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Transforming Religious Authority: Fatwas in the Social Media Era

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Abstract

This study examines the contestation of religious authority in Indonesia in the social media era by analyzing how digital platforms reshape the production, circulation, and validation of Islamic legal opinions. Despite the growing influence of online preachers and digital fatwas, limited research has examined how social media transforms the mechanisms of religious authority and the formation of Islamic law in the Indonesian context. Using a qualitative case study design and netnographic methods, this research analyzes digital fatwa content, the performance of religious authority by online preachers, and audience interactions on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. The findings reveal a shift from institution-based authority, grounded in scholarly credentials and collective deliberation, toward digital authority that derives legitimacy from symbolic capital, emotional appeal, and algorithmic visibility. This transformation contributes to epistemic fragmentation, as simplified and viral legal opinions frequently overshadow methodologically grounded fatwas issued by formal religious institutions. The study concludes that strengthening digital religious literacy, improving institutional communication, and applying a maqāṣid-based evaluative framework are essential to ensure that Islamic legal guidance in digital spaces remains credible, ethical, and socially beneficial.

Keywords: Digital Fatwas; Religious Authorities; Social Media Algorithms; *Maqaṣid al-Shari'ah*.

Introduction

The era of digital disruption has transformed patterns of human interaction with information, including in the religious sphere. For Muslims, access to sharia knowledge no longer relies on classical texts, the authority of scholars, or face-to-face forums, but rather spreads widely through social media and digital platforms. This presents a new landscape in which the production, distribution, and consumption of fatwas occur

quickly, openly, and are no longer constrained by traditional authority structures (Abusharif, 2023). In the Indonesian context, this digital transformation is increasingly evident with the emergence of non-institutional religious figures active on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram (Fauzi et al., 2026). They derive legitimacy not from scholarly chains of evidence or official institutions like the Indonesian Islamic Scholar Council (MUI), but from digital popularity, communication style, and algorithmic interactions. This situation has triggered a shift in religious authority from a basis of scholarship toward impressions and performativity, thus creating vulnerability to simplification of Islamic law, polarization, and a flood of instant fatwas that are not necessarily supported by adequate *ushul fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) methodology (Hamdani, 2023)

Previous research has shown that social media has significantly shifted patterns of religious authority, particularly through changes in how individuals access, produce, and interpret religious knowledge. Zuhri's study confirms that the digital landscape has reconstructed the dynamics of authority, marginalizing traditional institutions and opening up space for new actors (Zuhri, 2024). Arief also highlighted the emergence of religious authorities based on digital popularity that are not always based on scientific legitimacy (Arief, 2025). In addition, Ahmadi revealed that the accessibility of religious knowledge through social media provides individuals with greater freedom to choose reference sources (Ahmadi, 2019), a condition that, as noted by the Ikhwan, leads to the decentralization of fatwas (Ikhwan, 2023) Hefni even describes this phenomenon as a "buffet" of religious narratives that allows lay actors to act as both consumers and producers of spiritual knowledge (Hefni, 2020).

Previous research has focused on shifts in authority in general, without specifically examining how contestations of authority in the digital space influence the mechanisms of *istinbath al-ahkam* (Islamic law-making) and the transformation of fatwas in the Indonesian context. This gap is evident in the absence of studies examining how digital fatwa practices, algorithmic authority, and the logic of platform interactions influence the authority of *ulama* (Islamic scholars), the legal reasoning process, and public acceptance of Islamic legal products. Likewise, previous studies have not comprehensively examined how traditional authorities respond to these contestations, whether through methodological adaptations, new authoritative strategies, or revalidation of the *ulama's* position within the digital knowledge ecosystem.

