Beyond the Pulpit and the Screen: Digital Fatwas and the Transformation of Islamic Legal Authority in Nigeria

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital media has significantly altered the circulation of religious authority, raising new questions about how Islamic legal interpretation operates beyond traditional scholarly institutions. This article investigates how digital fatwas reshape the production and legitimacy of Islamic legal authority in Nigeria, a context where Islamic jurisprudence interacts with diverse social, institutional, and technological environments. The study positions digital fatwas not merely as new channels of dissemination but as socio-legal arenas in which authority is negotiated among scholars, digital platforms, and religious audiences. Drawing on qualitative socio-legal methods, including discourse analysis of online fatwas, platform observation, and interviews with scholars and digital religious actors, the article examines how Islamic legal opinions circulate and gain legitimacy within contemporary digital ecosystems. The findings demonstrate that digitalisation does not eliminate traditional scholarly authority; rather, it reconfigures it into a relational and networked form in which credibility is co-produced through scholarly reputation, technological mediation, and audience engagement. By analysing the transformation of fatwa practices in Nigeria, the article contributes to broader debates on Islamic law as a discursive and institutional phenomenon. It shows how

emerging digital infrastructures reshape the dynamics of *ijtihād*, authority, and legal interpretation in the Global South, offering new insights into how Islamic legal authority adapts to evolving socio-technological contexts.

[*Perkembangan pesat media digital telah mengubah secara signifikan sirkulasi otoritas keagamaan, sekaligus memunculkan pertanyaan baru mengenai bagaimana interpretasi hukum Islam beroperasi di luar institusi keilmuan tradisional. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana fatwa digital membentuk kembali produksi dan legitimasi otoritas hukum Islam di Nigeria, suatu konteks di mana yurisprudensi Islam berinteraksi dengan beragam lingkungan sosial, institusional, dan teknologi. Penelitian ini memposisikan fatwa digital bukan sekadar sebagai saluran baru penyebaran pendapat hukum, melainkan sebagai arena sosio-legal di mana otoritas dinegosiasikan antara ulama, platform digital, dan khalayak keagamaan. Dengan menggunakan metode sosio-legal kualitatif, termasuk analisis wacana terhadap fatwa daring, observasi platform digital, serta wawancara dengan ulama dan aktor keagamaan digital, artikel ini menelaah bagaimana opini hukum Islam beredar dan memperoleh legitimasi dalam ekosistem digital kontemporer. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa digitalisasi tidak menghapus otoritas ulama tradisional; sebaliknya, ia merekonfigurasi otoritas tersebut menjadi bentuk yang lebih relasional dan berjaringan, di mana kredibilitas dibentuk secara bersama melalui reputasi keilmuan, mediasi teknologi, dan keterlibatan audiens. Dengan menganalisis transformasi praktik fatwa di Nigeria, artikel ini berkontribusi pada perdebatan akademik yang lebih luas mengenai hukum Islam sebagai fenomena diskursif dan institusional. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa infrastruktur digital yang berkembang turut membentuk ulang dinamika ijtihād, otoritas, dan interpretasi hukum dalam konteks Global South, sekaligus memberikan pemahaman baru tentang bagaimana otoritas hukum Islam beradaptasi dengan perubahan lanskap sosial-teknologis kontemporer*.]

Keywords: Digital Fatwas, Islamic Legal Authority, Mediatisation of Religion, Networked Authority, Nigeria.

Introduction

The swift proliferation of digital communication technology has significantly transformed the landscape of Islamic legal authority and practice throughout the Muslim world. In Nigeria, which hosts one of the largest Muslim populations in Africa, the expansion of mobile internet access and the prevalence of social media

platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and X (previously Twitter) have revolutionised the manner in which Muslims seek religious direction (Yakasai and Muhammad 2023). The issuance of fatwas, once centred on face-to-face consultation with recognised scholars, has increasingly moved to online and mobile platforms. In Nigeria, websites, WhatsApp groups, and Facebook pages now serve as channels for seeking legal opinions on matters ranging from ritual practice to finance. This shift has expanded access to religious guidance, particularly among younger and urban users (Wahid 2024b). While digital platforms expand access to fatwas, they also complicate established mechanisms of verification and doctrinal oversight. This tension between accessibility and authority raises a central socio-legal question: how do communication technologies reshape standards of legitimacy and the production of Islamic legal knowledge?

Despite the prevalence of online fatwa procedures in Muslim nations, empirical research on Nigeria is limited. Current scholarship on Nigerian Islam has primarily concentrated on traditional institutions—such as state-supported fatwa councils and Islamic organisations—or on overarching trends in the field of digital preaching and religious communication (Ali and Aljahsh 2025b). Such studies offer significant descriptive insights but never address the precise jurisprudential methods, verification processes, or relational dynamics that form the digital fatwa ecosystem. Comparative studies from the Middle East and Southeast Asia have revealed how new media cultivate hybrid forms of authority, wherein traditional credentials coexist with digital charm and user (Shuhufi et al. 2022; Hamdani 2023a). However, these frameworks have rarely been utilised in African Muslim contexts, resulting in a considerable empirical and theoretical void regarding the mediation of Islamic legal reasoning by digital media in communities marked by diverse traditions, linguistic variety, and infrastructural disparities.

