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A Legal Review of Cancel Culture Based on Hadith: A Contextual Interpretation Analysis of Abdullah Saeed

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Abstract

The phenomenon of cancel culture as a form of social punishment in digital spaces raises ethical problems because it often occurs without verification, proportionality, and clear due process. This practice lies at the intersection of social control mechanisms and a form of symbolic violence that undermines individual dignity. This study aims to analyze the legal status of cancel culture from the perspective of the Prophet's hadith using Abdullah Saeed's contextual hermeneutical approach, in order to formulate legal principles relevant to the contemporary digital context. The method employed is qualitative research based on a literature review, using descriptive-analytical analysis of hadiths on *tajassus* (spying), *ghibah* (backbiting), the command of *satr al-'uyub* (concealing others' faults), and *tabayyun* (verification). The data are analyzed by identifying core values and contextual values, which are then integrated with the principles of *ushul fiqh*. The results show that the primary values of these hadiths are oriented toward the protection of individual dignity, the integrity of information, and social justice. Cancel culture is deemed impermissible when it is impulsive, unverified, and intended to bring down individuals, as it contradicts Islamic ethical principles. However, public criticism that is evidence-based, proportional, and corrective in intent may be

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justified within certain limits. Thus, an ethical-legal framework for evaluating cancel culture is contextual, depending on its purpose, process, and impact.

Keywords: Cancel culture; Contextual interpretation; Abdullah Saeed; Islamic law; Digital media

Introduction

The phenomenon of cancel culture (the practice of boycotting public figures in digital spaces) as a new form of "social punishment" in the digital sphere demonstrates a significant escalation in public shaming practices. These are no longer confined to formal legal mechanisms but have evolved into mass-based, viral forms of social control. Studies by Chen et al. (2025) and Novotný et al. (2025) show that online public shaming can lead to serious consequences, ranging from reputational damage to extreme psychological impacts such as depression and even suicide. This practice operates through mechanisms of collective morality that are often shaped by perceptions of social norms and public emotions, rather than proportional ethical considerations (Ringrose & Regehr, 2025). On the other hand, shaming is also used as a normative instrument to enforce social compliance, as seen in the concept of climate shaming, which functions as a tool of pressure against violations of environmental responsibility (Yadin & Maibach, 2025). This ambivalence indicates that cancel culture lies at the intersection between legitimate social control mechanisms and problematic forms of violence.

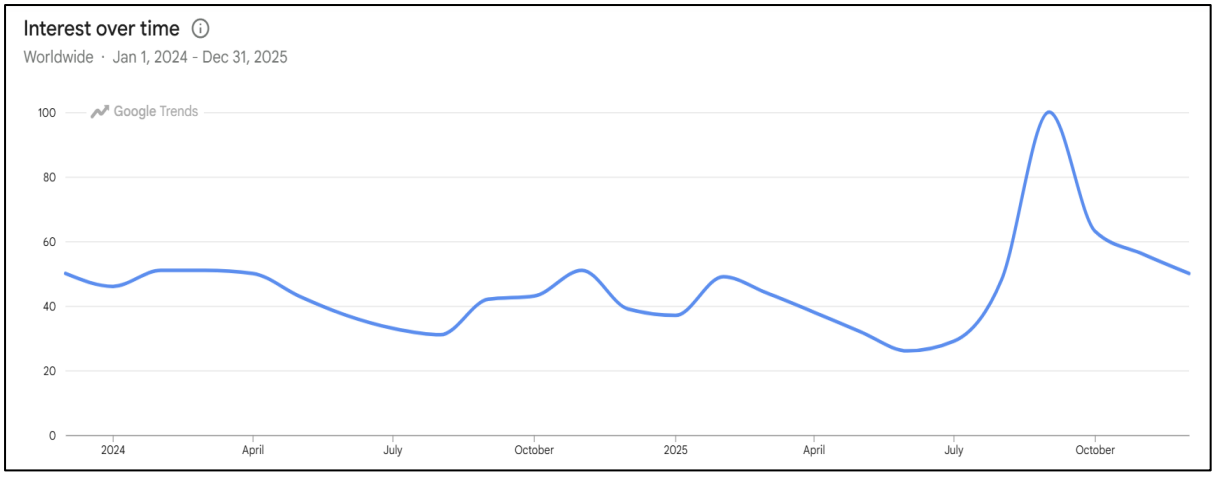

Figure 1. Global Trends in Cancel Culture Topic (2024–2025)
Source: Google Trends

