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## Examining the Antecedents of the Persuasiveness of Social Media Posts by Celebrity Muslim Preachers in Malaysia

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### Abstract

As communication technology continues to evolve, this has also revolutionized how religious messages are presented on social media, particularly for celebrity Muslim preachers. They can easily connect with their followers and create *da'wah* messages using various social media tools, such as reels, stories, and live streams. In Malaysia, some preachers have become instant celebrities, with millions of followers who are willing to like, reshare and repost their messages. What factors though contribute to the persuasiveness of religious messages posted on social media by celebrity Muslim preachers? Elaboration likelihood model (ELM) examines the persuasiveness of messages based on how they are processed by the recipient. Accordingly, hypotheses were tested based on ELM. This quantitative study employed a cross-sectional survey design with 423 university students in Malaysia. The research instrument was constructed using Google Form and distributed online among the survey respondents. They must follow at least one celebrity Muslim preacher on social media to participate in the study. Mediation and moderated mediation models (model 4 and 7) were tested using the PROCESS macro. Overall, this study provided some support for ELM; argument quality predicted both belief in *da'wah* messages and sharing intent. Belief mediated the relationship between argument quality and sharing intent. However, personal involvement did not moderate the relationship between argument quality and sharing intent, through belief. Implications of these findings on ELM and the persuasiveness of religious messages on social media will be deliberated.

**Keywords:** Celebrity Muslim Preachers, Da'wah, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Persuasion, Social Media

## Malezya'daki Ünlü Müslüman Vaizlerin Sosyal Medya Paylaşımlarında İkna Ediciliğinin Öncüllerinin İncelenmesi

### Öz

İletişim teknolojisinin sürekli olarak gelişmesi, dini mesajların sosyal medyada sunulma biçimini de dönüştürmüştür. Özellikle ünlü Müslüman vaizler, çeşitli sosyal medya araçlarını (reels, hikayeler ve canlı yayınlar gibi) kullanarak takipçileriyle kolayca etkileşim kurabilir ve davet (tebliğ) içerikleri üretebilir hale gelmiştir. Malezya'da bazı vaizler, milyonlarca takipçisi bulunan ve mesajlarının beğenildiği, paylaşıldığı ve yeniden gönderildiği ünlü kişiler haline gelmiştir. Ancak, ünlü Müslüman vaizlerin sosyal medyada paylaştıkları dini mesajların ikna ediciliğine katkıda bulunan faktörler nelerdir? Elaboration Likelihood Modeli (ELM), mesajların ikna ediciliğini alıcı tarafından nasıl işlendiğine bağlı olarak incelemektedir. Bu doğrultuda, ELM'ye dayalı hipotezler test edilmiştir. Bu nicel çalışma, Malezya'da 423 üniversite öğrencisiyle yapılan kesitsel bir anket tasarımı kullanmıştır. Araştırma aracı Google Form ile oluşturulmuş ve çevrimiçi olarak katılımcılara dağıtılmıştır. Ankete katılabilmek için katılımcıların en az bir ünlü Müslüman vaizi sosyal medyada takip etmesi gerekmektedir. Aracılama ve düzenlenmiş aracılama modelleri (model 4 ve 7), PROCESS makrosu kullanılarak test edilmiştir. Bu çalışma genel olarak ELM'yi destekleyen bazı bulgular sunmuştur; argüman kalitesi hem davet mesajlarına inanmayı hem de paylaşım niyetini öngörmüştür. İnanma, argüman kalitesi ile paylaşım niyeti arasındaki ilişkiyi aracı bir değişken olarak etkilemiştir. Ancak, kişisel katılım, argüman

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kalitesi ile inanma aracılığıyla paylaşım niyeti arasındaki ilişkiyi düzenleyici bir faktör olarak etkilememiştir. Bu bulguların ELM ve sosyal medyada dini mesajların ikna ediciliği üzerindeki etkileri tartışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ünlü Müslüman Vaizler, Davet, Detaylandırma Olasılık Modeli, İkna, Sosyal Medya

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## Introduction

Social media is widely used for many reasons, including for entertainment and to seek information. Kemp (2024) highlights that TikTok has 28.7 million users in Malaysia, and comparatively, 24.1 million YouTube users. Additionally, Instagram boasts up to 15.67 million users in August 2024 (NapoleanCat, 2024). Due to its immense popularity, social media platforms can reach a wide range of audience. Celebrity Muslim preachers or *dai'* can use social media platforms to disseminate *da'wah* messages, particularly to attract younger users (Abdullah et al., 2018). In Malaysia, some preachers have become instant celebrities, with millions of followers who are willing to like, share and repost their content. Their views on religion are even more popular than those given by religious authority figures. For instance, according to Saat and Mohd Taufeq (2021), the emergence of popular preachers in Malaysia has led to a declining interest in Malaysian Muftis.