Addressing this gap is important, as the lack of systematic data on Nigeria's digital fatwa landscape limits understanding of how credibility is shaped online. It also restricts the development of evidence-based oversight and quality assurance. Examining Nigeria further enables existing theories of mediatised and networked religion to be evaluated in a context where authority is shaped through interaction as well as institutional structures (Campbell and Tsuria 2021; Hjarvard 2013). This theoretical innovation positions the current research in the convergence of Islamic jurisprudence, communication studies, and socio-legal

analysis, enhancing global comprehension of how technology transforms normative reasoning and legitimacy in Muslim communities.

This study adopts a qualitative socio-legal approach complemented by descriptive survey data to examine how digital infrastructures reshape Islamic legal authority and fatwa practices in Nigeria. Rather than pursuing statistical hypothesis testing, the study uses survey patterns and qualitative materials to explore how authority and legitimacy are negotiated within digitally mediated religious environments. The research is guided by four interrelated questions: first, how do Nigerian Muslims engage with digital fatwa platforms across regions and demographic groups? Second, what thematic patterns and modes of legal reasoning characterise online fatwa content? Third, how are authority, trust, and legitimacy constructed and evaluated in digitally mediated environments? Fourth, how do scholars, platforms, and users interact in shaping verification and governance practices within digital fatwa networks?

A nationwide survey maps patterns of awareness, usage frequency, and demographic variation in engagement with digital fatwa platforms across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Semi-structured qualitative interviews with muftis, platform administrators, and users investigate perceptions of authenticity, competence, and verification norms. In addition, a textual analysis of 200 online fatwas examines jurisprudential themes, justificatory structures, and references to classical and contemporary legal sources. Integration of these strands occurs at the interpretive stage, where descriptive survey patterns are contextualised through qualitative accounts and textual evidence, enabling a structured assessment of both empirical trends and epistemic practices. This triangulated design ensures that the study moves beyond descriptive mapping to analyse how digital mediation affects not only access and communication but also gatekeeping, justificatory method, and the production of Islamic legal knowledge.

This article is structured in four sections. The first reviews scholarship on digital fatwas and explains why Nigeria provides a significant case marked by regional diversity and varied authority configurations. The second sets out the conceptual framework and methodological design. The third presents empirical findings on reach and usage, content and reasoning, authority and trust, and governance dynamics. The final section outlines implications for Islamic jurisprudence and institutional oversight, contributing to socio-legal debates on digital mediation and religious authority.

Method

This section outlines the conceptual framework and research design guiding the study. Drawing on theories of mediatisation and networked authority, the analysis examines how digital environments influence access to fatwas, patterns of legal reasoning, and perceptions of trust and legitimacy. The study adopts a qualitative socio-legal design supported by descriptive survey data, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis of 200 online fatwas. The section details the sampling strategy, construct operationalisation, analytical procedures, and ethical safeguards to ensure transparency and replicability in examining the transformation of Islamic legal authority in Nigeria's digital context.

The theoretical framework is based on two complementary approaches that elucidate the transformation of religious authority by media: the mediatisation of religion and the networked religion framework (Hjarvard 2013). The mediatisation paradigm perceives media as formative actors that transform the logic, practices, and institutional frameworks of religion, rather than functioning solely as neutral communication conduits. The concept of networked religion highlights that religious authority in digital settings is shaped through interaction among scholars, audiences, and online platforms. In this context, authority is not exercised solely through institutional position but is also influenced by patterns of communication, responsiveness, and user engagement.

Together, these perspectives provide a basis for examining how fatwa authority operates in digital environments and help frame the study's core questions concerning reach, content, and legitimacy. In this conceptual framework, digital fatwas serve as both manifestations of jurisprudential reasoning and socio-technical artefacts shaped by user interaction, algorithmic visibility, and institutional adaptability (Campbell and Evolvi 2020). The framework consequently delineates the factors analysed—such as usage patterns, trust, perceived authority, and content typology—and guides the analytical strategy by situating descriptive survey patterns alongside qualitative interpretations.

To operationalise this framework, the study adopts a qualitative socio-legal research design complemented by descriptive survey data and textual analysis. This approach allows the research to capture both the breadth of user engagement with digital fatwa platforms and the interpretive dimensions through which authority and legitimacy are understood by scholars and users. By combining survey mapping, interviews, and textual analysis of online fatwas,

the study employs methodological triangulation that strengthens analytical depth while reducing the epistemic limitations associated with single-method research (Creswell 2013). This integrated design enables a comprehensive examination of how technology, authority, and participation interact within Nigeria's evolving digital Islamic landscape.

The study population comprised Nigerian Muslims aged eighteen and older who possessed internet connections and were familiar with or had utilised digital fatwa services, including WhatsApp groups, Facebook Q&A pages, and both institutional and independent Islamic websites (Shuhufi et al. 2022). A stratified sampling strategy was employed to ensure proportional representation across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, resulting in a survey sample of approximately four hundred respondents.

