

The Scientific Authority of Ulama in the Era of Social Media Algorithms and the Shift in the Legitimacy of Islamic Fatwas

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Abstract

The rise of social media has introduced a new space for the formation and negotiation of religious authority within contemporary Muslim societies. Digital platforms have transformed the ways Islamic knowledge and fatwas are disseminated, accessed, and legitimized, shifting authority from traditional scholarly institutions toward algorithmically amplified religious actors. This transformation raises critical concerns regarding the legitimacy of Islamic fatwas in an era where visibility, popularity, and audience engagement increasingly shape public trust. The growing influence of algorithms challenges long-established models of ulama authority rooted in scholarly competence, methodological rigor, and institutional recognition. This study aims to analyze the shifting dynamics of Islamic scholarly authority in the context of social media and algorithmic governance. It focuses on examining how algorithms influence the circulation of fatwas, redefine patterns of religious legitimacy, and create tensions between scholarly expertise and digital popularity. Employing a qualitative research design with a conceptual-analytical approach, this study relies on systematic literature review and critical discourse analysis of academic publications on Islamic authority, digital religion, and social media published between 2019 and 2026. The findings reveal that social media algorithms play a decisive role in shaping religious visibility and public preference, often privileging simplified, emotionally engaging religious content over methodologically grounded scholarship. This

condition produces a structural gap between traditional ulama authority and digitally popular religious figures. The study further highlights adaptive responses by ulama and religious institutions, ranging from strategic digital engagement to ethical resistance. Theoretically, this research contributes to contemporary debates on religious authority and digital mediation. Practically, it underscores the need for integrating digital ethics and media literacy into Islamic scholarship to safeguard the integrity of fatwa production in the algorithmic age.

Keywords

Islamic Authority; Fatwa Legitimacy; Social Media Algorithms; Digital Religion

Introduction

The scholarly authority of *ulama* has long constituted a fundamental pillar of Islamic intellectual tradition. Since the classical period, the legitimacy of *ulama* has been constructed through mastery of Islamic disciplines such as the Qur'an, Hadith, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, and *fiqh*, acquired through prolonged educational processes, well-established chains of knowledge transmission (*sanad*), and recognition within scholarly communities. Within this framework, *ulama* function not merely as conveyors of religious teachings but as custodians of normative authority in Islamic law and fatwa issuance. This structure ensures that religious interpretations are produced through rigorous methodological standards and ethical responsibility.

However, the rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed this traditional configuration of religious authority. The digitalization of information has enabled Islamic teachings and legal opinions to circulate widely without mediation by formal religious institutions. Social media platforms have emerged as new arenas for the production and dissemination of religious knowledge, allowing diverse actors to participate in shaping Islamic discourse. This transformation signals a fundamental shift in the structure of Islamic authority, from institution-based and scholarly-centered systems toward more open, participatory, and fragmented forms of authority (Hamdani, 2023).

In this context, social media functions not merely as a communication tool but as a powerful mechanism for constructing

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religious meaning. Platform algorithms play a decisive role in determining which content gains visibility and which remains marginal. Religious content that attracts attention, generates engagement, and is easily consumable is often prioritized by algorithms, regardless of its scholarly depth or methodological rigor. As a result, popularity becomes a key determinant of religious authority in digital spaces, reshaping how legitimacy is perceived and recognized by audiences (Firdaus & Sidik, 2024).

This phenomenon has direct implications for the legitimacy of Islamic fatwas. In the classical tradition, fatwas were issued by scholars possessing recognized scholarly authority and moral responsibility toward the Muslim community. In the digital era, however, legal opinions and religious guidance are frequently delivered by social media figures whose influence derives from visibility and audience engagement rather than formal scholarly credentials. Studies indicate that digital audiences often assess religious authority based on popularity metrics, follower counts, and communicative style, rather than on scholarly competence or methodological soundness in legal reasoning (Fitriansyah & Lubis, 2025).

Such conditions create a growing gap between scholarly authority and digital popularity. Traditional *ulama* with strong academic legitimacy often struggle to gain algorithmic visibility due to communicative styles that are less compatible with the logic of social media platforms. Conversely, figures who possess rhetorical appeal and digital proficiency tend to dominate public attention. This imbalance has the potential to reshape public perceptions regarding who is considered a legitimate religious authority in contemporary Islamic discourse (Ulyan, 2023).