The figure illustrates a Google Trends graph for the topic "Cancel culture" worldwide from 2024 to the end of 2025. The search trend appears to fluctuate, with the highest peak in popularity occurring around October 2024. After declining in mid-2025, interest in this topic rose significantly again toward the end of 2025. This dynamic indicates that the trend of cancel culture continues to evolve within society. Furthermore, within the social media ecosystem, cancel culture practices often intersect with phenomena such as body shaming, slut shaming, and victim blaming, which reinforce social inequality and structural bias. Research shows that digital interactions reproduce patriarchal norms and symbolic violence, as seen in cases of slut shaming against victims of sexual violence, who experience stigma, delegitimization, and "social cancellation" in public spaces (Neupane & Sharma, 2026). Additionally, studies on adolescent interactions on social media indicate that shaming practices are more dominant in group contexts and tend to amplify criticism and social pressure rather than support (Alluhidan et al., 2025; Opesemowo & Taiwo, 2025). This underscores that cancel culture is a complex social construct shaped by cultural norms, power relations, and the dynamics of digital communication.

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Several previous studies have also examined the phenomenon of cancel culture, such as research by Nurfitria (2025) and Yaqinah & Antok (2024), which analyze the development of cancel culture among Muslims in Indonesia. Additionally, a study by Ainy & Zakka (2024) explores the relationship between cancel culture and the Prophet's hadith in a descriptive-comprehensive manner, identifying hadiths on gossip (*ghibah*), the prohibition of exposing others' faults (*satr al-'uyub*), the prohibition of narrating everything one hears, the importance of correcting others' mistakes wisely, and the principle of *tabayyun*. However, these studies have not examined the legal ruling on cancel culture, based on the Prophet's hadith, using a systematic legal methodology. In the legal domain, Fikri (2024) has conducted an analysis of public policy and Islamic law in general. However, this study tends to be normative-legal and does not deeply engage with the textual basis of hadith as a primary source of Islamic teachings. Moreover, the approach remains limited to a legal-sociological framework without incorporating contemporary hermeneutics. Therefore, no study has been found that examines the legal status of cancel culture through a hadith hermeneutical analysis.

This study aims to fill this gap by critically examining the controversy surrounding cancel culture in the practice of public shaming in digital spaces, situating it within the framework of Islamic law, particularly through the analysis of the Prophet's hadith. By employing Abdullah Saeed's contextual interpretation approach, this research seeks to interpret relevant hadiths dynamically in accordance with contemporary contexts, thereby uncovering the underlying moral values. Ultimately, this study aims to formulate a more comprehensive legal construction of cancel culture from the perspective of hadith, taking into account principles of justice, public interest (*maslahah*), and ethical boundaries between *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil) and public judgment practices in the digital era.

This study is based on two contrasting assumptions. First, cancel culture is viewed as a problematic trend arising from a culture of vigilantism, where individuals take judgment into their own hands without proper authority, whereas Islam emphasizes justice through structured procedures rather than impulsive, unprincipled actions. Second, cancel culture is seen as a form of social sanction intended to create a deterrent effect, enforce norms, and compel individuals to adhere to societal standards of behavior. Based on these assumptions, the primary consideration in examining its legal status is how Islamic teachings derived from the Prophet's hadith provide guidance or rulings, followed by an assessment of the benefits (*maslahah*) and harms (*mafsadat*) of cancel culture, to arrive at a well-grounded and scholarly conclusion.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design with a library research approach, focusing on normative and contextual analysis of the Prophet's hadith related to social ethics, such as the prohibition of *tajassus* (spying), *ghibah* (backbiting), as well as the commands of *satr al-'uyub* (concealing others' faults) and *tabayyun* (verification). The approach used is Abdullah Saeed's contextual hermeneutics, which is applied to identify core values and contextual values within the hadith texts. Abdullah Saeed's contextual hermeneutical approach is often used as an analytical tool in Qur'anic studies. However, the author here employs it as an analytical tool in Hadith studies because its theoretical framework is highly suitable and aligned with legal studies in the field of Islamic studies. The contextual hermeneutical approach, in particular, is an upgraded version of Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement theory; therefore, from an academic standpoint, the selection of this theory is a sound decision. Thus, this study not only seeks to understand the textual meaning of hadith but also to transform it into the context of contemporary social phenomena, particularly cancel culture in digital media.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. The primary data are the Prophet's hadith collected from the major hadith compilations (*Kutub al-Sittah*) related to

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the theme of social ethics. Meanwhile, the secondary data include academic literature such as books, reputable journal articles, and previous studies discussing Abdullah Saeed's hermeneutics, Islamic ethics, and the phenomenon of cancel culture. Data collection techniques are carried out through a documentation study by tracing, identifying, and classifying texts relevant to the research focus.

