discourse. This pattern indicates a shift from deductive rationality toward narrative-performative rationality in which persuasion, accessibility, and visual clarity become central communicative elements.

Research by Schäfer demonstrates that the architecture of social

media encourages forms of religious representation that are affective, symbolic, and visibility-oriented.<sup>32</sup> Religious expression within digital environments is therefore increasingly packaged through emotionally engaging and community-oriented formats. The empirical findings of this study reinforce this argument by showing that audience engagement increased significantly when theological content was framed through emotionally relatable themes such as anxiety, identity crisis, spirituality, or contemporary moral concerns. However, within the framework of *uṣūl al-dīn*, this phenomenon must also be examined epistemologically. The simplification occurring in digital formats through segmentation of evidences, reduction of argumentative premises, and abbreviated narrative presentation does not merely alter communicative style; it also affects the internal structure of *kalām* argumentation itself.

The transformation of argumentative structure from systematic exposition toward modular-visual presentation is closely related to the logic of platform mediation. Saumantri and Zikrillah explain that social media architecture prioritizes content that is quickly consumable and easily understood.<sup>33</sup> In this environment, lengthy and methodologically complex argumentation possesses lower circulation potential compared to concise content with strong visual and emotional appeal. This tendency was observable in the creators' adaptation strategies, including the use of subtitles, segmented theological themes, visual highlights, and emotionally engaging headlines designed to optimize algorithmic reach.

Content presented in concise visual formats consistently generated broader interaction than lengthy lectures containing more detailed methodological discussion. Consequently, creators increasingly adapted theological argumentation to align with platform communication structures. This adaptation is not merely technical but epistemic, because the rationality of *kalām* becomes reformulated into shorter, symbolic, and interactive forms. Importantly, the findings of this study do not suggest the disappearance of methodological rationality within *uṣūl al-dīn*.

Several creators continued to employ references to classical theological texts, cite traditional scholars, and explain doctrinal concepts systematically in long-form lectures. However, the empirical evidence indicates that such rationality increasingly coexists with digital communicative pressures that prioritize speed, accessibility, and audience engagement. Therefore, the transformation observed in this study should be understood not as the dissolution of theological rationality but as its rearticulation within digitally mediated interpretive environments

Based on these empirical findings and theoretical discussions, this

study formulates the model of Participatory-Digital Hermeneutics of *Ushūl al-Dīn*. This model possesses four principal characteristics. First, interpretation becomes collaborative because meaning is constructed through interaction between creators and audiences within digital environments. Second, authority becomes fluid (*fluid authority*), since legitimacy is distributed across networks of participants rather than concentrated in a single authoritative subject. Third, rationality increasingly operates in a narrative-performative mode because theological argumentation adapts to digital communication formats emphasizing accessibility and emotional resonance. Fourth, meaning production becomes distributed because texts, comments, audience responses, and algorithmic circulation form interconnected discursive chains that continuously shape theological interpretation.

### **Ontological and Epistemological Implications for the Rearticulation of Contemporary *Ushūl al-Dīn***

The discourse of *‘aqīdah* in digital spaces no longer appears solely as a relatively stable doctrinal formulation bound to a specific system of scholarly transmission; rather, it increasingly functions as a dynamic public discourse open to response, reinterpretation, and continuous negotiation through online interaction. Empirical observation revealed that theological discussions initiated by creators frequently continued within comment sections, where audiences provided additional interpretations, contextual applications, and critiques of theological explanations.

For example, discussions concerning Islamic identity, predestination, and interfaith relations often generated extended interaction chains in which audiences debated interpretations and requested clarification from creators. In several observed cases, creators subsequently uploaded additional explanatory content in response to audience questions and criticisms, indicating that theological meaning was partially reconstructed through public interaction. These findings suggest that *‘aqīdah*, as the core of *uṣūl al-dīn*, increasingly operates not only as a doctrinal formulation but also as a discursive entity shaped through digital circulation and participatory communication.

However, the findings do not indicate that the normative substance of *‘aqīdah* has fundamentally changed. Rather, the transformation primarily concerns the mode through which theological meaning is represented, circulated, and negotiated in digital environments. Ontologically, *‘aqīdah* continues to function as the foundation of

Islamic belief articulated through the argumentative framework of *kalām* and grounded in normative Islamic sources. Representationally, however, theological discourse increasingly appears in fluid, contextual, and interaction-dependent forms.<sup>34</sup> From the perspective of mediation theory, social and religious realities are shaped through technologically mediated communication processes.<sup>35</sup>

The tension between orthodoxy and the pluralization of interpretation emerges as a logical consequence of these conditions. In classical *kalām* epistemology, orthodoxy is established through methodological consensus and relatively stable argumentative boundaries. The validity of theological positions depends upon rational coherence and conformity with foundational principles of *‘aqīdah*. In digital spaces, however, interpretive pluralization unfolds through participatory interaction that does not always adhere to the same methodological discipline.