As celebrity Muslim preachers have a large following, their messages may have persuasive appeal and can influence their follower's attitudes and perception on religious issues. Tools such as reels, stories and live streaming allows for celebrity Muslim preachers to have direct interaction with their followers, inviting more discussions on religious issues. However, instead of presenting accurate information on Islam, some celebrity preachers in Malaysia may comment on religious issues using controversial or unsubstantiated comments, rendering their messages as less credible (e.g., Jefri, 2020). Furthermore, although preachers are attractive to the younger audience due to their savvy use of social media platforms, their depth of religious training may not be as extensive or in-depth as a traditional mufti or religious officer (Saat & Mohd Taufeq, 2021).

However, since they are highly influential and popular, their followers may not stop to consider the authenticity of their messages and may simply disseminate their social media posts by liking, sharing, or reposting these messages without considering the consequences. For example, PU Azman, a Malaysian celebrity preacher who boasts 2.5 million followers on Instagram has not been granted a license to preach about religion but is highly influential and is deemed as an authoritative figure by netizens to speak on religious issues (Saat & Mohd Taufeq, 2021). With influential celebrity preachers, this may likely lead to a barrage of inaccurate, inauthentic, or misleading religious messages that become viral simply because it was posted by a celebrity Muslim preachers and shared by their loyal followers. Thus, although social media offers many advantages for those who wish to share their thoughts on religious issues, it can also create negative consequences when these messages are not filtered or presented properly. Authority figures, such as the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs) in Malaysia, has been quoted as saying that when giving views on Islamic laws, Muslim preachers should be honest, and admit what they do not know as they are not as knowledgeable as authoritative scholars (BERNAMA, 2024).

To what extent though, are *da'wah* on social media persuasive, and how do followers of celebrity Muslim preachers process religious messages on social media? For instance, are they more persuaded by message content, such as argument quality, or characteristics of the source, such as physical attractiveness? Communication scholars have often used the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) to understand the persuasiveness of traditional media messages, and most recently on social

media (Li & Suh, 2015; Teng et al., 2014; Zha et al., 2018). According to ELM, persuasive messages can be processed via central or peripheral route, which are at two opposite ends of a continuum (Dillard & Lijiang, 2013; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Schumann et al., 2011). In the central route, message recipients will scrutinize the message by examining argument quality, and message processing depends on personal involvement. Due to its high elaboration likelihood, messages processed by the central route tend to result in attitude change and are persistent over time due to the scrutinization of the message arguments (Haugtvedt & Petty, 1989). On the other hand, the peripheral route is also important and maybe considered in examining persuasive messages. It occurs when elaboration likelihood is low, and processing of message requires minimal cognitive effort and therefore, recipient relies on peripheral cues such as source attractiveness (Kitchen et al., 2014).

Previous studies that have employed the use of ELM has mostly focused on advertising, marketing or consumer behavior (e. g., Gao & Syed Muhammad, 2021; Homer & Kahle, 2013; Teng et al., 2014), and health care (Angst & Agarwal, 2009; Chua & Banerjee, 2018). There are fewer studies though that have examined the use of ELM to understand the persuasiveness of religious messages, although it can be argued that religious messages can be considered as a powerful form of persuasive communication. Therefore, in this study, we will attempt to fill the research gap by applying ELM in the social media context, where ELM variables are assumed to influence the processing of religious messages posted by celebrity Muslim preachers on social media. In this study context, those who find religious messages personally relevant, are likelier to share these messages if it contains high argument quality, and if they believe in the truthfulness of the message. The source characteristics, such as source attractiveness, may also be given due consideration.

Specifically, the main research objectives of the study are as follows:

- To identify the antecedents of sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers
- To analyze the mediating role of belief in the relationship between argument quality and sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers
- To identify if the relationship between argument quality and sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, through belief in truthfulness of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, is moderated by personal involvement of *da'wah* messages (moderated mediation)

By extending the study context in examining religious messages, this study is expected to enhance understanding of the ELM framework in highlighting how social media users in Malaysia process religious messages using both the central and peripheral routes. Further, the study findings are also expected to have practical significance to religious authorities, institutions and agencies in Malaysia; where it will illuminate how religious messages can be designed to attract social media users to disseminate and spread religious messages.

## Literature Review

### Celebrity Muslim Preachers and *Da'wah* on Social Media

*Da'wah* or preaching can be defined as the process of conveying information about Islam by a Muslim to reach the aim of complying with Al-Quran and Al-Sunnah (Alimuddin, 2007). *Da'wah* refers to a call for individuals to return to the correct path to build a morally good community (Alimuddin, 2007). Conveying *da'wah* or religious messages to others are a duty and responsibility of every Muslim. This is emphasized numerous times in the Holy Quran such as in Surah An-Nahl, verse 125. Celebrity Muslim preachers, however, have the persuasive powers and the necessary platform to convey religious messages to millions of followers, through their social media accounts.