The data analysis technique is conducted descriptively-analytically through stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction is performed by selecting hadiths and literature that have direct relevance to the ethical values under study, then grouping them based on main themes. Data presentation is carried out in the form of analytical narratives that connect the historical context of hadith with contemporary realities through Abdullah Saeed's contextual approach. Furthermore, the analysis integrates the principles of *ushul fiqh* to formulate legal rulings based on substantive values rather than mere textual literalism. Through this approach, the study is able to produce legal formulations that are adaptive, contextual, and firmly rooted in the fundamental values of Islamic teachings.

Result

The Problematics of Cancel Culture in Global Academic Discourse

Cancel culture can generally be understood as a social practice in which individuals or groups withdraw support from a person, institution, or product deemed to have acted or expressed morally unacceptable views, particularly in relation to issues of social justice such as racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination (Janssens & Spreeuwenberg, 2022). This practice often occurs through collective pressure in public spaces, especially on social media, to impose social sanctions, such as damaging reputations, restricting access to public platforms, or even ending someone's career (Norris, 2023). In academic discourse, cancel culture is also viewed as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, as it not only functions as a form of social punishment but can also serve as a means of demanding accountability and amplifying the voices of marginalized groups (Ng, 2022; Janssens & Spreeuwenberg, 2022).

Cancel culture is regarded by scholars as a problematic phenomenon because it lies between the demands of social accountability and the principles of procedural justice. On the one hand, this practice can function as a form of public participation in correcting norm violations through mechanisms of public shaming on social media (Velasco, 2020). However, on the other hand, the absence of clear evaluative standards often results in individuals being "tried" rapidly by public opinion without adequate verification processes. The hypersocial nature of digital media further reinforces this condition by forming a kind of virtual collective consciousness, in which dominant opinions suppress alternative viewpoints and generate a chilling effect on freedom of expression. From a communication perspective, this practice is even categorized as a form of aggressive communication laden with social pressure and destructive criticism (Semenova, 2023).

These problematics become increasingly complex due to the tendency toward moral simplification in cancel culture practices. Many scholars argue that this phenomenon reduces human actions into black-and-white dichotomies without considering context, intention, or the possibility of individual change. Within the social media ecosystem, this condition is exacerbated by the emergence of mob judgment, in which the public acts as a "collective judge" that is difficult to control (Velasco, 2020). The impact is not only felt by individuals but can also extend to the erasure of certain symbols, cultures, or identities in socio-political conflicts (Botti & Bianchi, 2023), thereby potentially deepening social polarization and hindering constructive dialogue.

In addition, the limitations of social media in framing issues of social justice comprehensively further aggravate the problem. Platforms such as Twitter tend to encourage rapid, emotional,

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and fragmented discourse, resulting in narratives that are simplified and often contradictory (Bouvier, 2020). Call-out practices frequently merge various complex issues into a single event, leading to the individualization of problems and the marginalization of structural issues. Participation in cancel culture is also often influenced by subjective norms and social pressure rather than rational considerations (Roldan et al., 2024). In a broader sense, this phenomenon affects social relations and identity formation, particularly among adolescents who face risks of exclusion and obstacles in the process of self-reflection (Van Grunsven & Marin, 2024). Therefore, several studies advocate for a more proportional approach through strengthening digital literacy and inclusive dialogue, so that cancel culture can continue to function as a form of social control without sacrificing procedural justice and the health of social relations (Bouvier, 2020; Van Grunsven & Marin, 2024).

Abdullah Saeed's Thought and the Theory of Contextual Interpretation

Abdullah Saeed is a contemporary Muslim scholar who has made significant contributions to modern Islamic hermeneutics. He was born on September 25, 1964, in the Maldives, and from an early age pursued education in Saudi Arabia, particularly in Arabic language and Islamic studies, from primary to higher education in Madinah. He completed his undergraduate degree (BA) in 1986, before continuing his doctoral studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia, where he earned a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies in 1992. Since 1993, he has been actively engaged as an academic at the university and later became a Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies, as well as director of several research centers, including the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies. His academic experience also includes serving as a Visiting Scholar at SOAS, University of London, along with various administrative and teaching roles in Islamic studies and Qur'anic hermeneutics (Annisa, 2024). Saeed is known as a thinker committed to maintaining the relevance of Islamic teachings (Saeed, 2005). Some studies also place him within the stream of contemporary Islamic reformism, which emphasizes rationality and the historicity of the text (Saeed, 2013; Akbar & Saeed, 2019). This approach aligns with academic trends that view interpretation as a dynamic process shaped by social and intellectual contexts (Laabdi, 2014). With a cross-cultural educational background and global academic experience, his thoughts have developed within a framework that integrates classical tradition with modern needs.