Hardiman explains that the digital public sphere is fragmented and affective, causing discourse to be shaped through emotional resonance and communal affiliation.<sup>36</sup> This tendency was visible in the observed interactions, where theological discussions frequently shifted from methodological reasoning toward identity affirmation, emotional agreement, or symbolic solidarity. Comments such as “this explanation feels relevant to our generation” or “this content represents true Islamic values” appeared more frequently than discussions concerning methodological consistency or textual interpretation. Within the framework of *uṣūl al-dīn*, such conditions generate tension between preserving doctrinal coherence and accommodating increasingly diverse interpretive participation.

Research on digital religion has highlighted the pluralization of authority and the diversification of religious practices in cyberspace. Hakim and Mukhlis, for example, demonstrate that social media facilitates the emergence of new authoritative figures outside traditional institutional structures while expanding public participation in the production of religious discourse.<sup>37</sup> However, such studies generally remain at the sociological-descriptive level and do not explicitly examine the ontological implications of these transformations for Islamic theology itself. The present study extends these discussions empirically by demonstrating that digital participation not only changes who speaks authoritatively about theology, but also alters the communicative conditions through which theological meaning is produced, negotiated, and legitimized.

In this context, lengthy and methodologically complex argumentation possesses lower circulation potential than concise and visually appealing content. Consequently, digital da‘wah creators frequently adapt

theological presentation formats without consistently maintaining the full methodological elaboration characteristic of classical *kalām*. This tendency was observable in the use of segmented theological clips, motivational quotations, simplified doctrinal statements, and emotionally framed narratives optimized for rapid audience engagement. Several observed contents presented theological conclusions directly without extensive explanation of argumentative premises or classical scholarly debates. Such adaptation raises important epistemological questions regarding how the integrity of theological rationality can be maintained within communicative environments structured by speed, accessibility, and algorithmic visibility.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, the findings of this study do not support the conclusion that *uṣūl al-dīn* has lost its normative foundation. Several observed creators continued to employ references to classical theological texts, cite authoritative scholars, and explain doctrinal concepts systematically in long-form discussions, particularly within YouTube lectures and livestream sessions. This indicates that methodological rationality and digital communicative adaptation coexist rather than mutually negate one another. Accordingly, *uṣūl al-dīn* in digital environments undergoes a process of epistemological rearticulation rather than normative dissolution. This rearticulation occurs through the integration of *kalām* rationality with mechanisms of digital mediation that reshape the production, distribution, and legitimation of theological meaning.

Accordingly, the future of *uṣūl al-dīn* within the digital ecosystem is not determined by an opposition between tradition and technology, but by the capacity to reformulate theological methodology and communicative strategies in ways compatible with contemporary digital structures. The findings of this study suggest that *‘aqidah* remains a stable normative entity at the doctrinal level, while its public articulation increasingly depends upon digitally mediated interaction and circulation. Thus, the epistemology of *kalām* must account not only for argumentative coherence but also for performative, participatory, and circulatory dimensions of digital communication without sacrificing methodological rigor.

Importantly, this article positions itself as an empirically grounded conceptual study. The ontological and epistemological arguments advanced in this section are derived from observed patterns of digital theological interaction, audience participation, content circulation, and platform-mediated communication among selected creators and audiences. Therefore, the central thesis of this study can be reaffirmed:

in the digital era, *uṣūl al-dīn* does not undergo normative dissolution, but rather experiences epistemological rearticulation through technological mediation that reshapes the production, circulation, and recognition of theological truth within the public sphere.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that digitalization has significantly transformed the communicative and epistemological configuration of *uṣūl al-dīn* within cyberspace. Based on observations of Islamic theological content creators and audience interactions on digital platforms, the findings indicate that theological discourse no longer operates exclusively through hierarchical transmission grounded in *sanad* and institutional authority. Instead, theological meaning is increasingly mediated through platform algorithms, audience participation, and digital circulation. Empirical evidence from livestream discussions, comment interactions, short-form theological content, and audience engagement patterns shows that legitimacy in digital environments is influenced not only by scholarly authority but also by communicative performativity, emotional resonance, and algorithmic visibility. Consequently, an epistemic shift emerges in which epistemic authority interacts with performative and algorithmic authority in shaping the recognition and circulation of theological discourse.

Nevertheless, the findings do not indicate the disappearance of the normative foundations of *uṣūl al-dīn*. Several observed creators continued to employ classical references, theological reasoning, and systematic doctrinal explanation, particularly in long-form lectures and interactive discussions. However, these forms of theological rationality increasingly coexist with digital communicative structures that prioritize accessibility, speed, and audience interaction. In this context, the model of Participatory-Digital Hermeneutics of *Ushūl al-Dīn* proposed in this study explains that theological interpretation in digital environments operates collaboratively through fluid authority and distributed meaning production within digital networks. Ontologically, *‘aqidah* remains a stable normative foundation, yet representationally it appears as a dynamic and publicly negotiated discourse.

## Endnotes

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