The qualitative component encompassed three primary kinds of participants: Islamic scholars (muftis) who issued fatwas online, administrators overseeing digital platforms, and users who engaged with these services (Uchendu et al. 2017; Dewi et al. 2024). The sampling for this component was intentional and utilised a snowball method, guaranteeing the inclusion of participants possessing pertinent expertise or lived experience. The final qualitative sample consisted of twelve scholars, six to eight platform managers, and twenty to twenty-five users split throughout the six zones.

Data were collected through three complementary methods. First, a structured questionnaire gathered demographic information, platform use, and perceptions of authority and trust; it was distributed online via Google Forms, WhatsApp, and Telegram, and through trained field assistants in low-connectivity areas. Second, semi-structured interviews with scholars, platform administrators, and users explored legitimacy, verification practices, and experiences with digital fatwas; interviews were conducted online or in person, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Third, a systematic content analysis examined 200 fatwas collected over six months from institutional and independent Nigerian digital platforms. Fatwas were selected based on public accessibility, identifiable authorship or affiliation, and relevance to contemporary legal issues. The corpus was coded for themes, cited legal sources, and patterns of reasoning, drawing from multiple platforms to minimise regional or institutional bias.

Survey responses were organised and examined through descriptive pattern analysis in order to identify variations in platform use, trust, and

engagement across demographic groups. These descriptive patterns were used to identify variations in platform usage, trust, and perceived authority among respondents from different regions, genders, and educational backgrounds. Rather than serving as a basis for statistical hypothesis testing, the survey results provided an empirical overview that supported the interpretive analysis of digital fatwa practices.

Qualitative data from interviews were systematically coded and thematically analysed using NVivo software. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were employed to identify recurring themes related to authority, authenticity, and technology-mediated religious communication (Creswell 2013; Atkinson 2017). Integration occurred during the interpretive stage, where descriptive survey patterns were contextualised through qualitative narratives and textual evidence, enabling a deeper understanding of how scholars, platforms, and users collectively shape perceptions of legitimacy in digital fatwa networks. This triangulated analytical approach ensured that the study's conclusions were grounded in both theoretical reflection and empirically observed practices (Jick 1979; Venkatesh et al. 2013).

Ethical and methodological safeguards were implemented throughout the study. The survey instrument was pilot tested with a small group of respondents to ensure clarity and reliability. Triangulation across survey, interview, and content data enhanced validity, and member checking allowed interview participants to review and confirm transcript accuracy. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, with secure storage of digital and physical records and restricted access to the research team. ChatGPT was used only for language refinement and instrument drafting, not for data collection, analysis, or interpretation. (Nwankwo 2017b; Drew 2016).

This methodological design ensured both analytical rigour and empirical credibility in addressing the study's objectives. By combining descriptive survey mapping, qualitative interviews, and textual analysis of online fatwas, the research provides a comprehensive examination of how Nigerian Muslims engage with, evaluate, and legitimise digital fatwa practices. The study situates itself within the established tradition of socio-legal inquiry while offering new insights into the mediatisation of Islamic law in sub-Saharan contexts. The transparency of this research design enables critical evaluation, facilitates

methodological reflection, and opens possibilities for comparative studies in other Muslim societies undergoing similar digital transformations.

Patterns of Muslim Engagement with Digital Fatwa Networks in Nigeria

Digital communication technologies have become an increasingly important channel through which Nigerian Muslims access Islamic legal guidance. In line with scholarship on mediatised religion (Hjarvard 2013), social media and mobile applications now function as routine sites for raising and responding to legal questions. Given Nigeria's high levels of mobile-phone penetration and its relatively young demographic profile, platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are commonly used for the circulation and consultation of fatwas. (Ali and Aljahsh 2025c). The digital environments that were once marginal to traditional scholarship have now evolved into hybrid spaces, where accessibility, immediacy, and interactivity play a crucial role in shaping both the production and reception of Islamic guidance (Bunt 2018; Campbell & Tsuria 2021; Wahid 2024).

To obtain a broad overview of user engagement, the study conducted a nationwide survey of Nigerian Muslims across the six geopolitical zones. The number of respondents was determined to ensure broad regional representation and sufficient descriptive coverage of platform usage patterns:

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 \cdot p(1-p)}{e^2}$$

Where:

$n_0 = \text{ sample size},$
$Z = 1.96 \ (for \ 95\% \ confidence),$
$p = 0.5 \ (assumed \ population \ proportion),$
$e = 0.05 \ (margin \ of \ error).$

Table 1

Distribution of Survey Respondents by Region and Gender

No.	Geopolitical Zone	Male	Female	Total	Percentage (%)	No.
1	North-West	72	48	120	30.00	1
2	North-East	50	35	85	21.03	2
3	North-Central	40	30	70	17.05	3
4	South-West	40	25	65	16.03	4
5	South-East	25	15	40	10.00	5
6	South-South	12	8	20	05.00	6

Source: Researcher's elaboration based on field data (2025).