Moreover, the dominance of algorithms in shaping religious content distribution raises critical ethical and epistemological concerns. Algorithms operate primarily on the basis of engagement optimization and economic incentives, rather than truthfulness or scholarly reliability. When such mechanisms govern religious communication, there is a heightened risk of oversimplifying Islamic teachings, intensifying polarization, and normalizing instantaneous fatwas that lack contextual depth. These tendencies pose serious challenges to the Islamic scholarly tradition, which emphasizes

deliberation, methodological precision, and moral accountability in legal interpretation (Fadilla & Indriyani, 2025).

At the same time, digital platforms also present new opportunities for expanding access to Islamic knowledge and strengthening religious literacy, particularly among younger generations. Social media enables broader participation in religious learning and facilitates engagement with Islamic teachings beyond conventional institutional settings. However, without a clear framework of scholarly authority, this openness may lead to epistemological confusion, where audiences struggle to distinguish between well-grounded scholarly interpretations and personal opinions presented in appealing digital formats. Consequently, understanding the dynamics of *ulama's* scholarly authority in the age of algorithms becomes an urgent concern within contemporary Islamic studies (Rahmah, 2025).

The urgency of this research lies in its effort to address these challenges through a systematic academic inquiry. While studies on digital da'wah have grown significantly, research that specifically examines the relationship between social media algorithms, digital popularity, and the legitimacy of Islamic fatwas remains relatively limited. This study offers a novel contribution by positioning algorithms as a critical variable in analyzing shifts in religious authority, while simultaneously exploring their implications for the epistemological foundations of Islamic legal discourse in digital public spaces.

Based on this background, the present study seeks to address several key questions: how scholarly authority of *ulama* is understood within the context of social media; how digital algorithms influence the legitimacy of Islamic fatwas; and why a gap emerges between scholarly authority and digital popularity. The objectives of this study are to analyze the transformation of religious authority in the algorithmic era, to examine the role of social media in shaping contemporary fatwa discourse, and to contribute conceptually to efforts aimed at reinforcing scholarly authority in response to the challenges of digitalization.

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Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design with a conceptual-analytical approach. The research is aimed at examining shifts in *ulama's* scholarly authority in the context of social media and algorithmic governance. The qualitative approach is chosen to capture the complexity of religious authority, legitimacy, and discourse formation that cannot be adequately measured through quantitative methods alone. The study relies on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and authoritative scholarly publications related to Islamic studies, digital religion, social media, and algorithmic influence published between 2019 and 2026. Data collection is conducted through systematic literature review and document analysis to ensure relevance, credibility, and academic rigor.

The unit of analysis in this research consists of scholarly discussions on religious authority, fatwa legitimacy, and digital media practices within contemporary Islamic discourse. The object of the study focuses on the interaction between traditional *ulama* authority and digital popularity shaped by social media algorithms. Data analysis is carried out using thematic and critical discourse analysis to identify recurring patterns, conceptual shifts, and underlying assumptions regarding authority and legitimacy in digital religious spaces. To maintain analytical focus, this study is limited to examining Islamic scholarly authority in relation to social media platforms and does not include empirical fieldwork or audience reception studies. This delimitation allows the research to concentrate on conceptual clarity and theoretical contribution within the framework of contemporary Islamic studies.

Result

The findings indicate that the dissemination of fatwas and religious discourse on social media follows patterns driven primarily by platform algorithms rather than by established scholarly hierarchies. Religious content that is concise, emotionally engaging, and visually appealing tends to spread more rapidly and reach wider audiences. In this context, legitimacy in digital religious spaces is often constructed through indicators such as visibility, follower numbers, and audience interaction. These indicators function as alternative

markers of authority, gradually reshaping public perceptions of who is considered a credible religious voice. As a result, scholarly authority rooted in formal education and methodological rigor increasingly competes with popularity-based legitimacy generated through algorithmic amplification.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals a strong correlation between algorithms, popularity, and the perceived authority of religious figures in digital environments. Algorithms prioritize content with high engagement, indirectly elevating certain religious actors regardless of their scholarly credentials. This dynamic creates an uneven landscape in which digitally skilled communicators gain prominence, while traditionally authoritative *ulama* may experience reduced visibility. In response, some *ulama* and religious institutions have begun adapting to digital platforms by establishing official social media channels and producing content tailored to algorithmic logic, while others maintain conventional modes of religious communication. These varied responses reflect ongoing negotiations between preserving scholarly integrity and adapting to the realities of digital religious engagement.

Discussion

Shifting Concepts of Scholarly Authority in Contemporary Islam

The concept of scholarly authority (*al-sulṭah al-ʿilmiyyah*) in Islam has undergone a significant transformation in contemporary contexts, particularly with the rise of digital media. Traditionally, the authority of *ulama* was grounded in epistemic legitimacy derived from mastery of Islamic sciences, long-term scholarly training, and recognition within established religious institutions. Authority was not merely performative but normative, functioning as a mechanism to regulate interpretation, ensure methodological discipline, and preserve continuity within Islamic legal and theological traditions. In this classical framework, the credibility of a scholar was inseparable from scholarly lineage, ethical responsibility, and adherence to established interpretive methodologies.

