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Digital Media and the Transformation of Religious Authority: An Empirical Study of Islamic Scholarship in the Social Media Era

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Abstract: *This article examines how digital media have reconfigured the foundations of religious authority in contemporary Islam, focusing specifically on the practices of Islamic scholarship in the social media era. Drawing together a substantial body of empirical research conducted across Indonesia, Malaysia, Egypt, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Muslim minority communities in the West, the study traces the movement of interpretive authority away from formally credentialed institutions and toward networked, algorithmically mediated actors. It argues that the transformation is not merely a change in the medium through which religious knowledge travels, but a deeper epistemological reconstruction in which visibility metrics, audience engagement, and platform logic increasingly compete with classical qualifications such as sanad (chains of scholarly transmission) and institutional oversight. The analysis identifies several interrelated dynamics: the fragmentation of a previously unified interpretive field; the emergence of religious influencers whose legitimacy is performative rather than scholarly; the renegotiation of gendered authority as women scholars enter digital space; the strategic digital re-engagement of established institutions such as Al-Azhar, Dar al-Iftāʾ, and the Indonesian Ulama Council; and the new epistemic risks introduced by AI-assisted religious guidance. The article concludes that digital religious authority is best understood as fluid, co-produced with audiences, and continuously contested, and it outlines the implications of this shift for religious literacy, institutional credibility, and the integrity of Islamic jurisprudence.*

Keywords: digital media, religious authority, Islamic scholarship, social media, fatwa, mediatization, digital daʿwah

Introduction

For centuries, religious authority in Islam rested on a relatively stable set of credentials: mastery of the classical sciences, recognized chains of transmission, affiliation with respected institutions, and the communal recognition of scholarly standing. The authority to interpret scripture and issue rulings was, in this model, something conferred through formation and endorsement rather than claimed through publicity. Over the past two decades, however, digital media have introduced a structural disruption into this arrangement. As online platforms have become primary channels for religious content, the ability to speak authoritatively about Islam has been progressively decoupled from the institutional and scholarly gatekeeping that once

regulated it. The result is a religious public sphere in which traditional scholars, popular preachers, lay influencers, and increasingly automated systems all compete for the attention and trust of Muslim audiences.

This article addresses that shift through a focused empirical lens: the practice of Islamic scholarship in the social media era. Its central question is how digital mediation reconfigures the constitution, recognition, and contestation of religious authority among Muslims who produce and consume religious knowledge online. Three subsidiary questions guide the analysis. First, what mechanisms have displaced or supplemented classical markers of scholarly legitimacy? Second, how do audiences, institutions, and individual scholars respond to this displacement? Third, what are the epistemic and normative consequences for the integrity of Islamic jurisprudence? The contribution of the study lies in its synthesis of a large body of recent empirical work into an integrated account, showing that the transformation of authority is neither a simple story of democratization nor a simple story of decline, but a complex renegotiation that unfolds differently across platforms, regions, and scholarly constituencies.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive empirical design that synthesizes findings from a substantial corpus of peer-reviewed empirical research on digital religion, Islamic authority, and online daʿwah. Rather than relying on a single dataset, it treats the accumulated empirical record as its field, drawing together studies that employed in-depth interviews, ethnographic and netnographic observation, content analysis of social media profiles, and large-scale review methodologies. This approach is appropriate because the transformation of religious authority is a distributed phenomenon that manifests differently across national contexts and platforms, and because the most reliable evidence about it is dispersed across many localized studies.