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary framework that integrates Bourdieu's theory of symbolic authority, Hjarvard's theory of religious mediatization, and the *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* to critically examine the phenomenon of digital fatwas in the algorithmic era. Unlike previous

studies, which generally analyze digital fatwas from technological, sociological, or normative Islamic perspectives separately, this study synthesizes these approaches to explain how digital capital influences epistemic legitimacy while assessing the quality and authority of religious legal opinions in online environments. This study therefore offers a more comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the interaction between algorithmic visibility, symbolic religious authority, and the objectives of Islamic law. Beyond describing the phenomenon, it provides evaluative parameters for assessing the legitimacy and quality of digital fatwas and proposes a direction for the epistemological reconstruction of Islamic legal authority in digital spaces. Consequently, this study contributes to the development of contemporary Islamic legal scholarship by offering a theoretical model that is responsive to the challenges of digital communication while preserving the normative objectives of Islamic law.

Research Method

This research is a qualitative case study that aims to deeply understand the dynamics of religious authority in the digital landscape, particularly the production and dissemination of fatwas through social media. (Creswell & Poth, 2017) Methodologically, this research draws on netnography, which is considered relevant for analyzing communication patterns, interactions, and the construction of religious authority in digital space (Kozinets, 2015). Researchers examined how fatwas are produced, interpreted, debated, and shared on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. The primary focus of this research encompasses three interrelated components of the digital religious ecosystem: digital fatwas, digital religious actors, and audience interactions.

Data collection was conducted through three main, complementary techniques. First, digital documentation, which included the collection of fatwa texts, short videos, and various religious content posts relevant to the research theme. Second, passive participant observation of social media accounts actively producing fatwa content was conducted to understand the content presentation patterns, the styles of authority established, and the algorithmic dynamics that influence the visibility and acceptance of these fatwas. This combination of techniques was used to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the dynamics of religious authority in the digital space.

Data analysis in this study uses a critical discourse analysis approach developed by Fairclough (2013). The data analysis process involved several stages, starting with data reduction and thematic categorization, and then progressing to in-depth interpretation of the patterns of religious authority that emerged in the mediatic context. Data

validity was strengthened through source and method triangulation, as well as through member checking with several informants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations did not deviate from the intended meaning of the informants (Bruckman, 2002).

Result and Discussion

Transformation of Religious Authority in the Digital Era

The transformation of religious authority in the digital era is marked by the weakening of formal religious institutions' dominance in defining religious truth (Alfani & Anwar, 2024). The transformation of religious authority in Indonesia in the digital era marks a significant shift from a knowledge-based authority to a new form of legitimacy grounded in digital performativity and public acceptance (Amirudin et al., 2025). Religious authority, previously under the control of formal institutions such as the Indonesian Islamic Scholar Council (MUI), large religious organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, and *ulama* with *sanad* (lineage or chain of narrators), now must share space with non-institutional religious actors who gain influence through social media platforms. This change is further evident in empirical observations showing that religious content produced by digital influencers receives greater visibility, interaction, and public legitimacy than content created by formal religious institutions. These findings indicate that religious authority is undergoing a fundamental reorientation due to digital disruption.

The author's netnographic observations from January to March 2025 on TikTok and YouTube show that non-institutional religious accounts such as @ustadzahmillennial (1.8 million followers) and @kajianmnt (1.2 million followers) consistently generate engagement levels far exceeding those of official accounts like @officialMUI or @NUonline. This comparison is clearly evident in the case study of TikTok content on the theme "*Hukum Pacaran* (The Law of Dating)" produced by a non-Islamic student influencer. The approximately 45-second video received 4.9 million views and 350,000 likes, along with thousands of emotional comments from viewers. The content uses a very simple, unclear narrative pattern and targets the audience's emotions through motivational diction and straightforward moral framing. In contrast, the official MUI video, "*Hukum Khalwat dalam Islam* (The Law of Seclusion in Islam)", presented in a formal lecture format, garnered only around 3,000 views on YouTube and a very low engagement rate (Muhammad, 2024).

This striking difference indicates a shift in the legitimacy of religious authority from scientific authority to impressionistic authority. This phenomenon can be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's framework of symbolic capital. (Bourdieu, 2020). According to Bourdieu,

symbolic capital is a form of power born from public recognition, trust, and perception of a figure. In the digital context, this symbolic capital is built not from scholarly credentials or formal religious credentials, but through content production skills, personal branding, and the ability to convey messages emotionally. Successful religious influencers on social media generally present a relatable self-image that aligns with their audience's daily lives and a persuasive speaking style that evokes a sense of emotional closeness. This makes them more easily trusted by the public, even though some lack formal Sharia education.