The application of this algorithm resulted in a minimum target of 384 respondents, which was rounded to 400 to accommodate potential non-responses. Stratified random sampling was subsequently utilised across Nigeria's six zones, with proportional allocation corresponding to the relative Muslim population in each area.

The demographic profile reveals that male respondents comprised 59 per cent of the total, while female respondents accounted for 41 per cent. This distribution aligns with established gendered trends in religious engagement and digital literacy throughout Nigeria (Adewale and Ndwandwe 2026; Nasir and Noor 2023). The greatest concentration of participants originated from the Northwest and Northeast areas, indicative of both population density and the cultural preeminence of Islamic institutions in northern Nigeria.

The examination of user involvement indicated that digital fatwa platforms are progressively incorporated into everyday religious practices. Table 2 indicates that WhatsApp is the predominant medium, with 68.5% of respondents indicating regular usage, followed by Facebook at 54.2%, YouTube at 37.8%, and Telegram at 24.6%. Only 12.4% of interviewees referenced institutional websites like Darul Fatwa Nigeria and NASFAT Online, suggesting a preference for conversational and mobile-based platforms.

Table 2

Frequency of Digital Fatwa Platform Usage

Platform	Regular Users (%)	Occasional Users (%)	Rarely/Never (%)
WhatsApp	68.5	23.2	8.3
Facebook	54.2	29.6	16.2
YouTube	37.8	32.4	29.8
Telegram	24.6	30.2	45.2

Source: Researcher's elaboration based on field data (2025).

The prevalence of WhatsApp for fatwa consultation supports previous research that characterises mobile-first Islam as a key aspect of religious communication in Africa (Sule and Abdulkareem 2022; Subchi et al. 2022). WhatsApp groups facilitate swift communication and personal engagement, enabling the rapid exchange of religious views and forms of collaborative interpretation outside formal institutional structures, as noted by Uchendu and friends (Uchendu et al. 2017).

The analysis further examined how demographic characteristics—including age, gender, and educational background—shape patterns of engagement with digital fatwa platforms. The findings indicate that younger participants, particularly those between eighteen and thirty-five years old, tend to engage with digital fatwa services more frequently than older respondents. Higher levels of formal education are also associated with greater diversity in the use of digital platforms and stronger levels of trust in online fatwa content. These patterns suggest that generational experience with digital media and educational exposure to religious discourse play an important role in shaping how Muslim users navigate and evaluate digital religious authority.

These findings support the assertion that digital literacy and socio-educational mobility act as mediating variables in the mediatisation of religious authority. The younger generation, nurtured in an environment of smartphones and social media, no longer saw fatwa consultation as confined to physical institutions but as a flexible, on-demand activity integrated into daily communication (Wahid 2024a). This corresponds with networked religion theory, which posits that authority is redefined through interactivity and accessibility rather than proximity to established scholarly hierarchies (Campbell and Evolvi 2020; Larsson and Willander 2025).

Qualitative insights elucidate the motivations driving these patterns. Interview participants consistently highlighted speed, anonymity, and convenience as the principal factors for favouring internet consultations. A

female participant from Lagos remarked, "On WhatsApp, I can enquire about sensitive topics privately, without fear of judgement or exposure"—a feeling reiterated in other interviews. In contrast, male participants appeared to prioritise access to a variety of academic perspectives, mirroring a phenomenon similar to "fatwa shopping" observed in Southeast Asia (Campbell 2012; Slama 2018; Kholili et al. 2024).

The integration of accessibility and plurality illustrates what Gräf refers to as the media logic of religious authority, when immediacy and interactivity supplant institutional mediation as primary indications of legitimacy (Gräf 2010). Survey findings suggest that many Nigerian Muslims, particularly younger respondents, navigate both institutional forms of authority and digital sources of guidance. The results indicate that patterns of platform use are shaped not only by technological access but also by social factors such as age, gender, education, and trust in scholarly credentials. Younger participants tended to report more frequent consultation of online fatwa services, while respondents with higher educational backgrounds displayed greater diversity in platform usage and higher levels of trust in digital fatwas (Rahman 2022). The prominence of WhatsApp and Facebook suggests that many users access fatwas through interactive, platform-based communication rather than formal institutional channels. Survey findings further suggest that age and educational background are closely related to levels of engagement, indicating that digital participation varies across demographic groups (Hamdani 2023b; Evolvi 2011).

The use of digital fatwas among Nigerian Muslims reflects changes in how religious guidance is accessed and evaluated. Online platforms have expanded the availability of legal opinions beyond mosque-based or institutionally mediated settings. At the same time, this shift has altered patterns of consultation, as users increasingly rely on mobile-based communication rather than exclusively on established scholarly channels. (Bunt 2018). Bunt notes that the "cyber-ummah" does not eliminate authority; rather, it reallocates it among networks of legitimacy, popularity, and interactivity. This study's empirical evidence demonstrates that redistribution is currently occurring in Nigeria, where digital platforms function as both access points for guidance and arenas for debate regarding the definition of true Islamic legal knowledge.