Abdullah Saeed's theory of contextual interpretation is based on the assumption that the Qur'an contains both universal values and particular instructions tied to historical contexts. He develops the concept of a *hierarchy of values*, which distinguishes between core values (such as justice and compassion) and specific rules that emerged from the social conditions of the 7th century. This approach allows flexibility in the application of law without neglecting the fundamental principles of Islam (Saeed, 2013). Saeed also emphasizes the importance of analyzing both the historical context and the contemporary context so that the moral message of the Qur'an remains relevant. This perspective is supported by studies showing that many ethico-legal texts in the Qur'an are closely related to the social conditions at the time of revelation (Saeed & Akbar, 2021). Furthermore, the contextual approach is consistent with developments in modern hermeneutics, which stress the interaction between text, context, and reader (Esack, 1997). Thus, Saeed's theory is not merely a reinterpretation but a methodology for actualizing Qur'anic values in the modern world.

Saeed's contextual approach bears a strong resemblance to Fazlur Rahman's *double movement* theory. Rahman proposes two steps: first, understanding the text within its historical context; and second, extracting universal moral principles to be applied in the modern context (Rahman, 1982). Saeed adopts this approach by emphasizing that understanding the original context is essential before applying verses to contemporary situations. Both reject narrow literalism and place moral values at the center of interpretation. Moreover, both are influenced by the idea that revelation should be understood as a response to specific social realities (Rahman, 2009).

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Despite these similarities, there are fundamental differences between Saeed and Rahman. Rahman places greater emphasis on a philosophical method through the *double movement* as a systematic framework for extracting universal moral principles. His approach is theoretical and oriented toward reconstructing Islamic ethics as a whole. In contrast, Saeed develops a more applicable approach by introducing a classification of verses based on levels of flexibility through the *hierarchy of values*. Saeed divides this classification into three concepts. First, *core values* refer to universal principles in the Qur'an that are constant, such as justice, compassion, and public welfare, and thus apply across all times and places. Second, *contextual values* are those that emerge from specific social and historical contexts, such as rules related to the conditions of Arab society at the time of revelation. Third, *specific instructions* are practical provisions containing technical rules that may change according to the development of time and societal needs (Saeed, 2026; Saeed & Akbar, 2021). Through this approach, Saeed provides a practical tool for determining whether a verse should be applied literally or contextually. This distinction is also noted in modern hermeneutical studies, which show that Saeed focuses more on practical implementation, while Rahman emphasizes normative methodology (Saeed & Akbar, 2021). Thus, Rahman offers a theoretical framework, whereas Saeed provides a more operational analytical instrument for contemporary interpretive practice.

Saeed's contextual thought is influenced by various intellectual and social factors. Intellectually, he draws inspiration from reformist thinkers such as Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Abduh, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who emphasize rationality and the historicity of revelation (Zayd, 2005). In addition, global issues such as human rights, pluralism, and democracy have also shaped his approach. Saeed argues that without contextual reinterpretation, Islamic teachings risk being understood rigidly and becoming irrelevant (Saeed & Akbar, 2021). Furthermore, the influence of Western hermeneutics and the historical study of religion has contributed to shaping his perspective (Neuwirth et al., 2010). Therefore, Saeed's theory represents an interaction between Islamic tradition and modern thought, aimed at maintaining the relevance of the Qur'an in a globalized world.

The Context of Hadiths on the Phenomenon of Cancel Culture

The phenomenon of cancel culture in digital spaces reflects a shift in patterns of social interaction, often characterized by public judgment, the spread of unverified information, and the mass exposure of individual wrongdoing in public arenas. From the perspective of Islamic teachings, this phenomenon is closely related to several ethical principles established in the Prophet's hadith, such as the prohibition of seeking others' faults (*tajassus*), backbiting (*ghibah*), exposing others' faults, and the command to verify information (*tabayyun*). In this context, the hadith on *tajassus* becomes a primary reference, as it explicitly prohibits seeking out others' faults and spying—actions that, in many cases, serve as key triggers for cancel culture practices. A review of the *tajassus* hadiths in the six major hadith collections (*Kutub al-Sittah*) reveals five narrations: three in *Sahih al-Bukhari* (nos. 5143, 6063, 6066), one in *Sahih Muslim* (no. 2563), and one in *Sunan Abi Dawud* (no. 4917). An analysis of the *Kutub al-Sittah* (*Sahih* and *Sunan*) was chosen because they are considered primary sources (core texts) in hadith studies, and their sources have been verified. All narrated by the Companion Abu Hurairah, as follows:

6066 – Narrated to us by 'Abdullah ibn Yusuf: reported to us by Malik, from Abu al-Zinad, from al-A'raj, from Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him), that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: "Beware of suspicion, for suspicion is the most false of speech. Do not seek out others' faults, do not spy on one another, do not engage in *najash* (artificially inflating prices), do not envy one another, do not hate one another, do not turn away from one another, but be servants of Allah as brothers." (Al-Bukhari, vol. 8, p. 19, 2001).

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This hadith, which prohibits suspicion, *tajassus*, and other negative social behaviors, emerged within the context of forming the *madani* (civil) society of Madinah, which sought to move beyond pre-Islamic Arab social patterns characterized by suspicion, rivalry, and exploitation. Practices such as fault-finding, spying, and economic manipulation (*najash*) were phenomena that could undermine public trust and social cohesion. Through this hadith, the Prophet (peace be upon him) not only prohibited such actions normatively but also reformed the ethical structure of society by emphasizing the importance of information verification, protection of privacy, and control of negative emotions such as envy and hatred. Thus, this hadith reflects a moral transformation from a *tribal society* (*mujtama' qabali*) to a civilized society grounded in justice, honesty, and solidarity, as the Prophet said: "Do not seek out others' faults, do not spy on one another, do not engage in *najash* (artificially inflating prices), do not envy one another, do not hate one another, do not turn away from one another, but be servants of Allah as brothers". The core ethical values derived from this hadith include the protection of individual dignity (*ḥifẓ al-'irḍ*), information integrity, and the establishment of social relations based on trust and brotherhood. The prohibition of *tajassus* and *tahassus* indicates that Islam closes the door to any form of exposing faults without legitimate ethical grounds, while the prohibition of suspicion underscores the importance of responsible epistemology in judging others.

In line with this, just as the hadith on *tajassus* emphasizes the prohibition of fault-finding as a root cause of social harm, subsequent hadiths expand this ethical dimension into the realm of communication and information dissemination. A review of *Kutub al-Sittah* shows that hadiths on *ghibah* are found in three sources: *Sahih Muslim* (no. 2589), *Sunan Abi Dawud* (no. 4874), and *Sunan al-Tirmidhi* (no. 2047), all narrated by Abu Hurairah. These hadiths affirm that mentioning something about your brother that he dislikes—even if it is true, constitutes *ghibah*, demonstrating that ethical violations lie not only in falsehood but also in the manner of conveying truth that harms another's dignity. This principle is further reinforced by hadiths on the prohibition of exposing others' faults (*satr al-'uyub*), found in multiple major hadith collections, including narrations by 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar in *Sahih al-Bukhari* (no. 2442), *Sahih Muslim* (no. 2580), and *Sunan Abi Dawud* (no. 4893), as well as narrations by Abu Hurairah in *Sunan Abi Dawud* (no. 4946), *Sunan al-Tirmidhi* (nos. 1487, 2043), and *Sunan Ibn Majah* (no. 225). These hadiths emphasize that whoever conceals the faults of their brother, Allah will conceal their faults in this world and the Hereafter. Thus, while *tajassus* prevents the initial act of uncovering faults, the prohibition of *ghibah* and the command of *satr al-'uyub* function as subsequent mechanisms to prevent the spread and amplification of such faults in public spaces, forming a comprehensive ethical system for safeguarding individual dignity and social stability, as reflected in the following hadiths:

2589 – Narrated to us by Yahya ibn Ayyub, Qutaybah, and Ibn Hujr; they said: narrated to us by Isma'il, from al-'Ala', from his father, from Abu Hurairah, that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: "Do you know what backbiting (*ghibah*) is?" They said: Allah and His Messenger know best. He said: "It is mentioned about your brother what he dislikes." It was said: What if what I say about my brother is true? He said: "If what you say is true, then you have backbitten him; and if it is not true, then you have slandered him." (Muslim, vol. 8, p. 21, 2013).

2442 – Narrated to us by Yahya ibn Bukayr: narrated to us by al-Layth, from 'Uqayl, from Ibn Shihab, that Salim informed him that 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with them) informed him that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: "A Muslim is the brother of another Muslim; he does not wrongfully (*zalim*) harm him nor abandon him. Whoever fulfills the needs of his brother, Allah will fulfill his needs. Whoever relieves a Muslim of a hardship, Allah will relieve him of a hardship on the Day of Resurrection. And whoever conceals a Muslim's faults, Allah will conceal his faults on the Day of Resurrection." (Al-Bukhari, vol. 3, p. 128, 2001).