In the case study of the video "*Hukum Pacaran,*" digital symbolic capital is clearly visible through three main aspects. First, the content is easy to access and can be consumed in less than a minute. Second, the emotional packaging, such as a strong and dramatic tone of voice and the use of background music that reinforces the moral message. Third, the strengthening of visual religious identity, such as the use of Islamic attire and an authoritative delivery style. These three aspects create the illusion of scholarly depth while increasing public trust in the influencer. Bourdieu's analysis shows how digital symbolic capital has become an alternative source of legitimacy, rivaling the scientific legitimacy previously held by religious scholars and formal institutions.

This phenomenon can also be analyzed through Stig Hjarvard's theory of the mediatization of religion. Hjarvard states that the media is not merely a means of conveying religious messages, but has become an institution that changes the structure, logic, and presentation of religion to the public (Hjarvard, 2018). In the Indonesian context, platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram have created a new logic for the dissemination of Islamic preaching and fatwas: the logic of virality, speed, and visualization. In other words, religious content must adhere to media mechanisms to reach a wide audience. This forces preachers to adapt to formats favored by algorithms, such as short, emotional, and easily understood content (AlMazaedh et al., 2026).

Returning to the case study of "*Hukum Pacaran*", the TikTok algorithm promoted this content because it met the criteria for viral content: short, emotional, and engaging. Meanwhile, the formal, long, and complex MUI video did not receive the same treatment from the algorithm because it did not generate high levels of engagement. This demonstrates that algorithms are not merely passive mediators but new epistemic actors that determine what is considered important, true, or worthy of public view (Haryadi, 2020). Thus, social media algorithms indirectly reshape the face of religious authority in digital space.

This transformation shifts the previously vertical authority structure, in which *ulama* or institutions held supreme authority as producers of religious law and interpretation, toward a more horizontal,

participatory structure. In this new structure, digital communities, user comments, and levels of interaction play a role in determining the legitimacy of a religious opinion (Naila Nabiha Qonita et al., 2024). Authority no longer flows from the *ulama* to the congregation, but from the content to the community. The public participates in affirming or rejecting religious opinions, and these collective social decisions are often influenced more by the emotional resonance of the content than by scientific accuracy.

This transformation of religious authority has several academic implications. First, it democratizes religious discourse, allowing every individual to express their religious views and receive legitimacy based on public response. Second, this transformation triggers epistemic fragmentation, as sources of authority proliferate, become varied, and are not always grounded in sound scientific evidence. Third, the emergence of impressionistic authority grounded in digital symbolic capital can diminish the authority of traditional *ulama* (Islamic scholars) who rely on scientific *sanad* (certifications).

However, the transformation of digital religious authorities also opens up new opportunities. Da'wah and spiritual education are becoming more inclusive, accessible, and relevant to the needs of the younger generation. The challenge is to ensure this transformation remains aligned with Islamic methodological principles and does not fall into shallow religious populism.

Decentralization of Fatwa Production and Epistemic Fragmentation

The digitalization of religious public spaces has triggered a fundamental shift in the production of fatwas: from formal, deliberative, and scholarly forums to rapid, distributed production driven by non-institutional actors (Atallah, 2026). In a netnographic study conducted by the author, which analyzed 120 short videos on the fatwa-themed platforms TikTok and Instagram during the observation period, it was noted that 73% of the sample did not explicitly mention primary evidence (Quran and Sunnah) or the methodology of *ushul fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). This figure is not merely a statistic; it signifies a practical shift that has implications for how the public views the truth of Islamic law. Fatwas, traditionally the product of collective *ijtihād* (interpretation) or the decisions of fatwa councils, are now also short content assessed through digital metrics: views, likes, and shares.