Patterns of Piety: Content Structures and Legal Themes in Nigeria's Online Fatwa Landscape

The digitalisation of Islamic legal discourse in Nigeria has established novel patterns of content dissemination and thematic variety. Fatwas that were once limited to the restricted discursive environments of conventional madrasahs or formal juristic councils now circulate through social media platforms, WhatsApp groups, and digital archives available to a worldwide audience (Al-Zaman 2022). This section examines the thematic distribution and structure of 200 digital fatwas collected over six months from institutional websites, Facebook pages, and WhatsApp groups. By combining thematic mapping with qualitative coding, the analysis identifies dominant legal themes and patterns of reasoning within digitally mediated contexts (Belhaj 2022).

The 200 fatwas focused primarily on personal ethics and worship (32%), followed by family and gender issues (21.5%), financial transactions (18%), and digital-related questions such as social media and cryptocurrency (13.5%). Health and socio-political topics accounted for the remainder, indicating engagement with contemporary concerns (Evolvi 2022).

Table 3.
Distribution of Fatwa Topics by Jurisprudential Category (N = 200)

Jurisprudential Theme	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Representative Examples
**Personal Worship & Ethics (*ʿIbadah, Akhlāq)*	64	32.0	Prayer timing apps, online dhikr, modesty in online spaces
Family & Gender Issues	43	21.5	Polygamy, online marriage, divorce via SMS
Economic & Financial Transactions	36	18.0	Cryptocurrency, online business ethics, zakat on digital income
Digital Conduct & Media Ethics	27	13.5	Gossip on WhatsApp, TikTok da'wah, AI-generated Islamic content

Health & Bioethics	18	9.0	Vaccination, halal medicine, reproductive ethics
Politics & Civic Responsibility	12	6.0	Voting, governance, corruption
Total	200	100.0	—

Source: Researcher's elaboration based on field data (2025).

The findings indicate a changing array of legal issues influenced by local socio-religious circumstances and worldwide technological changes. While traditional fatwas in Nigeria mostly concentrated on ceremonial and jurisprudential orthodoxy (Ibrahim 2024), the advent of digital platforms has expanded the area of investigation to encompass socio-ethical issues influenced by technology. Subjects like "the permissibility of TikTok *da'wah*" and "*halal* investment in digital assets" illustrate the ways in which digital existence reshapes the parameters of Islamic legal discourse (Evolvi and Giorda 2021).

Textual analysis indicates that most fatwas align with Sunni legal traditions, particularly the Maliki and Hanafi schools, reflecting Nigeria's intellectual context. However, 35% were coded as employing hybrid referencing. In this study, hybrid referencing refers to fatwas that cite at least one classical source (Qurʾan, hadith, or recognised *fiqh* literature) while also addressing contemporary considerations such as technological practices, public interest (*maṣlaḥah*), or social context. For example, a ruling that cites a hadith on *gharar* and applies it to online financial transactions was classified as a hybrid (Akpanika 2019; Fahm 2020). The findings show that digital fatwas remain grounded in established textual sources while addressing contemporary issues. Coding indicates that 94% cited Qurʾanic verses, 86% referenced hadith, and 42% drew on classical *fiqh* works, whereas only 18% referred to contemporary scholars or institutional bodies (Fahm 2020). This numeric disparity highlights a persistent inclination for traditional literary authority, even in contemporary communication contexts (Hidayati et al. 2023).

Table 4.

Distribution of Fatwa Topics by Jurisprudential Category (N = 200)

Type of Source	Frequency (%)	Illustrative Examples	Example Pattern

Qur'anic Text	94	"Q 24:30–31 on modesty"; "Q 2:282 on documentation in contracts"	Qur'anic Text
Hadith Literature	86	Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Sunan Abu Dawud	Hadith Literature
Classical *fiqh* textbook	42	Mukhtaṣar Khalīl, al-Muwatta', al-Majmūʿ	Classical *fiqh* Manuals
Contemporary Jurists & Councils	18	ECFR, IIFA, Yusuf al-Qaradawi	Contemporary Jurists & Councils
Modern Digital Ethics Sources	9	Academic references, UNDP Islamic finance briefs	Modern Digital Ethics Sources

Source: Researcher's elaboration based on field data (2025).

This empirical pattern highlights a key paradox of digital Islamic authority: while digital spaces encourage accessibility and diversity, legitimacy still gravitates toward traditional epistemic anchors. The result is what Gräf terms "textual conservatism within technological modernity"—a balancing act between maintaining doctrinal continuity and embracing communicative innovation. (Gräf 2014). One emerging pattern in the corpus is the increase in questions about digital conduct, including posting images online, engaging in social media debates, and using AI-generated religious content. These enquiries show how classical *fiqh* principles are being applied to new technological contexts. Several scholars also emphasised the need to preserve standards of modesty (ḥayā') and sound learning (ʿilm) in online environments (Wahid 2024a; Evolvi 2022).