Due to the development of information and technology, various social media tools are available to craft, design and share religious messages, such as reels, videos, live streams, hashtags and stories. According to Tatar and Abdul Rohman (2019), this will provide opportunities for anyone in expressing their *da'wah* activities, by spreading religious teachings and for celebrity Muslim preachers to demonstrate their competence in preaching through social media. Younger audiences may also gravitate towards *da'wah* content featured on social media as it can be more contemporary, interesting and expressive. Accordingly, many Muslim preachers are transformed into instant celebrities due to their use of social media. Thus, in this digital era, social media is becoming a new channel for expressing *da'wah* activities for celebrity Muslim preachers, and they have their own niche audience. In Malaysia, some celebrity Muslim preachers such as *Imam Muda Ashraf* (@imammudaasyraf) became popular with the masses after winning Islamic reality television shows, such as *Imam Muda*, and continued their efforts to spread *da'wah* through their personal social media accounts on TikTok, Facebook, YouTube or Instagram (Abdullah et al., 2018; Abdul Karim, 2013; Tengku Mohd Azzman & A. Manaf, 2018; Tengku Mohd Azzman & A. Manaf, 2017).

Further, these celebrity Muslim preachers or *da'i* on social media are especially well-known among the younger generation, such as young adults and university students (Tengku Mohd Azzman & A. Manaf, 2018; Tengku Mohd Azzman & A. Manaf, 2017). They have many following and their posts/tweets/videos are often liked, commented on, shared, or reposted by their followers. For instance, a popular celebrity Muslim preacher, *Ustaz Wadi Anuar* (@Ustazwadianuar) has 811,000 followers on Instagram and 1.2 billion viewers on his TikTok account. Furthermore, all these preachers or *da'i* are actively creating *da'wah* content that easily attracts the younger audience. Hence, preaching through social media platforms such as Tik Tok, Instagram, YouTube or Facebook provides some advantages, including high interactivity, easy accessibility, increased ability to attract a broader range of audience, and easy dissemination, notwithstanding the barrier of time and space (Abdullah et al., 2018; Rustan et al., 2020; Tatar & Abdul Rohman, 2019).

However, not all celebrity Muslim preachers rely on using wisdom, good words and conveying truthful and credible information on social media, as befitting the recommended Islamic preaching style practiced by the Holy Prophet (Shehu, 2017). The Holy Prophet uses a communication style that is direct and succinct, but still respectful (Kasmani, Yusoff & Kanaker, 2019). On the other hand, celebrity Muslim preachers may rely on commenting on controversial issues to become viral or use emotionally laden responses to preach to their audience, to win arguments and increase followers. In one incident, a celebrity Muslim preacher openly rebuked and shamed a Malaysian celebrity for uploading a video that contained allegedly defamatory images (Jefri, 2020). Thus, when celebrity Muslim preachers are too critical, sarcastic, harsh, or argumentative, this may turn people off in *da'wah* content, and lead to a reluctance to share these messages, no matter how beneficial they are. Messages that are more emotionally laden, rather than fact-based, may also be perceived as less credible and in turn, be perceived as less persuasive. The next section will examine possible factors that may influence the persuasiveness of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers based on the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) perspective, specifically through the message content and source characteristics.

#### **Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Religious Posts on Social Media**

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) was developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) and it provides a framework for understanding how individuals process and respond to persuasive messages based on their motivation and ability to engage in critical thinking. The theory focuses on communication related factors that can lead to attitude change. It stresses the importance of both the content of the message and context in which it is received in determining the effectiveness of

persuasive messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Motivation to process messages involve personal involvement or importance of the message to the individual and ability to process involves factors such as cognitive resources, knowledge, and distraction. When motivation and ability is factored into information processing, individuals will then decide on the modes of information processing. Further, ELM assumes that individuals engage in two different modes of information processing when evaluating persuasive messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

First is the central route, where it involves deep, systematic thinking about the message content and occurs when individuals are motivated and able to process information critically and carefully (Dillard & Lijiang, 2013; McNeill & Stoltenberg, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Central route involves high elaboration of the issue, where arguments are critically evaluated and considered in terms of implications. The second route, which is the peripheral route, requires a more superficial-heuristic based processing and happens when individuals lack the motivation or ability to examine message deeply, and would therefore resort to peripheral cues such as perceived attractiveness of the source, or message length (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Low elaboration occurs on the peripheral route, where individuals focus more on simple cues rather than message content. ELM also posits that attitude change is more likely when messages are processed via central route, where it requires deeper consideration and understanding of the arguments presented.

ELM has been applied in various context to understand information processing, including in advertising, marketing and political campaigns, or tourism, and most recently in examining the persuasiveness of messages in social media platforms such as Facebook etc. (Li & Suh, 2015; Teng et al., 2014; Zha et al., 2018). Some have found that both central and peripheral route can influence perceived persuasiveness of marketing messages presented via social media features, such as live streaming commerce (Gao et. al., 2021). Other studies found that the persuasiveness of social influencers in word of mouth (WOM) marketing, can lead to purchase decision of food products among consumers (Erkli, 2022). Thus, in this study context, celebrity Muslim preachers can be regarded as religious influencers who are largely followed due to their thoughts on religious issues, and their messages have the power to influence the attitude and perception of their followers on religious issues.