This phenomenon of decentralization arises from several structural factors within the digital space. First, the entry threshold is low: anyone who understands the platform's mechanics can produce and disseminate legal claims. Second, the logic of the attention economy encourages the production of easily consumed, short, emotional content that is free of

methodological complexity, thereby gaining traction more quickly. Third, audiences seeking quick answers often legitimize engagement, making engagement numbers a substitute for scientific judgment.

The first case featured an influencer declaring that caring for dogs for aesthetic or entertainment purposes is absolutely *haram* (forbidden). The video, less than a minute long, contained a strong statement without any supporting evidence, accompanied by provocative text and background music that dramatized the moral message (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 2010). The video garnered approximately 2.1 million views and thousands of comments, mostly supportive; many of them were short and emotional. "It's just *najis* (impurity), that's it." This public response demonstrates how normative claims with little scientific justification can gain social legitimacy through virality.

On the other hand, official institutions such as MUI have provided a more comprehensive explanation of the law on keeping dogs, including the context of use (e.g., for hunting, guarding livestock, or for other reasons that allow dispensation) and its *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) implications (Fatwa MUI No. 2/2010). However, the delay, lengthy format, and formal communication style make the general public less likely to encounter or heed these official fatwas. Meanwhile, influencers' short messages, which simplify the *halal* (lawful)-*haram* (forbidden) dichotomy, are more easily absorbed because they align with digital information consumption styles (Sholihah et al., 2023).

Theoretical analysis helps explain this dynamic. From Bourdieu's perspective, the traditional symbolic capital of diplomas, *sanad*, and institutional networks is disrupted by digital symbolic capital generated through visibility, engagement, and the aesthetics of representation. (Bourdieu, 2020). Influencers who can project a convincing religious image (dress style, intonation, authoritative impression) convert visibility into social legitimacy. From the perspective of mediatization (Hjarvard), social media not only facilitates the dissemination of fatwas but also changes the form and logic of legitimacy itself, making truth something produced through media resonance rather than scientific merit (Hjarvard, 2018).

The practical impact is epistemic fragmentation: the public is exposed to competing and often methodologically inequivalent versions of the law (Suaedy et al., 2023). When the public no longer has easy access to fatwas grounded in *ushul* (foundation), legal decisions based on scientific arguments are being pushed aside by popular claims. The second case demonstrates the conflict between the influencer's claim that crypto trading is absolutely permissible and the formal fatwa of the National Sharia Council (DSN-MUI) that places crypto activities in a more nuanced position: some products/activities are acceptable if they meet certain criteria, but speculative transactions that resemble *gharar* (uncertain) and

maysir (speculation) can be categorized as *haram* (Dewan Syariah Nasional Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 2021). A YouTube video by a popular Islamic preacher claiming that "all crypto is *halal*" has garnered approximately 1.3 million views; massive comments and reposts have reinforced the message among his followers.

The contrast between influencer claims and official fatwas illustrates that the legitimacy process on social media is often more strongly influenced by the availability of easily understood narratives and the audience's economic interests (Ali & Aljahsh, 2025). Many users facing investment decisions seek quick answers; answers stating that it is "*halal*" provide emotional reassurance to proceed. As a result, formal fatwas, filled with strings attached and complex legal explanations, tend to be ignored.

Epistemologically, this shift obscures the criteria for validity: religious truth, once tested through *ijtihād* methodology, is now tested through rhetorical performances and digital statistics. As a result, society faces the risk of misguided decision-making—in this case, the potential to be deceived by speculative financial products marketed as *halal* due to endorsements by popular religious figures. At the macro level, this can also lead to socio-economic dysfunction if religious claims trigger harmful collective behavior. The two case studies above demonstrate a recurring pattern: concise claims, an emotional format, and algorithmic visibility = social legitimacy. Bourdieu helps map how symbolic capital shifts from academic to digital-aesthetic capital, while Hjarvard emphasizes that media has become an institution that shapes the very forms of religion itself. Both perspectives together explain why Instagram and TikTok fatwas can rival those of formal institutions.