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In their historical context, hadiths on *ghibah* and *satr al-'uyub* emerged as part of the Prophet Muhammad's efforts to build ethical communication and social cohesion within the plural society of Madinah, which was transitioning from tribal patterns to a civilized social order. Pre-Islamic traditions characterized by ridicule, mockery, and the exposure of others' faults posed serious challenges to social stability. Therefore, the prohibition of *ghibah* was not merely intended as individual moral control but also as a social instrument to prevent community disintegration caused by damaged reputations and personal honor. Meanwhile, the command to conceal others' faults operates within a framework of collective solidarity, where each individual is seen as part of a single social body that must protect rather than undermine one another. In this sense, these hadiths reflect the Prophet's broader project of building a *civil society* (*mujtama' madani*) grounded in trust, dignity, and social responsibility.

The core ethical value derived from the hadith on *ghibah* is the importance of verbal integrity and the protection of individual dignity (*ḥifẓ al-'irḍ*). This hadith explicitly defines that even conveying something true, if it is degrading and disliked by the person concerned, constitutes an ethical violation. This indicates that truth in Islam does not stand alone as moral justification but must be considered alongside its social impact. In other words, Islamic communication ethics are impact-oriented rather than merely fact-oriented. The hadith on *satr al-'uyub* adds further ethical dimensions, including empathy, privacy protection, and collective social responsibility, where concealing others' faults is seen as a moral investment rewarded by divine protection. This value also suggests that Islam promotes a restorative culture rather than a destructive exposure of individual faults.

Overall, these hadiths demonstrate ethical continuity with the hadith on *tajassus*, forming a layered system for protecting individual dignity: from the prohibition of fault-finding (pre-information), to the prohibition of spreading wrongdoing (information distribution), and finally to the encouragement of concealing faults (post-information). However, this protection does not imply the absolute suppression of truth; rather, it requires a responsible epistemological mechanism in responding to information. Thus, as the ethical progression of these hadiths moves from prevention to information management, the next stage emphasizes verification as the foundation of informational justice. In this regard, the Prophet, in other narrations, demonstrated that truth must be established through careful clarification (*tabayyun*), ensuring that injustice does not arise from unverified information.

2539 – Narrated to us by Ibn Abi Maryam, who said: al-Layth informed me, from 'Uqayl, from Ibn Shihab: 'Urwah mentioned that Marwan and al-Miswar ibn Makhramah informed him: "That the Prophet (peace be upon him) stood when the delegation of Hawazin came to him. They asked him to return their property and their captives. He said: 'Those with me are those you see, and the most beloved speech to me is the most truthful. So choose one of the two: either the property or the captives. I have already waited for you.' The Prophet (peace be upon him) had waited for them for more than ten nights after returning from Ta'if. When it became clear to them that the Prophet would not return to them except one of the two, they said: 'We choose our captives.' Then the Prophet (peace be upon him) stood among the people, praised Allah as He deserves, and said: 'As for what follows, your brothers have come to us in repentance, and I think to return their captives to them. Whoever among you is willing to forgo his share, let him do so. And whoever prefers to retain his share until we compensate him from what Allah grants us in the future, let him do so.'

The people said: 'We willingly forgo it.' He said: 'We do not know who among you has given permission and who has not, so return until your leaders convey your decision to us.' The people returned, their leaders consulted them, and then came back to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and informed him that they had willingly consented." This is what has reached us regarding the captives of Hawazin. Anas added: al-'Abbas said to the Prophet (peace be upon him), "I ransomed myself and I ransomed 'Aqil." (Al-Bukhari, vol. 3, p. 147-148, 2001).

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In its historical context, this hadith related to *tabayyun* (verification), connected to the event of the Hawazin delegation, demonstrates how the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) managed information and public decision-making with caution in a sensitive post-conflict socio-political situation. The request to return property and captives was not decided unilaterally; rather, it went through a process of clarification, consultation, and verification of collective consent. The Prophet even emphasized the uncertainty of the initial information by requiring reconfirmation through tribal leaders. This reflects that in the Madinan society—then in the process of building a system of social justice—truth was not determined merely by claims or assumptions, but through a transparent and participatory validation process. The core ethical value derived from this hadith is epistemological integrity and responsibility in verifying information, where every socially impactful decision must be based on clear data and legitimate consent. Thus, *tabayyun* functions as the final pillar in the ethical system of Islamic communication, not only preventing errors in the transmission of information but also ensuring that social justice is upheld through processes that are accurate, fair, and accountable.