Specifically, we will examine how religious messages by celebrity Muslim preachers are perceived and processed based on the ELM model. ELM has predicted that in using the central route, higher argument quality can influence attitude towards messages and lead to behavioral change (i.e., Angst & Agarwal, 2009). Specifically, when followers of celebrity Muslim preachers are motivated to process religious messages by celebrity Muslim preachers, argument quality can influence their perception of religious messages. For those with high motivation, they will consider the argument quality when processing message using the central route and are likelier to share social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers as they are convinced by the persuasiveness of these messages. As predicted in previous research (i.e., Bhattacharjee & Sandford, 2006) heuristic cues such as source attractiveness, will also influence the processing of messages in the online context. Thus, in this study, perceived attractiveness of the celebrity Muslim preacher is entered as a co-variate. Thus, the following hypothesis are posed:

H1: Argument quality is positively related to sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers

In using the central route to process messages, those who are convinced with the argument quality of the message are motivated to process the message and will take the time to consider other aspects of the message content (i.e. believability in the truthfulness of these messages), before deciding to share these messages with others (Chen et al., 2021). It is predicted thus, there is a positive relationship between high argument quality and intention to share, and it is mediated by belief in the truthfulness of the message presented by celebrity Muslim preachers. Therefore,

the following two hypotheses are suggested:

H2: Argument quality is positively related to belief in social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers

H3: Belief in social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers will mediate the relationship between argument quality and sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers

Further, if messages presented on social media are interactive (i.e., features such as comments, discussions threads, or polls), it can promote deeper understanding of the message, particularly if users are motivated. In this study context, celebrity Muslim preachers often personalize the religious messages they share on social media and encourage discussions on the posts that they initiate. Thus, followers may find these messages highly relevant to them and would use high elaboration to process these messages via the central route when processing these messages, as predicted by ELM (Chen et al., 2021; Kitchen et al., 2014). If arguments quality and belief in the truthfulness of the message is high, the central route is chosen to process these messages and may lead to them having a deeper understanding of religious messages. Thus, persuasion is salient with higher intention to share these messages with others so they can also benefit from it. On the other hand, for those with low motivation (i.e., have low personal involvement with the message), they may rely on source characteristics, such as source attractiveness, to process these messages, instead of critically evaluating social media posts on religious issues. Thus, those who do not find these messages highly relevant, will not engage in the central route to process these messages. In sum, the following hypothesis is presented:

H4: When personal involvement is high, the indirect effect of argument quality on sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, mediated by belief in social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, will be stronger.

Overall, based on the discussion of the literature and the theoretical framework, a conceptual framework of ELM from the context of *da'wah* messages on social media by celebrity Muslim preachers is depicted in Figure 1. This conceptual framework depicts the variables and constructs of ELM in the social media and *da'wah* context. Antecedents of persuasive religious message are displayed in the framework. Sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers is integrated into the conceptual framework.

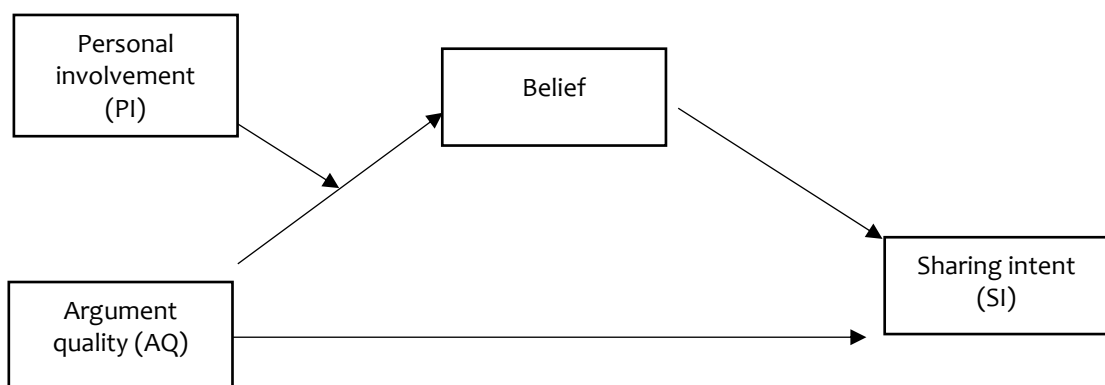


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

## Methodology

### Participants and Data Collection Procedures

This study used a cross-sectional online survey design, and a Google form to construct the survey questionnaire. The data was collected from October to December 2022. The target

respondents consisted of undergraduate students in an international Islamic university in Selangor, Malaysia. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents prior to completing the survey questionnaire. All respondents must follow at least one celebrity Muslim preacher on YouTube, TikTok or Instagram, to participate in the study. The final sample size totaled to 423. To ensure that the sample size is suitable for data analysis, the minimum sample size calculated by G\*power software based on the number of predictor variables was 193, and this criterion was met in this study. The research instrument was in the English language as all participants were fluent in English, and there was no need to translate the instrument into the local language.