In contrast, contemporary digital environments have reshaped the meaning of authority by introducing new criteria of recognition and legitimacy. Authority is increasingly constructed through

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visibility, audience reach, and digital engagement rather than through formal scholarly credentials. Social media platforms enable religious figures to communicate directly with audiences, bypassing institutional mediation and traditional gatekeeping mechanisms. As a result, authority in digital Islam often appears fluid, decentralized, and contingent upon audience perception rather than scholarly consensus (Hamdani, 2023). This shift marks a transformation from epistemic authority to performative authority, where persuasive communication and digital presence play decisive roles.

The transformation of *ulama's* authority is further intensified by the logic of platform algorithms. Algorithms privilege content that generates interaction, emotional resonance, and rapid circulation, which often favors simplified religious messages over complex scholarly argumentation. Consequently, classical forms of scholarly authority rooted in caution, depth, and methodological rigor face structural disadvantages in digital spaces. Studies demonstrate that algorithmic prioritization tends to amplify voices that align with platform logic, regardless of their scholarly standing, thereby redefining public perceptions of religious credibility (Firdaus & Sidik, 2024; Fitriansyah & Lubis, 2025).

When compared to classical authority, digital authority lacks stable mechanisms of accountability. Classical *ulama* operated within institutional frameworks that regulated fatwa issuance and scholarly debate, ensuring ethical responsibility and communal oversight. In contrast, digital religious authority often emerges in individualized and fragmented forms, where religious opinions circulate rapidly without systematic verification. This condition risks diluting the epistemological foundations of Islamic scholarship and encourages the normalization of instant legal opinions detached from methodological deliberation (Fadilla & Indriyani, 2025).

Nevertheless, it would be reductive to view this transformation solely as a decline of scholarly authority. Digital platforms also offer opportunities for rearticulating *ulama's* authority in new forms. Some scholars and religious institutions have successfully adapted by translating classical knowledge into accessible digital formats while maintaining methodological integrity. These efforts suggest that the transformation of authority is not a complete rupture but rather a

reconfiguration shaped by technological mediation and social change (Ulyan, 2023).

In this sense, the comparison between classical and digital authority reveals a fundamental tension within contemporary Islam: the struggle to preserve epistemic depth while navigating a media environment driven by speed and visibility. The shift in authority reflects broader changes in how knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimized in modern societies. Understanding this transformation is essential for developing strategies that reinforce scholarly credibility without ignoring the realities of digital religious engagement (Rahmah, 2025).

Social Media Algorithms as Determinants of Religious Authority

Social media algorithms play a central role in reshaping religious authority in contemporary Islamic discourse by determining which fatwas and religious messages gain public visibility. Unlike traditional modes of knowledge transmission that relied on institutional endorsement and scholarly consensus, digital platforms operate through algorithmic systems designed to maximize user engagement. These systems prioritize content based on metrics such as likes, shares, watch time, and comments. As a result, fatwas and religious opinions that are concise, emotionally resonant, and visually appealing are more likely to be amplified, regardless of their scholarly depth or methodological rigor (Firdaus & Sidik, 2024).

This algorithmic logic significantly alters the circulation of Islamic legal discourse. Fatwas that once required careful contextual explanation and scholarly justification are increasingly reformulated into simplified narratives suitable for rapid consumption. The algorithm thus functions as an invisible gatekeeper, shaping not only the visibility of religious content but also its form and substance. Scholars note that algorithmic amplification often favors certainty, polarization, and immediacy over nuance and deliberation, which are essential elements of classical Islamic legal reasoning (Fitriansyah & Lubis, 2025). Consequently, authority in digital religious spaces becomes closely tied to communicative effectiveness rather than epistemic reliability.

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The impact of algorithms extends beyond visibility to influence public religious preferences and orientations. As users repeatedly encounter certain types of religious content, algorithms reinforce specific interpretations and normative positions through personalization mechanisms. This process creates what scholars describe as algorithmic religious echo chambers, where audiences are continuously exposed to homogeneous viewpoints that align with their prior interactions. Over time, this repetition contributes to the normalization of particular fatwa styles and theological orientations, shaping public perceptions of what constitutes mainstream or authentic Islam (Fadilla & Indriyani, 2025).