A Lagos-based mufti explained in his interview, "*Technology is neutral, but its use carries moral consequence. The fatwa must remind Muslims that media is not beyond shariʿa; it is within it.*" This interpretive stance exemplifies the networked religion paradigm, where religious meaning is constantly negotiated across human–media interfaces. The very act of issuing a fatwa online transforms the

process from a monologic transmission into a dialogic exchange, in which scholars, users, and algorithms participate in shaping moral knowledge (Campbell 2012; Ali and Aljahsh 2025c).

Analysis of the 200 fatwas shows that 72% adopted a didactic tone, while 28% used a more consultative style. The latter, more common on WhatsApp and Facebook, featured shorter sentences and direct address. These patterns indicate that digital platforms influence communication style, encouraging clearer and more conversational presentations without displacing established scholarly authority (Meyer and Moors 2005).

Networked Authority and the Transformation of Contemporary Fatwa Practices

Within the framework of networked religion, the findings show that digital fatwas draw on established jurisprudential sources while responding to contemporary social and technological issues. The prominence of personal and ethical questions indicates a focus on everyday moral concerns. Consistent with mediatisation theory, digital platforms shape not only the circulation of religious content but also its format and presentation (Hjarvard 2013). Nigerian muftis present legal guidance through digital formats such as hashtags and instant messaging, adapting established reasoning to contemporary communication practices. These patterns indicate that digital platforms influence not only the circulation of fatwas but also how they are framed and understood within Islamic legal discourse (Nwankwo 2017a).

Nigerian muftis present established legal reasoning through digital formats such as hashtags, short posts, and instant messaging. These practices adapt the presentation of classical sources to platform conventions without replacing them. The findings suggest that digital platforms shape how legal guidance is framed and received, not only how it is transmitted. Traditionally, authority in Islamic legal settings such as the madrasa and majlis al-fatwa was grounded in recognised scholarly training, chains of transmission (*sanad*), and institutional affiliation. Legitimacy was closely tied to formal education and established scholarly networks (Nwankwo 2017a). The fatwa served as a legal declaration that connected heavenly revelation with human experience. However, with the expansion of mobile internet, WhatsApp groups, and social media platforms, this revered connection has been digitised and fragmented across a diverse and participative environment (Wahid 2024b; Subchi et al. 2022).

The findings suggest a shift from a hierarchical relationship between the mufti and the *mustaftī* (the individual who seeks a legal opinion) to a more networked process involving scholars, digital platforms, and lay users who interpret, circulate, and assess religious rulings in real time.

Survey results indicate that perceptions of legitimacy among Nigerian Muslims who consult online fatwas are shaped by multiple factors. As shown in Table 5, 68.5% of respondents identified classical education and institutional affiliation as primary indicators of credibility. At the same time, 62.1% emphasised clarity of explanation, and 54.2% highlighted responsiveness and accessibility, while 47.8% considered social media metrics such as likes and followers to influence perceived validity (Ibrahim 2024; Sule and Abdulkareem 2022).

This pattern illustrates that authority has not vanished in the digital era; instead, it has transformed into a relational and performative construct, dependent on both symbolic capital (academic qualifications) and communicative capital (digital interaction).

Table 5.
Indicators of Fatwa Credibility among Respondents (N = 400)

Indicator of Credibility	Percentage (%)	Source of Validation	Type of Validation
Classical education (Ijazah, Madrasa affiliation)	68.5	Institutional recognition	Classical education (Ijazah, Madrasa affiliation)
Speed of response and accessibility	54.2	Platform interaction	Speed of response and accessibility
Number of followers or views	47.8	Social media metrics	Number of followers or views
Clarity and simplicity of explanation	62.1	User evaluation	Clarity and simplicity of explanation
Transparent citation of evidence	58.6	Textual legitimacy	Transparent citation of evidence

| Institutional fatwa council endorsement | 40.7 | Bureaucratic legitimacy | Institutional fatwa council endorsement |

Source: Researcher's elaboration based on field data (2025).

The results validate a hybrid authority paradigm that integrates the epistemic significance of the 'ulama with the participatory dynamics of digital media. This synthesis reflects Weber's notion of charismatic authority, wherein personal allure and communicative prowess engender trust irrespective of bureaucratic or traditional legitimacy (Szelenyi 2016; Weber 1978). A senior mufti from Kano observed that while digital communication accelerates the exchange between scholar and questioner, trust develops more gradually. Although technology reduces the time between question and response, it also requires new forms of validation and sustained engagement to maintain credibility (Raj and Chandwani 2025; Eze and Bienert 2025).

The second dimension concerns the role of digital platforms in shaping the communication of fatwas. Mediatisation theory suggests that media operate according to their own communicative logics rather than as neutral channels. Interview findings indicate that platform features influence both the format of fatwas and how they are received by audiences (Hjarvard 2013; Hamdani 2023b). Seventy-eight per cent of administrators reported adapting posts to platform algorithms by simplifying language and using hashtags or visual elements to increase visibility. One administrator noted that Arabic posts attracted less engagement than English or Hausa content with hashtags. These findings suggest that platform conventions shape how religious guidance is presented, even when the underlying legal reasoning remains unchanged (Wright 2025). The algorithm now ascertains what is displayed, who perceives it, and the frequency of its circulation. Religious legitimacy is now grounded not only in *isnād* (scholarly chain) but also in algorithmic reach—a novel, imperceptible type of validation (Niam 2024).