Descriptive analysis was carried out to examine the background of the respondents. Based on the analyses, the respondents in this study were relatively young ( $M = 22.93$ ,  $SD = 7.11$ ) and mostly female (73%). They were active social media users ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = .73$ ). Interest in religious content on social media was high; based on the search for *da'wah* content ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = .80$ ). A little more than half of the survey respondents had formal religious educational background (52%). Preachers followed on social media were popular celebrity Muslim preachers, both locally and globally such as Ustazah Asma Harun, Ustaz Firdaus Wong, Zakir Naik, Omer Sulaiman, and Mufti Menk. The survey respondents reported that these celebrity Muslim preachers almost always posted on religious content on their social media accounts (89%).

### Measurements

The scale for argument quality, sharing intent, and belief was adapted from a previous study by Chen, Kearney and Chang (2021). A sample item for argument quality is: *“The information presented by the Muslim celebrity preacher I follow on social media, is informative”*. An example of the item for sharing intent is *“I will share Islamic da'wah content presented by a celebrity Muslim preacher on social media”* while a sample item for belief is *“I believe the information presented by the celebrity Muslim preacher I follow on social media, is truthful”*. Personal involvement is the individual's perceived relevance to the religious content posted by the celebrity Muslim preacher. The items for personal involvement were adapted also from a previous study by Chua and Banerjee (2018), and a sample item reads: *“The Islamic da'wah content posted by the celebrity Muslim preachers I follow on social media is important to me”*. The items for source attractiveness were adapted from a previous study by Ohanion (1990), and a sample item is as follows: *“The celebrity Muslim preacher I follow on social media, are attractive”*.

Finally, to measure belief in the truthfulness of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, 1 item from Chen, Kearney and Chang (2021) and the item reads: *I believe the information presented by the celebrity Muslim preacher I follow on social media, is truthful*. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with response items that ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Table 1 displays specific details related to the scale employed in the study.

**Table 1.** Scales used in the study

No	Scale	Total items	M	SD	Source
1	Personal involvement (PI)	2	4.17	.84	Chua & Banerjee, 2018
2	Argument quality (AQ)	4	4.44	.69	Chen, Kearney & Chang, 2021
3	Belief in the truthfulness of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers (Belief)	1	4.26	-	Chen, Kearney & Chang, 2021
4	Source Attractiveness (SA)	5	4.09	.78	Ohanion, 1990
5	Frequency of searching for da'wah content (FS)	1	3.14	-	Self-constructed
6	Sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers (SI)	2	3.76	.92	Chen, Kearney & Chang, 2021

Before conducting data analysis, the value of the dependent variable was examined, and it was within the range of -2 and +2 (Siddiqi, 2014). Thus, this shows that the data was normally distributed, and the multiple regression as well as the moderated mediation analysis can be conducted.

## Findings

### Model Fit, Reliability and Validity

All scales used in this study achieved good internal consistency ranging from .84 to .97, which was above the cut-off value of .70 (Hair et al., 2013). This indicates that all scales demonstrate acceptable reliability scores. Further, to establish the measurement model, the JAMOVI software was used run the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). To establish convergent validity, several fit indices was examined. The model fit indices suggest an acceptable fit. The chi-square value for the default model was significant,  $X^2(59) = 454, p < .001$ . The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and The Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) was 0.903 and 0.892 respectively, both indicating an acceptable model fit. Additionally, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was .084 suggesting that the model fit quite well in terms of error approximation. Overall, these indices support the convergent validity of the factors in explaining the underlying factors that influence sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers.

In evaluating the measurement model, as suggested by the literature (i.e., Hair et al., 2011; Gefen & Staub, 2005), items with low factor loadings (i.e., values should be at least above .50) should be removed. All items loaded based on their respective construct and were above the cut-off values. The composite reliability should also be above .70 according to Hair et al. (2011) and all values were above the cut off value. Finally, the average variance extracted (AVE) should be above the cut-off value of .50 (Hair et al., 2011), and this was also met in this study. Table 2 displays the factor loadings, reliability and validity of each of the construct

**Table 2.** Factor loadings, reliability and validity

Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Frequency of searching for da'wah content (FS)		NA	NA	NA
Belief		NA	NA	NA
Source Attractiveness (SA)		<b>0.884</b>	<b>0.933</b>	<b>0.614</b>
SA1	0.866			
SA2	0.800			
SA3	0.831			
SA4	0.717			
SA5	0.691			
Personal involvement (PI)		<b>0.840</b>	<b>0.908</b>	<b>0.727</b>
PI1	0.862			
PI2	0.843			
Argument Quality (AQ)		<b>0.897</b>	<b>0.946</b>	<b>0.711</b>
AQ1	0.836			
AQ2	0.906			
AQ3	0.899			
AQ4	0.717			
Sharing Intent (SI)		<b>0.887</b>	<b>0.937</b>	<b>0.799</b>
SI1	0.932			
SI2	0.855			

Note: CA = Cronbach Alpha, CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

To examine discriminant validity, the value of the square root of AVE is compared with the



correlation coefficient with each construct, where the value of the square root of AVE should be higher than the correlation coefficient value between the constructs (Hair et al., 2011). This criterion was met in this study, and thus good discriminant validity was established. Table 3 displays the discriminant validity in this study.