Legal Formulation through Contextual Analysis

Within the framework of Abdullah Saeed's contextual hermeneutics, the stage of legal formulation cannot be separated from efforts to bridge the ethical values contained in hadith texts with the dynamics of contemporary social realities (Saeed, 2026). Although Abdullah Saeed's contextual hermeneutical approach is often used as an analytical tool in Qur'anic studies, this research still employs it as an analytical tool in hadith studies because its theoretical framework is highly suitable and aligned with legal studies within the field of Islamic sciences. The contextual hermeneutical approach, in particular, is a refined version of Fazlur Rahman's Dual Movement theory; therefore, from an academic perspective, the selection of this theory is an appropriate decision. After identifying the historical context and core moral values of relevant hadiths, such as the prohibitions of *tajassus* (fault-finding), *ghibah* (backbiting), and the commands of *satr al-'uyub* (concealing faults) and *tabayyun* (verification), the next step is to examine how these values operate within the modern digital landscape that gives rise to the phenomenon of cancel culture. Cancel culture can generally be understood as a social practice in which individuals or groups withdraw support from a person, institution, or product deemed to have acted or expressed morally unacceptable views, particularly in relation to issues of social justice such as racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination (Janssens & Spreeuwenberg, 2022). This approach aligns with the principle that religious texts should not be understood merely literally but must be interpreted contextually, taking into account changes in social structures and patterns of human interaction. Thus, legal analysis does not stop at reproducing classical norms but moves toward formulating ethical frameworks that are responsive to contemporary challenges.

From the perspective of hadith, the primary ethical values emphasized include the protection of individual dignity (*ḥifẓ al-'irḍ*), the integrity of information, and the control of destructive social emotions. The prohibition of *tajassus* closes the door to attempts at seeking others' faults, while the prohibition of *ghibah* asserts that even truth conveyed in a degrading manner remains an ethical violation. Meanwhile, the command of *satr al-'uyub* promotes a protective attitude toward individual faults, and the principle of *tabayyun* requires verification before taking a stance. These values demonstrate that Islamic ethics are both preventive and restorative, aiming to preserve social cohesion and prevent disproportionate reputational harm. However, when these values encounter contemporary realities, significant tensions arise.

In many cases, cancel culture is triggered by controversies involving public figures, both global and local, which then generate massive collective reactions in digital spaces. A prominent example can be seen in the global response to statements or policies of several world leaders regarding the Palestine conflict, where support for military actions or rejection of Palestinian independence has sparked waves of boycotts, criticism, and even "social cancellation" of

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individuals and institutions perceived as involved (Fraihat & Ezbidi, 2024; Lazin, 2023). In this context, the legal framework within the culture of boycotts targets world leaders as the objects of boycotts on social media, as it is believed that the policies they enact lack fairness within the political and ethical order. This understanding serves as an instrument of moral and political pressure—whereby a group that originally had no power can gain power through its numerical dominance. Consequently, there has been a shift in the law: what was originally forbidden—backbiting—is now permitted, taking into account the potential harm (*mafasid*) and benefits (*masalih*) (Botti & Bianchi, 2023).

At the micro level, unintentional mistakes are often amplified by the logic of social media virality, thereby triggering disproportionate collective attacks (Alluhidan et al., 2025). This condition is further exacerbated by the characteristics of platforms such as Twitter/X, which encourage rapid, emotional, and fragmented discourse, resulting in complex issues being reduced to simplified moral narratives (Bouvier, 2020). Consequently, cancel culture often operates as a "collective spontaneous reaction" that disregards procedural justice and verification, thereby risking damage to individuals' reputations without adequate opportunities for defense (Norris, 2023).

The problem becomes more evident when the practice transforms into impulsive and disproportionate mob judgment, as seen in cases of harassment against public figures due to minor mistakes, such as unintentional lyrical errors by musicians in Indonesia (Pratama, 2026). This phenomenon indicates a shift from value-based ethics toward reactive morality driven by collective emotions. When compared with the principles of hadith, this practice contradicts *tabayyun* and the prohibition of *ghibah*, thereby placing cancel culture in an ambivalent position between legitimate social correction and public judgment that exceeds moral boundaries. Through the framework of the hierarchy of values, prohibitions in hadith are not understood rigidly, but as manifestations of core values such as justice and the protection of dignity. Therefore, a literal approach that rejects all forms of public criticism becomes inadequate.