Important epistemological implications include: first, the erosion of methodological standards, shifting indicators of truth from argumentative evidence and *sanad* (chain of narrators) to indicators of engagement. Second, the fragmentation of discourse, the spread of diverse claims without verification mechanisms, giving rise to a plurality that is not always productive (plurality vs. relativism). Third, exposure to viral disinformation content can rapidly spread religious misunderstandings.

To address this fragmentation, a multipronged approach is needed: increasing digital religious literacy in society (teaching how to read the credentials of content providers, the characteristics of valid fatwas), adapting formal institutions (presenting fatwas in a more concise, multimedia, and SEO-friendly format without sacrificing methodology), and digital verification mechanisms (labeling or certification of fatwa content by credible institutions) (Gojali & Setiawan, 2023). Additionally, media education for preachers or influencers from formal authorities can help them maintain scientific quality when utilizing digital formats.

The Role of Algorithms in Distributing Fatwas

In the era of social media, the process of constructing religious knowledge no longer takes place solely in traditional discursive spaces such as religious assemblies, Islamic boarding schools, or scientific publications (Maemonah et al., 2022). It is now appreciated and curated by a series of technical tools called algorithms. The author's netnographic observations on the TikTok platform during February 2024 revealed a consistent recommendation pattern: the religious content most frequently promoted by the algorithm is characterized by short duration (15–60 seconds), high emotional content, strong truth claims, and dramatic audio and visual packaging. This pattern is not a technical coincidence; it is a manifestation of the platform's logic, which encapsulates user preferences, engagement metrics, and an attention-based business model (Kholili et al., 2024). In this context, algorithms function not merely as distribution mediators but as epistemic actors, entities that help determine what counts as knowledge, who is considered authoritative, and how religious truth is distributed to the public.

This phenomenon can be best illustrated by the case study of content titled "*Hukum Makan di Restoran Non-Muslim* (Rules on Eating at Non-Muslim Restaurants)" which went viral on TikTok in 2024. The video presented a simple statement: "*Haram*! Period." It lacked historical context, textual references, or methodological explanation; the message was delivered with a firm intonation, fast-paced text, and background music that reinforced the moral sentiment. Despite its lack of substance, the content generated over 20,000 comments, a high level of engagement that encouraged the algorithm to continue recommending the video to other users. Consequently, normative claims unfounded by clear *fiqh* methodology became prominent on many users' homepages. Meanwhile, an in-depth study by the Indonesian Islamic Scholar Council (DSN-MUI/BPJPH) on *halal* assurance, which offered comprehensive institutional analysis, definitions, and exceptions, received little attention in the recommendation track due to relatively low engagement (Dewan Syariah Nasional—Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 2021).

Positioning algorithms as epistemic actors requires a more theoretical understanding than simply calling them "non-neutral." Stig Hjarvard offers a useful analytical framework: the mediatization of religion. Hjarvard shows that media are not merely channels, but institutions that transform the form, function, and logic of religion (Hjarvard, 2018). If media mediates religion by simplifying, visualizing, and emphasizing certain forms of religious experience, then the algorithms at the heart of social media perform similar functions in an automated and measurable way. Algorithms define visibility parameters:

optimal duration, caption patterns, narrative structure, and editing tempo that "work" in the recommendation engine (Fitriansyah & Lubis, 2023). In other words, the algorithm defines the aesthetics of religious truth in the digital public space; what is effective at gaining attention will be considered relevant and true by many users.

Several epistemological consequences arise from this role—first, the prioritization of format over substance. Algorithms tend to prioritize form (short, punchy, and emotional), so that format becomes a signal of relevance, often overriding argumentative quality. A fatwa or lengthy explanation presenting evidence and *tarjih* (legal rulings) will not "play" in the recommendation mechanism unless it is broken down and optimized into short chunks. This process potentially shreds nuance and complexity. Second, the creation of engagement-based truth characteristics: likes, shares, and comments become easily measurable proxies for legitimacy, even though they are not methodological indicators of *fiqh*. Third, the fragmentation of the discursive space: algorithms strengthen filter bubbles and echo chambers, allowing strong but unscientific truth claims to proliferate among certain audiences without adequate critical exposure.