**Table 3.** Discriminant validity

Factor	SA	PR	AQ	SI
SA	<b>0.781</b>			
PI	0.673	<b>0.853</b>		
AQ	0.639	0.812	<b>0.843</b>	
SI	0.497	0.644	0.514	<b>0.894</b>

Note: SA = source attractiveness, PR = personal involvement, AQ = argument quality and SI = sharing intent. Bolded values in the diagonal are the square root of the AVE

**Hypotheses testing**

The next step is to establish the structural model and to test the hypotheses of the study. Prior to all other analysis, the zero-order correlations analysis established significant relationships between the co-variates, the independent variables, the mediator, the moderator and the dependent variable in the study. Correlational values for all variables ranged from .22 to .74. PROCESS macro by Hayes was used to test the hypotheses of the study (model 4 and model 7). According to Hayes (2018), PROCESS models are suitable to examine mediation and moderating relationships.

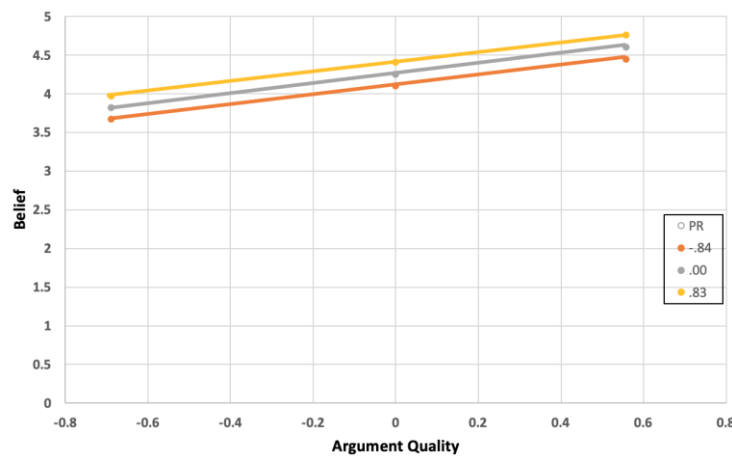
The mediation analysis (model 4) was performed to test main association analyses (H1-H3). In this model, frequency of searching for *da'wah* content and source attractiveness was entered as co-variates. Both co-variates were significant predictors to SI, where frequency of searching for *da'wah* content on social media had a significant relationship with SI ( $b = .260, SE = .047, t = 5.429, p < .001$ ). Similarly, source attractiveness of celebrity Muslim preachers has a significant relationship with SI ( $b = .228, SE = .063, t = 3.621, p < .001$ ). Further, H1 predicts that AQ will be positively associated with SI; results exhibit a significant relationship between AQ and SI ( $b = .262, SE = .084, t = 3.08, p < .05, 95\% CI = [.095/.429]$ ), where approximately 31.8% of the variance explained for SI were accounted for by all predictors. Next, H2 posits that AQ is positively associated with belief; results indicate a significant link between AQ and belief ( $b = .746, SE = .053, t = 13.942, p < .001, 95\% CI = [.641/.852]$ ). Therefore, both H1 and H2 is supported.

Further, the study examined the mediating role of belief on the relationship between AQ and SI. The results revealed a significant indirect effect of the impact of AQ on SI ( $b = .198, t = 2.896$ ), supporting H3 and indicating a significant indirect effect. Further, the direct effect of AQ on SI in the presence of the mediator is also significant ( $b = 0.430, t = 5.21$ ). Therefore, H3 is also supported. Table 4 displays a summary of the mediation analysis results.

**Table 4.** Mediation analysis summary

Relationship	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		t-statistics
				Lower bound	Upper bound	
AQ -> Belief -> SI	.628 (.000)	.430 (.002)	(.198)	-.052	.321	2.896

Finally, the moderated mediation analysis was performed (model 7) to test the moderated mediation, where it is predicted that when personal involvement is high, the indirect effect of argument quality on sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, mediated by belief in social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, will be stronger (H4). In examining the results, the initial interaction between AQ and PI on belief is not significant ( $b = .000$ ,  $SE = .0346$ ,  $t = .003$ ,  $p = .997$ ,  $95\% CI = [-.0679/.068]$ ). The analysis also indicates that the index for moderated mediation (index = .001,  $95\% CI = [-.013/.017]$ ) is not significant since the 95% CI does include a 'zero'. Simple slopes show insignificant indirect effect when the moderator is low, moderate, or high (refer to Figure 2). Generally, the finding implies that PI do not moderate the relationship between AQ and SI, through belief. Therefore, H4 is not supported.