The substantive relevance of hadith instead opens space for differentiating between corrective criticism and destructive exposure. From the perspective of *ushul fiqh*, this aligns with the maxim "matters are judged by their objectives" (*al-umur bi maqasidiha*), where the evaluation of actions depends on their objectives. Criticism based on public interest may be justified, whereas actions aimed at bringing down individuals contradict the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, particularly *ḥifẓ al-ʿirḍ*.

In addition, the maxim "preventing harm takes precedence over attaining benefit" (*dar ul mafasid muqaddamun ala jalbil masalih*) emphasizes that preventing harm must take precedence. Although cancel culture sometimes generates social pressure against violations, its negative impacts (such as reputational damage, psychological distress, and procedural injustice) are often more dominant. The principle of *tabayyun* becomes an important epistemological boundary, as many practices occur without adequate verification. This is reinforced by the maxim "there should be neither harm nor reciprocating harm" (*la darar wa la dirar*), which prohibits all forms of actions that cause harm, thereby rendering disproportionate social punishment normatively unjustifiable.

On the other hand, under certain conditions, public exposure may become an ethical necessity, especially when it relates to public interest. The maxim "whatever is necessary to fulfill an obligation becomes obligatory" (*ma la yatimmu al-wajib illa bihi fahuwa wajib*) provides space for legitimizing public criticism that is proportional, evidence-based, and constructive in purpose. However, this legitimacy is limited and requires clear verification, valid objectives, and modes of expression that still preserve individual dignity. Without these boundaries, corrective actions risk transforming into ethical violations.

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Based on the overall analysis, the legal ruling on cancel culture is contextual and not singular. Practices that are impulsive, unverified, and aimed at bringing down individuals without a fair process are categorized as impermissible (*ḥarām*) because they contradict the principles of *ḥifẓ al-ʻirḍ*, *tabayyun*, and the maxim "there should be neither harm nor reciprocating harm" (*la darar wa la dirar*). Conversely, public criticism that is evidence-based, proportional, and oriented toward public interest may be categorized as permissible (*mubāḥ*), and may even become obligatory under certain conditions in accordance with *maqāṣid al-sharīʻah*. Thus, the legal cause (*ʻillat*) is determined by four main aspects: verification of information, the objective of the action (corrective or destructive), proportionality of impact, and its implications for individual dignity and social justice.

Conclusion

This study finds that the phenomenon of cancel culture in the digital world cannot be assessed in a black-and-white manner through a literal approach to hadith texts; rather, it must be understood through the framework of the substantive values they contain. The hadiths that prohibit *tajassus* (fault-finding), *ghibah* (backbiting), and encourage *satr al-'uyub* (concealing faults) and *tabayyun* (verification) are fundamentally oriented toward the protection of individual dignity (*ḥifẓ al-'irḍ*), justice, and social integrity. However, in the contemporary context, cancel culture reflects a crossroads: on the one hand, it functions as a mechanism of social control over norm violations by public figures, but on the other hand, it often develops into a form of impulsive, unverified, and disproportionate *mob judgment*. Through Abdullah Saeed's contextual hermeneutical approach, this study affirms that the relevance of hadith lies in its core values rather than its literal form. Accordingly, cancel culture practices driven by collective emotion and aimed at bringing down individuals without due process are considered contrary to Islamic ethical principles, while evidence-based public criticism with corrective intent may be justified within certain limits.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its integrative effort to connect classical hadith studies with contemporary social phenomena through a contextual hermeneutical approach. It not only expands the application of Abdullah Saeed's *hierarchy of values* theory within hadith studies but also offers a legal formulation grounded in *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and principles of *ushul fiqh* in responding to contemporary digital phenomena. By linking the normative values of hadith with the realities of social media, this study provides a new perspective that Islamic ethics possess the flexibility to address modern challenges without losing their moral substance.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, it is normative-conceptual in nature and is not yet supported by empirical field data on cancel culture practices within Muslim communities specifically. Second, the hadith analysis focuses primarily on thematic and contextual aspects without an in-depth exploration of *isnad* (chain of transmission) criticism. Third, the scope of the study is limited to Abdullah Saeed's hermeneutical perspective and does not broadly compare it with other hermeneutical approaches in Islamic studies. Therefore, future research is recommended to develop empirical studies on the impact of cancel culture in Muslim communities, conduct methodological comparisons with other interpretive approaches in Qur'anic and hadith studies, and expand the analysis to include digital regulation and global ethics. In this way, the study of cancel culture will not remain at a purely normative level but will also provide contextual and applicable practical solutions.

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