The empirical base includes interview-based research with young Muslim scholars affiliated with a provincial Indonesian Ulama Council, in which 36 scholars were studied regarding their knowledge acquisition and fatwa-making habits (Rusli et al., 2020). It includes netnographic work observing the social media output of prominent Indonesian preachers such as Hanan Attaki, Abdul Somad, and Habib Husein Ja'far across YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, together with user interactions in comment sections (Tabaika & Roibin, 2025). It incorporates content-analytic studies of Instagram, including an assessment of 7,568 posts drawn from 20 profiles in Malaysia and Indonesia (Zdarsová, 2024), and a study of 21 women-focused posts and 228 user comments collected over a three-month period on the @QuranReview account (Fawaid & Amalia, 2025). It also draws on fieldwork with leaders and scholars affiliated with Al-Azhar and Dar al-Iftāʾ al-Miṣriyyah in Egypt (Fauzi et al., 2026), interview-based research with 10 Malaysian respondents from Generations X and Y on online religious information seeking (Hasan & Haron, 2013), and ethnographic work on Indonesian gender-just ʿulamāʾ conducted between 2020 and 2022 (Nisa & Saenong, 2022). Thematic analysis across these studies allows the identification of recurring patterns in how authority is constructed, contested, and reconstituted in digital environments.

Findings

The Shift from Institutional to Individualized Authority

The most consistent finding across the empirical literature is the displacement of interpretive authority from institutional scholars toward individualized and networked actors. Hegazy and colleagues report that content developers and bloggers have risen to a level of authority equal to, and in some cases surpassing, that of recognized religious figures, and that the Internet tends to displace interpretive authority from religious scholars toward the individualized interpretation of sacred texts (Hegazy et al., 2025). The same dynamic is captured in studies of Indonesian social media, where traditional religious authority has increasingly come to share the stage with digitally popular figures who may lack formal academic or scholarly legitimacy (Masruha et al., 2025). Tabaika and Roibin document the emergence of "religious influencers" who blend piety with branding and whose authority is no longer solely institutional but co-produced with audiences in real time through participatory comment sections that function as semi-public arenas of theological debate (Tabaika & Roibin, 2025). This finding is echoed by Harahap and colleagues, who show that religious influencers cultivate authenticity and audience trust through personalized communication, storytelling, and interactive platform features, such that authority is shaped by digital performativity, algorithmic visibility, and audience participation rather than by formal credentials (Harahap et al., 2025).

The individualization of interpretive authority also reshapes the everyday knowledge practices of scholars themselves. Rusli and colleagues found that young Muslim scholars in Central Sulawesi refer to online knowledge sources in their fatwa making quite frequently, and that they construct knowledge from online social network interaction and then use that knowledge for fatwa production, a development with significant implications for the simplicity of Islamic knowledge acquisition and fatwa making (Rusli et al., 2020). This suggests that digital mediation is not only changing who speaks to lay audiences but also how the next generation of scholars itself is formed.

Algorithmic Visibility and the New Metrics of Credibility

A second major finding concerns the rise of algorithmic visibility as a competing currency of religious credibility. Zaki and colleagues describe how, in digital spaces, authority is increasingly shaped by visibility metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and follower counts, so that religious influence is often granted to digital preachers based on algorithmic popularity rather than scholarly expertise, creating tensions between traditional ulama and emerging online religious influencers (Zaki et al., 2026). They further argue that social media algorithms prioritize engagement, emotional appeal, and audience retention, amplifying short, simplified, and performative religious messages and encouraging the spread of what they term "bite-sized Islam," in which complex theological concepts are reduced to motivational slogans, identity affirmations, or controversial statements designed for virality (Zaki et al., 2026).

The empirical data on engagement patterns are striking. One viral preaching video on TikTok, uploaded by a religious influencer account, received more than 2.3 million views and 185,000 likes within five days despite presenting a highly simplified interpretation of Islamic morality without reference to classical Islamic sources; its caption read "Islam itu mudah, jangan dibuat rumit!" ("Islam is easy, do not make it complicated!"), and commenters responded that the

explanation was easier to understand than a sermon at the mosque (Zaki et al., 2026). The same study found significant differences in authority construction across platforms: of 15 YouTube contents analyzed, only 4 videos from institutionally affiliated scholars exceeded 100,000 views, while almost all short-form clips from digital influencers reached higher interaction rates through reposting and algorithmic recommendations (Zaki et al., 2026). On Instagram, by contrast, religious authority was frequently reinforced through branding strategies such as verified badges, aesthetic Islamic visual identities, and the use of trending hashtags including #Hijrah, #IslamicReminder, and #DakwahMilenial (Zaki et al., 2026). This platform differentiation indicates that authority is not simply eroded by digital media but is reconstructed differently depending on the affordances and audience cultures of each platform.