Table 6
Interplay of Actors in Digital Fatwa Production

Actor	Function in Fatwa Process	Source of Legitimacy	Risks/Challenges

Scholars	Juridical reasoning, ethical framing	Knowledge (*ʿilm*), institutional background	Fragmentation, loss of context
Technology/Platforms	Algorithmic mediation, interface logic	Visibility, accessibility	Bias, misinformation
Users	Interpretation, dissemination, validation	Engagement, testimonial trust	Selective adherence, interpretive drift

Source: Researcher's illustration based on field data (2025).

In this triadic environment, technology holds a transitional role: it serves as both a medium and an agent in religious interpretation. Campbell and Evolvi characterise this phenomenon as networked religion, wherein meaning arises from the interactions between users, content, and technological affordances (Campbell and Evolvi 2020). Nigerian digital fatwas embody this phenomenon—each ruling transforms into a communal event, collectively interpreted and recontextualised through comments, shares, and emojis. The fatwa, previously a static text, has transformed into a dynamic discourse, perpetually redefined via social engagement (Udenze 2024).

The wider circulation of digital fatwas raises questions about verification practices. Survey data show that only 41% of respondents reported checking a scholar's credentials before accepting an online ruling, while others relied on perceived authenticity, clarity of language, or peer endorsement. In contexts where multiple legal schools and perspectives are present, limited verification may contribute to divergent interpretations and varied understandings of religious guidance.

In addition to concerns about verification, some digital platforms have developed informal review practices. In certain groups, draft responses are discussed among multiple scholars before circulation, creating a form of peer consultation rather than formal institutional oversight. An interview participant from Ibadan noted that members in her Telegram group routinely comment on one another's responses and request supporting evidence. These practices suggest emerging patterns of collective review in digital settings, although they do not constitute formal mechanisms of *ijmāʿ* or institutional accreditation. (Oloba and Blankenship 2025; Abusharif 2020). These voices demonstrate the

potential for rejuvenation amid disorder: the essence of collective intellect that formerly invigorated classical Islamic research is now resurfacing, facilitated by digital technology and alerts.

The presentation style of digital fatwas also influences audience engagement. Video formats on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, often delivered in vernacular languages and informal settings, tend to attract more interaction than highly formal institutional recordings. These patterns suggest that communicative style and perceived approachability can affect how religious authority is received in digital environments (Nwankwo 2017b). Have confidence in the sheikh who responds promptly and with a smile to my enquiries. When he articulates in my language, I perceive Islam as intimately connected to me. The "aestheticisation of charisma" corresponds with Meyer and Moors' notion of emotive authority, wherein religious legitimacy is derived from emotional resonance and perceived authenticity. In this context, the digital mufti often appears less as a distant legal authority and more as an accessible adviser who communicates religious guidance in a manner perceived as empathetic and relatable (Meyer and Moors 2005; Sona 2024). Some scholars express concern that digital dissemination may weaken established standards of scholarly review, while others argue that it increases accessibility and public engagement. These differing perspectives reflect ongoing debates about how Islamic legal guidance should be communicated in digitally mediated settings (Lahoud 2012).

The article proposes a triangular model of digital fatwa legitimacy that brings together three interrelated actors: scholars, digital platforms, and users. Empirical analysis indicates that trust in digital fatwas emerges from the interaction among these three elements rather than from a purely hierarchical structure of authority. Scholarly credibility provides the epistemic foundation of the fatwa, digital platforms shape its circulation and visibility, and user engagement contributes to the ongoing evaluation of its reliability. In this configuration, legitimacy is produced through relational interaction within a networked digital environment rather than through a single institutional source.

$$T = f(S, P, U)$$

In this model, T represents trust in fatwas; S denotes scholarly expertise and responsiveness; P refers to platform mediation (visibility and interface logic); and U captures user participation through interpretation and sharing. The

findings suggest that trust is shaped by the interaction of these elements rather than by scholarly credentials alone. Reduced visibility, weak evidentiary grounding, or uncritical circulation may each affect how legitimacy is perceived in digital contexts (Shapiro 2010). The Nigerian case highlights the interdependence of scholars, digital platforms, and users in shaping contemporary religious authority. These developments raise important questions for Islamic institutions regarding standards of legitimacy and verification in digital environments. Rather than relying solely on strict regulation or unrestricted circulation, a balanced approach that combines transparent verification mechanisms with participatory engagement may help sustain credibility in online *iftāʾ* practices.