**Figure 2.** Interaction between argument quality and belief, on sharing intent.

Table 5 Displays a summary of the moderated mediation analysis.

**Table 5.** Moderated mediation summary

Direct relationship	Unstandardized Coefficient	T statistics
AQ -> Belief	.707	10.185
Belief -> SI	.215	3.292
AQ -> SI	.430	5.219
AQ * PI -> Belief	.000	.003

Indirect Relationship	Direct effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval Low/High	T statistics
AQ -> Belief -> SI	.430	.152 (.050)	.046/.246	3.031
Probing moderated indirect relationships	Effect	SE	Confidence Interval Low/High	T statistics
Low level of PI	.152	.049	.046/.246	3.102
High level of PI	.152	.051	.046/.250	2.984
Index of Moderated Mediation	.001	.007	-.013/.017	.142

Note: AQ = argument quality, belief = belief in truthfulness of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, SI = sharing intent, PI = personal involvement

## Discussion

The main objective of this research was to identify antecedents of sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers. Four hypotheses were proposed to examine predictors to sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, including the relationship between argument quality and sharing intent (H1), the relationship between argument quality and belief (H2) and the mediating role of belief in the truthfulness of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, in the relationship between argument quality and intention to share (H3). Finally, we examined the moderating role of personal involvement, in the relationship between argument quality and sharing intent, through belief in the truthfulness of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers (H4). Out of the four hypotheses, three was supported (H1-H3). The following paragraphs will analyze in detail the results of the study based on the hypotheses that was proposed, and in relation to the theoretical contributions, practical implications, research limitations, and suggestions for future research.

### Theoretical Contributions

First, consistent with the predictions by ELM in previous studies (i.e., Angst & Agarwal, 2009; Chen et al., 2021), for those who are highly motivated, they will use central cues such as argument quality to process messages by scrutinizing them more closely. They are also likelier to share these messages as they are persuaded by the high argument quality. H1 posits that AQ would be significantly related to SI, and it was supported. Thus, for social media users who are motivated to process religious messages by celebrity Muslim preachers, high argument quality in creating religious content is important in persuading others to share it, after discounting for the effect of peripheral cues such as source attractiveness. For celebrity Muslim preachers disseminating religious messages, this has important implications. For example, when designing religious content on social media, it is important that celebrity Muslim preachers support the content with evidence from *Quranic* verse and verified Hadith. Additionally, argument quality can also be increased by being unbiased and presenting informative and helpful messages that consider the context and arguments from all sides in the issue being presented. On the other hand, celebrity Muslim preachers should avoid flimsy, inflammatory, divisive or inaccurate content not reflecting Islamic principles, such as arguments based on emotions, or arguments that lack evidence or proper justification from the Quran or Hadith, which may lead to information that mislead the public.

Further, consistent with previous research (i.e., Angst & Agarwal, 2009; Chen, et al., 2021; Meng & Choi, 2019) H2 is also supported; highlighting a positive relationship between AQ and belief; when users are highly motivated to process religious message via central route, they will take the time to consider other aspects of the message besides argument quality, which is truthfulness of the message. Therefore, especially for those who are predisposed and inclined to search for religious posts on social media, celebrity Muslim preachers can reach a wider social media audience who will reshare and disseminate their message with others, but they must consider how the tone in which the message is being designed and presented on social media. For example, celebrity Muslim preachers should present their opinions based on honesty and truth, and avoid exaggeration, even when it may veer from public opinion.

The significance of heuristic cues (via the significance of source attractiveness as a co-variate) in this study cannot be discounted; although message that are of importance to social media users may be examined critically in terms of message content (argument quality and believability), social media users may be overwhelmed by information overload that may occur judging by the sheer number of messages posted by social media users. When that occurs, heuristic cues available on social media platforms can be utilized to grab their attention and to persuade them to further analyze the message content via the central route.

For example, celebrity Muslim preachers should ensure that they are professionally dressed and presentable when appearing on videos, stories, or reels and use the interactivity function on social media (i.e. votes or polls, quizzes, asking for comments on feedback on posts, encouraging users to use share button on stories) that can encourage further discussion on religious posts, to enhance the persuasiveness of their messages. Appropriate music background or playing Quranic verse can also be considered as part of their social media strategy to attract attention using heuristic cues. This is reiterated in a study by Abdullah et al. (2018); Islamic celebrity preachers are expected to be good looking and presentable online, as this is an especially important criteria in attracting the younger Muslim audience. The initial attraction to watch their content may invite further scrutiny of their message content and encourage the audience to carefully consider their arguments instead of mindlessly sharing unsubstantiated or unverified posts.

Next, H3 posited that belief will mediate the relationship between AG and INT, which was in line with ELM's predictions on the pathway of central route when processing persuasive messages (Chen, et al., 2021; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) The results demonstrate the mediating role of belief; messages with high argument quality will lead to stronger belief in the message truthfulness, leading to higher likelihood of sharing intent. ELM has predicted attitude change (i.e., intention to share the message) is likelier to occur for those who have critically examined a message, and find the message to be believable and credible, and this attitude change may persist over time. Thus, for social media users who are not aware of certain religious issues, when the message is presented in a believable and trustworthy manner, this may lead to stronger sharing intent. As social media has the capability of making a message 'viral' and reaching the masses, it is important that consideration is given to the message content as well as the argument presented, to ensure that the message will be shared by social media users who are convinced of its truthfulness and authenticity.