Fragmentation, Contestation, and the Public Sphere

The empirical record strongly supports the fragmentation thesis. Studies of Indonesian digital daʿwah describe how social media has democratized Islamic discourse, disrupted traditional religious authority, and catalyzed reinterpretations of Islamic jurisprudence and gender roles, while also generating ethical and theological challenges including misinformation, loss of scholarly oversight, and ideological polarization (‘Ulyan, 2023). Hamdani's ethnographic study of fatwas disseminated on YouTube shows that the "moving narratives" circulating in cyberspace are not only dialogue and contestation in the form of fatwas but are bound up with the religious authority that preachers receive, and that social media allows popular preachers to gain authority precisely because of the democratic nature of the platforms (Hamdani, 2023). The case of Abdul Somad is instructive: rather than building a career through a boarding school or television, his authority was constructed from video recordings uploaded to YouTube and Instagram that then underwent circulation and reproduction across other social media, including WhatsApp (Zuhri et al., 2024). Zuhri and colleagues note that this viral instrumentality brings fundamental changes in the field of thought, fatwas, religious practice, and religiously grounded social relationships (Zuhri et al., 2024).

Fragmentation, however, is not a uniform good. Abdulsalam and Abdulrasheed identify structural mechanisms—algorithmic amplification, influencer culture, monetization systems, and user-generated authority—that enable the proliferation of misleading religious discourse and create new patterns of abuse in daʿwah practices (Abdulsalam & Abdulrasheed, 2026). Fithriyah and colleagues similarly document ethical concerns related to misinformation and hate speech driven by viral content, the polarization of religious narratives that intensifies interpretive divisions, and the emergence of religious consumerism through sponsored content or merchandise that may shift daʿwah away from spiritual authenticity toward commercial interests (Fithriyah et al., 2025). Tabaika and Roibin likewise raise concerns about theological integrity, commercialization, and regulation challenges even as they acknowledge the democratization of access (Tabaika & Roibin, 2025). These findings complicate any straightforward narrative of digital empowerment.

The Reconfiguration of Gendered Scholarly Authority

Digital media have also opened new space for women scholars, though not without contestation. Nasri and Rahmatullah show that female scholars such as Ustadzah Halimah

Alaydrus, Ning Imaz Fatimatuz Zahra, and Umi Lailatul Rahma Adi play a pivotal role in shaping religious discourse in the digital realm, while facing challenges that include online harassment and gender discrimination (Nasri & Rahmatullah, 2025). Uyuni and Adnan find that women ulama active on social media draw on the concept of maqāṣid al-sharīʿah to outline their daʿwah messages, explaining religious content both textually and contextually and drawing on the opinions of previous scholars to support their messages, thereby offering Muslim women the opportunity to choose among different and more personal presentations of Islamic teaching (Uyuni & Adnan, 2022). Nisa and Saenong demonstrate that during the COVID-19 pandemic, gender-just ʿulamāʾ in Indonesia were compelled to adjust to digital religion and used an online presence to relegitimize their authority so they could compete with and counter the narratives of tech-savvy conservative Muslims (Nisa & Saenong, 2022).

Yet the entry of women into digital religious space is also met with fragmented reception. Fawaid and Amalia, analyzing the @QuranReview account, found a shift in interpretive authority from traditional scholars to digital figures functioning as religious influencers, accompanied by three dominant patterns of audience reception: progressive-affirmative, conservative-resistant, and critical-reflective (Fawaid & Amalia, 2025). This suggests that the reconfiguration of gendered authority is as contested as the reconfiguration of authority more broadly, and that audience reception is a decisive variable in whether new interpretive voices achieve durable legitimacy.