Moreover, algorithm-driven exposure affects how audiences evaluate religious authority. Public trust increasingly shifts toward figures who dominate digital spaces, leading to the perception that visibility equates to credibility. This transformation has profound implications for Islamic epistemology, as authority becomes audience-centered rather than knowledge-centered. Studies indicate that many users prioritize accessibility and relatability over scholarly credentials, thereby redefining the criteria by which religious legitimacy is assessed in everyday practice (Hamdani, 2023).

At the same time, algorithmic influence creates structural inequalities among religious actors. Traditional *ulama* and official religious institutions often face challenges in adapting their communication styles to the demands of digital platforms without compromising scholarly integrity. Meanwhile, digitally fluent religious influencers gain disproportionate authority through algorithmic reinforcement. This asymmetry underscores the role of technology as an active agent in reshaping religious hierarchies rather than a neutral medium of communication (Ulyan, 2023).

Nevertheless, awareness of algorithmic power has prompted strategic responses from some religious institutions. By developing digital literacy, producing contextually rich yet accessible content, and engaging ethically with platform logic, certain *ulama* seek to reclaim visibility without abandoning scholarly standards. These efforts suggest that while algorithms significantly shape religious authority, their influence is not absolute and can be negotiated through informed and critical engagement (Rahmah, 2025).

Legitimacy of Fatwa between Scholarly Competence and Digital Popularity

The legitimacy of fatwa in contemporary Islamic discourse increasingly unfolds within a tension between scholarly competence and digital popularity. In the classical Islamic tradition, fatwa legitimacy was grounded in rigorous scholarly qualifications, mastery of legal methodology, and ethical accountability toward the Muslim community. Fatwas were not merely legal opinions but carefully reasoned responses rooted in established interpretive frameworks and collective scholarly norms. This epistemic foundation ensured that legal judgments were produced through deliberation, contextual awareness, and methodological discipline.

In contrast, the digital environment introduces popularity as a competing source of legitimacy. Social media platforms reward visibility, immediacy, and emotional appeal, often privileging religious content that resonates quickly with broad audiences. As a result, fatwas delivered by popular religious figures may gain widespread acceptance regardless of the depth of their legal reasoning. Studies show that digital audiences frequently associate credibility with metrics such as follower counts, engagement levels, and rhetorical confidence, rather than with demonstrated scholarly expertise (Hamdani, 2023; Firdaus & Sidik, 2024). This shift reflects a broader transformation in how religious authority is socially constructed in the digital age.

The tension between scholarly competence and popularity creates structural challenges for Islamic legal authority. Scholars trained in classical methodologies often emphasize nuance, conditional reasoning, and contextual differentiation features that are difficult to translate into the fast-paced logic of social media. Conversely, popular religious influencers tend to present clear, definitive answers that align with audience expectations for simplicity and certainty. While such clarity may enhance accessibility, it risks marginalizing methodological complexity and scholarly caution that are central to Islamic jurisprudence (Fitriansyah & Lubis, 2025).

One of the most significant consequences of this tension is the growing risk of oversimplification in Islamic legal discourse.

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Algorithm-driven communication favors short-form content and binary answers, encouraging the reduction of complex legal issues into easily digestible statements. This process can strip fatwas of their contextual foundations, including consideration of differing legal schools, socio-historical conditions, and ethical objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*). Scholars warn that such simplification may lead to misunderstandings of Islamic legal principles and the normalization of rigid or decontextualized interpretations (Fadilla & Indriyani, 2025).

Moreover, the normalization of simplified fatwas may erode public appreciation for scholarly processes. When religious guidance is consistently presented as instant and definitive, audiences may come to view deliberation and scholarly disagreement as signs of weakness rather than intellectual integrity. This perception undermines the pluralistic and dialogical nature of Islamic jurisprudence, which historically accommodated diversity of opinion as a strength rather than a liability (Ulyan, 2023).

Nevertheless, the coexistence of competence and popularity should not be understood solely as an irreconcilable conflict. Some scholars have demonstrated that it is possible to maintain scholarly rigor while engaging effectively with digital audiences. By adapting communicative strategies without abandoning methodological principles, these scholars attempt to bridge the gap between accessibility and epistemic integrity. Such efforts highlight the potential for reconstructing fatwa legitimacy in ways that remain faithful to Islamic legal traditions while responding to contemporary media realities (Rahmah, 2025).

In this regard, the challenge facing contemporary Islamic scholarship is not merely to resist digital popularity but to critically negotiate it. Strengthening public awareness of scholarly methodology and ethical responsibility becomes essential to counterbalance the dominance of popularity-based legitimacy. Understanding the dynamics between competence and popularity thus provides an important framework for assessing the future of fatwa authority in the digital age.