Finally, H4 examined the moderated mediation role of personal involvement; where it is predicted that users who are more personally involved with religious content, are more motivated and will critically examine religious messages via the central route. Consequently, when personal involvement is high, the indirect effect of argument quality on sharing intent of social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, mediated by belief in social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers, will be stronger. Although ELM has predicted that personal involvement matters in the central route (i.e. Chen et al., 2021; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), in this study, it was not significant, and results did not indicate a moderated mediation model. This can perhaps be attributed to the nature of religious posts by celebrity Muslim preachers; most religious posts made popular by them are arguably perhaps everyday issues that are relevant to most Muslim Malaysians, such as issue concerning marital relationships, *halal* food, and parenting issues. Further, respondents in this study were dominantly Muslim students studying in an Islamic environment. The homogeneity of the respondent's background in terms of religion has perhaps led to similar attitudes when it comes to evaluating the personal relevance of religion or religious issues. Consequently, personal involvement is not dictating how respondents in this study process religious messages. Overall, from this study, there is no doubt that religious posts that are credible, informative and supported by facts, have the potential to be a highly persuasive form of communication on social media.

#### **Practical Implications**

For Malaysian religious institutions, agencies and the governmental department over-seeing religious affairs, this study has several practical implications. It is very important for them to monitor religious messages that are spread through social media, particularly ones that are shared by celebrity Muslim preachers, considering their mass appeal and their influence over the public. Religious authorities such as Muftis, should also utilize the interactive features on social media

platforms, such as discussion threads, or quizzes and polls, to increase their persuasive appeal. To increase argument quality and belief in religious content, any fatwas or decrees by religious authorities should also be clear, supported by facts, and neutral, to avoid misleading their audience. Consequently, this may also lead to higher likelihood of sharing, posting and dissemination of these messages by the public.

### Limitations and Future Research

Generally, there is some support for ELM and the usage of the central route to process *da'wah* messages on social media. However, in this study context, a major finding is that personal involvement to social media posts by celebrity Muslim preachers did not matter too much to the recipient in processing religious messages. As the respondents in this study came from an Islamic university, interest in religious is perhaps already built in due to the environment they are in. Future studies could employ a different sample in comparing those studying in a different type of higher educational system that do not highlight or emphasis on Islamic values in the environment, and this could perhaps yield a different result on the role of personal involvement in processing religious messages on social media, and how it affects the relationship between belief, argument quality and sharing intent.

As cross-sectional studies only provide information on specific variables but does not establish causal relationships or analyze behavior over time, future studies could utilize the experimental method, to isolate cues that influence the central processing route, and examine its effect on the persuasiveness of *da'wah* messages or use the longitudinal approach to understand how social media audience process religious message over time. Also, using qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews can lead to a deeper and in-depth understanding of the meaning of personal involvement in the religious context, and to examine diverse motivations to process religious messages on social media. Finally, other peripheral cues, such as source credibility or expertise, could also yield additional information in terms of how social media audience process religious messages. It could be interesting for example, to compare the role of formal religious training of the source, in examining the persuasive appeal of religious messages among social media audiences.

### Conclusion

In sum, based on this study findings, celebrity Muslim preachers who are active on social media platforms and intend to use it to spread the messages of Islam must consider both the message content and the source characteristics in designing religious messages that are both credible and persuasive. To attract the younger audience using social media, interactive tools can be used to invite further discussion on religious issues, but celebrity Muslim preachers should be cognizant of the credibility of such messages and employ social media platforms carefully to avoid from misleading the public and sharing information that is false, inflammatory or inaccurate. They should also emulate the Prophetic *da'wah* style to ensure that the message of Islam receives positive response from the Muslim ummah, that could potentially lead to the adoption and incorporation of Islamic values in their everyday life.

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#### **Çalışmanın Etik İzin Bilgileri / Ethics Committee Approval**

International Islamic University Malaysia Abdulhamid Abusulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, 08/11/2024 tarihli yazısı çerçevesinde çalışma etik açıdan bir sakınca içermemektedir.

*The study has no ethical concerns within the framework of the letter dated 08/11/2024 from the Abdulhamid Abusulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia.*

#### **Araştırmacıların Katkı Oranı Beyanı/ Contribution of Authors**

Yazarların çalışmadaki katkı oranları yazar sırasına göre %90 ve %10 şeklindedir.  
The contributions of the authors to the study are as follows: 90% and 10% in order of authorship.  
\*\*\*\*\*

#### **Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı / Conflict of Interest**

Çalışma kapsamında herhangi bir kurum veya kişi ile çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.  
*There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of the study.*  
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