Institutional Responses and Re-engagement

Established institutions have not been passive in the face of these changes. Fauzi and colleagues, drawing on fieldwork in Egypt, show that the digital space has democratized access to Islamic knowledge, enabling social media influencers and informal online scholars to serve as alternative sources of fatwas, and that Al-Azhar has responded by prioritizing a strengthening of its academically grounded digital presence while Dar al-Iftāʾ has pursued a more dynamic strategy of expanding online fatwa services, launching social media campaigns, and developing multilingual outreach programs (Fauzi et al., 2026). Their study also reveals that state regulation and political involvement significantly shape both the autonomy and public perception of official religious institutions, illustrating how classical institutions negotiate legitimacy amid algorithmic visibility, digital pluralism, and state control (Fauzi et al., 2026).

In Indonesia, Nurbaeti and colleagues compare the digital-era fatwa methodologies of three major institutions—the Indonesian Ulama Council, Bahtsul Masā'il Nahdlatul Ulama, and the Tarjih and Tajdid Council of Muhammadiyah—finding different but complementary epistemological characteristics and a shared challenge of maintaining scholarly authority and fatwa credibility amid the proliferation of algorithms and religious content (Nurbaeti et al., 2025). Kasdi and colleagues further show that MUI fatwas possess substantial sociological and moral binding force because they are perceived as authoritative interpretations grounded in Islamic legal principles, and that religious authority has become increasingly strategic in the digital era, particularly following the issuance of MUI Fatwa No. 24 of 2017, which provides ethical guidelines for social media engagement, promotes social harmony, and seeks to prevent societal fragmentation (Kasdi et al., 2026). These responses indicate that institutional authority is being rearticulated rather than simply eclipsed.

AI and the Automation of Religious Guidance

The most recent empirical developments concern artificial intelligence. Rois and Yazdani identify a "digital schism"—an epistemic tension between the hierarchical logic of sanad and the distributed logic of algorithms—that gives rise to a new knowledge elite, including daʿwah influencers and "AI muftis," whose legitimacy is constructed through digital performativity and symbolic capital (Rois & Yazdani, 2026). Atallah's framework similarly notes that digital mediation introduces new ambiguities concerning authority, legitimacy, and moral agency, particularly in the context of AI-assisted religious tools, and warns that while digital fatwas may enhance accessibility and transnational connectivity, they also risk epistemic fragmentation, erosion of institutional credibility, and the diffusion of accountability (Atallah, 2026). Ahmed and colleagues emphasize that generative systems can produce grammatically confident responses that appear authoritative even when their sources are incomplete, their attribution is wrong, or their treatment of disagreement is selective, converting factual unreliability into a claim of normative authority (Ahmed et al., 2026). Askaraliev and Utayev, examining Islamic chatbots with a focus on Generation Z users in Uzbekistan, argue that the persistence of algorithmic hallucinations, the absence of spiritual lineage, and the lack of moral intentionality necessitate a "Human-in-the-Loop" approach to safeguard the integrity of the Islamic legal tradition (Askaraliev & Utayev, 2026). Ahmed's earlier assessment recommends that AI be incorporated for its accessibility and capacity to handle high query volumes, but insists that fatwa provision retain the human element, since only a human muftī can be alert and sensitive to context and gauge which ruling is appropriate in each situation (Ahmed, 2024). Niam's study of IslamGPT concludes that reliance on AI for religious advice may blur the lines of legitimate authority and that direct verification with religious experts is necessary to maintain doctrinal integrity (Niam, 2024), while Abdul-Latif and colleagues find that AI lacks the consciousness, intention, and jurisprudential reasoning required for legal and moral accountability and therefore cannot independently issue fatwas, though it may be employed as an auxiliary tool under strict scholarly supervision (Abdul-Latif et al., 2025).