Organisations like the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and the National Board for Arabic and Islamic Studies (NBAIS) could establish accreditation procedures for digital muftis, drawing inspiration from Malaysia's e-Fatwa Portal (Ali and Aljahsh 2025a). Madrasah curricula may benefit from incorporating digital literacy to prepare students for engagement in online environments. At the same time, users require critical skills to assess the reliability of religious content circulated through digital platforms (Ismail et al. 2024). Digital participation in fatwa discussions is often framed by users as a form of ethical and religious commitment, indicating that engagement with legal interpretation is understood not only as information seeking but also as a morally meaningful practice.

Nigeria's digital fatwa ecosystem exemplifies the global transition from hierarchical to networked religious authority. The mufti no longer addresses the community but engages with it. Digital communication environments increasingly frame the issuance of fatwas as a participatory process in which juristic reasoning interacts with ongoing dialogue among scholars and audiences. Authority in this context is not diminished; it is reallocated within a communicative network where charisma, credibility, and connectedness converge (Awass 2014; Gräf 2010; Akpanika 2019). Bunt notes that "Islamic authority online is neither anarchic nor autocratic—it is negotiated." This negotiation characterises the contemporary essence of ijtihad: dynamic, pluralistic, and responsive. In Nigeria, what manifests is not a crisis of tradition but its adaptation—a dynamic jurisprudence that exists on servers, computers, and smartphones while being connected to the revelation (Bunt 2018). Classical Islamic jurisprudence traditionally grounds the authority of fatwa in scriptural

sources, including Qur'anic and prophetic teachings, which scholars interpret as guiding principles for legal reasoning (Q.16:125). In the digital era, such insight necessitates not only proficiency in scripture but also adeptness in technology, sensitivity in communication, and humility in visibility (Ali and Aljahsh 2025a; Ibrahim 2024). This pattern can be understood as a contemporary form of knowledge-based religious outreach (*da'wah al-'ilmiyyah*), in which legal interpretation circulates through digital communication networks.

These findings indicate that Islamic authority in digital settings is being reshaped rather than displaced. In Nigeria, digital platforms have not replaced the 'ulama', but have altered how their authority is communicated and assessed. Traditional scholarly structures remain important, while speed of response, visibility, and interaction increasingly influence perceptions of credibility (Dauda 2024; Subchi et al. 2022). These findings suggest not a decline of religious authority but a change in how it is exercised and perceived in digital settings. While fatwas remain grounded in established textual sources, their circulation and evaluation increasingly occur through interactive online platforms (Lim 2017; Zohra Benali et al., n.d.).

Taken together, the three analytical dimensions—reach and usage, content and themes, and the reconfiguration of authority—indicate that digital fatwa practices in Nigeria reflect more than technological change; they show how Islamic legal guidance is being communicated, interpreted, and evaluated within contemporary digital platforms (Fahm 2020; Yékú 2022). Empirical findings indicate that digital platforms have broadened access to religious consultation, with engagement shaped by gender, age, and educational background. Content analysis further shows that online fatwas address contemporary concerns while remaining grounded in classical *fiqh*, often engaging practical ethical questions arising within digital and local contexts (Subchi et al. 2022; Faiz et al. 2023). The findings also suggest that perceptions of legitimacy are shaped by both institutional authority and patterns of interaction among scholars, platforms, and users within digitally mediated religious environments.

These findings indicate that Islamic authority in digital settings is being reconfigured rather than displaced. In Nigeria, digital platforms have not replaced the 'ulama' but have altered how their authority is communicated and evaluated. Traditional scholarly credentials remain important, while visibility, responsiveness, and interaction also shape perceptions of legitimacy. This shift

reflects changes in mode of engagement, not a departure from established legal foundations.

Conclusion

This study has examined how the expansion of digital media reshapes the production and legitimacy of Islamic legal authority through the circulation of digital fatwas in Nigeria. The analysis demonstrates that the emergence of digital platforms does not displace traditional scholarly authority in Islamic law. Instead, it transforms the conditions under which authority is articulated, negotiated, and recognised. Within contemporary digital environments, Islamic legal authority increasingly emerges as a relational and networked process in which scholars, technological infrastructures, and audiences collectively participate in the production and circulation of legal interpretation.

These findings respond directly to the research question concerning how Islamic legal interpretation operates beyond conventional institutional settings. The study shows that digital platforms function not merely as channels for disseminating legal opinions but as socio-legal arenas that mediate the formation of authority. Credibility and legitimacy are shaped through the interaction between scholarly reputation, technological mediation, and audience engagement, producing a form of networked authority that reconfigures contemporary fatwa practices.

By situating these developments within the Nigerian context, the article contributes to broader debates on Islamic law as a discursive and institutional phenomenon. The findings refine existing socio-legal scholarship on fatwa authority by demonstrating how digital infrastructures reshape the dynamics of *ijtihād* and the circulation of Islamic legal knowledge in the Global South. Rather than signalling the erosion of traditional Islamic legal authority, digitalisation generates new configurations through which classical scholarly legitimacy interacts with technologically mediated publics. The triangular configuration of scholar, platform, and user provides a conceptual lens for analysing the transformation of Islamic legal authority in digitally mediated environments.

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