Ethical and Scholarly Implications for the Study of Islamic Fatwa

The transformation of fatwa authority in the digital era raises significant ethical challenges for contemporary Islamic scholarship. In classical Islamic jurisprudence, issuing a fatwa was considered a morally weighty responsibility, grounded in accountability before God and the community. Ethical principles such as prudence (*taharrī*), humility, and avoidance of harm were central to the fatwa process. In digital environments, however, the speed and visibility demanded by social media platforms often conflict with these ethical foundations. Fatwas are frequently delivered in compressed formats that prioritize immediacy over careful deliberation, increasing the risk of misinterpretation and ethical oversimplification (Hamdani, 2023).

One major ethical concern lies in the commodification of religious authority. Algorithms incentivize content that attracts engagement, encouraging religious actors to tailor fatwas to audience expectations and platform trends. This dynamic risks transforming fatwas into consumable media products rather than principled legal judgments. Scholars warn that such conditions may compromise ethical integrity, as religious guidance becomes influenced by metrics of popularity rather than by considerations of social responsibility and moral consequence (Fadilla & Indriyani, 2025). The ethical tension between sincerity (*ikhhlās*) and visibility thus becomes a defining challenge for fatwa practices in digital spaces.

Beyond ethical concerns, these transformations carry important implications for Islamic studies as an academic field. The rise of algorithm-mediated religious authority challenges conventional frameworks used to analyze fatwa legitimacy, authority, and transmission. Traditional models that emphasize institutional structures and scholarly hierarchies are increasingly insufficient to explain how religious authority is constructed and perceived in digital contexts. Consequently, contemporary Islamic studies must expand its analytical tools to include media studies, digital sociology, and critical algorithm studies in order to adequately assess the evolving dynamics of fatwa authority (Firdaus & Sidik, 2024).

From a practical perspective, the digitalization of fatwa discourse also affects how Islamic knowledge is taught, disseminated,

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and evaluated. Academic institutions and religious bodies face the challenge of preparing future *ulama* who are not only methodologically competent but also digitally literate. Without such preparation, scholarly voices risk marginalization in public religious discourse dominated by algorithmic visibility. Some scholars argue that integrating digital ethics and media literacy into Islamic legal education is essential for preserving scholarly credibility while engaging contemporary audiences effectively (Fitriansyah & Lubis, 2025).

At the same time, the digital context necessitates renewed reflection on collective responsibility in fatwa production. Unlike classical settings where fatwas were embedded within institutional oversight, digital fatwas often circulate independently of formal review mechanisms. This fragmentation underscores the need for collaborative scholarly platforms and ethical guidelines that address the unique challenges of online religious authority. Such initiatives could help balance accessibility with accountability, ensuring that digital engagement does not undermine the epistemological foundations of Islamic law (Ulyan, 2023).

Ultimately, the ethical and scholarly implications of digital fatwa practices point to a broader transformation in the study of Islam itself. The interaction between technology, authority, and religious knowledge demands critical engagement rather than rejection. By acknowledging both the risks and possibilities of digital platforms, Islamic scholarship can develop adaptive strategies that uphold ethical integrity while responding to contemporary modes of knowledge production. In this sense, the digital era does not signal the end of scholarly authority but calls for its ethical and intellectual rearticulation within new technological realities (Rahmah, 2025).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the authority of Islamic scholars (*ulama*) in contemporary Muslim societies is undergoing a significant transformation due to the increasing influence of digital media and algorithmic systems. The findings reveal that religious authority is no longer determined solely by scholarly competence, institutional affiliation, or mastery of Islamic legal methodology, but is increasingly

shaped by visibility, engagement metrics, and algorithm-driven popularity. Social media platforms function not merely as channels of dissemination but as active agents that restructure religious discourse, influence public preferences, and redefine the mechanisms through which fatwas gain legitimacy. As a result, a structural gap emerges between traditional scholarly authority and digital religious influence, challenging established models of fatwa production and reception.

In response to the research questions, this study affirms that while *ulama* remain central to the epistemological foundations of Islamic law, their authority in the algorithmic era requires strategic adaptation without compromising ethical and scholarly integrity. The position of *ulama* must be reaffirmed through a synthesis of intellectual competence, ethical responsibility, and digital literacy. Future research is encouraged to explore empirical dimensions of algorithmic governance in religious discourse and to examine comparative contexts across Muslim societies. Practically, Islamic institutions and educational bodies should integrate digital ethics and media literacy into religious training, ensuring that engagement with digital platforms strengthens rather than dilutes the normative and moral foundations of Islamic scholarship in the contemporary world.

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