Discussion

Taken together, these findings support a view of digital religious authority as fluid, relational, and continuously negotiated rather than as a fixed attribute of persons or institutions. The classical architecture of authority—rooted in scholarly qualification, isnād-based transmission, contextual discernment, and institutional oversight—has not disappeared, but it now operates in an environment structured by visibility metrics, platform logics, audience engagement, and algorithmic amplification (Atallah, 2026). The transformation is therefore best understood as a change in the conditions under which authority is constituted and recognized, rather than as a simple transfer of authority from one set of actors to another. This aligns with Neumaier's systematization, which predicts that established authorities will be questioned, new authorities will emerge, new pathways to authority will open, and existing authorities will seek new recognition through new channels (Neumaier, 2023)—all of which the empirical record confirms.

The normative stakes are considerable. Where authority is granted on the basis of algorithmic popularity rather than scholarly expertise, the risk is not only the simplification of Islamic legal

discourse but the erosion of the verification mechanisms—such as the practice of tabbayyun, the vigilant checking and researching of information—that Islamic tradition has long prescribed for the evaluation of religious claims (Ramlan et al., 2024). Research on religious literacy shows that the level of religious literacy among social media users affects their acceptance and reliability judgments regarding false or inaccurate religious information, and that users who lack Islamic knowledge, particularly Muslim youths, may struggle to determine the validity of information sources (Ramlan et al., 2024). This underscores the importance of the digital religious literacy that several studies identify as a necessary response to the transformation (Masruha et al., 2025). It also explains why scholars call for responsive religious policy and inclusive educational frameworks to sustain both innovation and theological integrity (‘Ulyan, 2023), and why Islamic religious education is being reconceived to equip students to distinguish accurate from misleading information (Hidayatulah et al., 2025). The fact that digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have become major epistemic spaces for Generation Z, reshaping religious authority and modes of value internalization, makes this pedagogical imperative especially urgent (Humaida et al., 2025).

The reconfiguration of authority also carries implications for the sociology of Islamic knowledge. The finding that young scholars increasingly construct fatwa knowledge from online sources (Rusli et al., 2020) suggests that digital mediation is altering not only the public face of authority but the formation of scholarly expertise itself, with traditional Islamic education institutions and muftis potentially reduced in role. At the same time, the strategic digital re-engagement of institutions such as Al-Azhar, Dar al-Iftāʾ, MUI, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Muhammadiyah (Fauzi et al., 2026)(Nurbaeti et al., 2025) indicates that the institutional field is adapting, and that the future of Islamic authority will likely involve a hybrid arrangement in which academic credibility and digital reach are combined rather than opposed.

Conclusion

This study has shown that digital media are transforming religious authority in Islam through a set of interrelated dynamics: the displacement of interpretive authority from institutions toward networked individuals; the emergence of algorithmic visibility as a competing measure of credibility; the fragmentation and contestation of the interpretive field; the contested entry of women scholars into digital space; the strategic digital re-engagement of established institutions; and the new epistemic risks posed by AI-assisted religious guidance. The empirical record across multiple national contexts and platforms indicates that digital mediation does not merely expand access to religious guidance but alters the balance between evidentiary reasoning and infrastructural prominence, reshapes the relationship between the muftī and the mustaftī, and introduces new ambiguities concerning legitimacy and moral accountability (Atallah, 2026). The transformation of Islamic religious authority in the digital age is thus not merely a shift in medium but a fundamental epistemological reconstruction that necessitates a new paradigm integrating Islamic values with modern technological rationality (Rois & Yazdani, 2026). For scholars, institutions, and Muslim communities alike, the task ahead is to develop the critical digital religious literacy, the ethical guardrails, and the hybrid scholarly practices that can preserve methodological rigor and the integrity of religious guidance while embracing the genuine accessibility that digital media afford.

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