An empirical analysis of the case of "*Hukum Makan di Restoran Non-Muslim*" demonstrates how this practice works. A simple, emotional video triggers intense commentary, often consisting of short moral affirmations, emojis, and reposts. These interactions signal to the algorithm that the video is "relevant," and thus, it enters the broader recommendation pool. Users inclined to question the issue are exposed to a single narrative. At the same time, critical studies emerging from academic sources or formal institutions are excluded from the recommendation cycle. As a result, the truth-testing process that previously involved reviewing *ushul* (Islamic principles), *tarjih* (Islamic law), and collective discourse is reduced to a sequence of digital micro-endorsements.

The role of algorithms as epistemic actors varies across religious groups. *Ulama* or institutions that understand platform mechanics can leverage algorithms to disseminate nuanced content, for example, by breaking long studies into a series of micro-content pieces that retain references and methodology. However, many formal institutions have not yet adopted platform-optimized communication practices, thus losing visibility. Conversely, influencers who excel in visual storytelling are often uninterested or unable to maintain methodological commitments because platform logic values momentum and immediate emotional resonance. This difference in adaptability contributes to the unequal distribution of authority in the digital realm (Harisi et al., 2026).

Positioning algorithms as epistemic actors also raises a normative question: do we want a machine-mediated system for distributing religious knowledge that prioritizes engagement? Practical answers

require multi-stakeholder intervention. First, platforms must provide features that facilitate context, such as "verified scholarly source" labels, reference metadata, or context panels that direct users to comprehensive studies. Second, religious institutions need to adopt digital communication strategies that maintain methodological integrity while adapting to the platform format: creating concise FAQs with links to comprehensive studies, micro-lectures with clear references, or cross-platform collaboration with experienced creators. Third, public digital literacy must be improved so that users can distinguish between popular claims and methodologically grounded fatwas.

Beyond technical advice, there is a need for further systematic research: comparative studies of cross-platform recommendation mechanics (TikTok vs. YouTube vs. Instagram Reels) and A/B experiment analyses of how format variations affect the visibility of content referencing primary sources. Such approaches help formulate evidence-based guidelines for religious institutions to design ethical, effective communication in the algorithmic era (Akyüz & Say, 2026).

Theoretically, understanding algorithms as epistemic actors connects the study of mediatization to the sociology of knowledge: not only who speaks (social actors), but also the technical devices that mediate those conversations determine what counts as knowledge (Srivastava, 2023). This framework is important because it provides an analytical basis for assessing not only religious content, but also the technical ecology that selects it. Hjarvard (2011) reminds us that media transformations affect religion structurally; adding the term "epistemic actors" to algorithms helps explain how these transformations occur at the most technical and practical levels.

Ultimately, recognizing algorithms as epistemic actors does not mean abandoning all digital practices. Rather, it requires religious actors, including *ulama*, institutions, and educators, to actively develop digital capabilities that maintain epistemic quality: linking every brief claim to primary sources in an easily accessible manner, using micro-formats that maintain sound theoretical foundations, and educating the public about the signs of valid fatwas. Without this collective effort, algorithms will continue to be gatekeepers of religious truth, prioritizing aesthetics and engagement over methodology, with consequences for the quality of religious knowledge received by the public.

Symbolic Authority and Digital Capital

Symbolic capital, in Pierre Bourdieu's framework, refers to a form of legitimacy arising from social recognition of attributes such as piety, honor, or moral reputation. In the context of classical Islamic tradition, the symbolic capital of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) is grounded in the *sanad*

(chain of narrators) of knowledge, the authority of texts, and strong institutional affiliations (Hallaq, 2009). However, digital transformation has radically altered this configuration. In social media, symbolic capital is no longer determined by mastery of Islamic texts, depth of *ushul fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence), or structural position within religious institutions, but rather by visual representation, the aesthetics of delivery, personal narratives, and the emotional closeness established with audiences. This phenomenon is particularly prominent across digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, where the logic of virality supplants traditional mechanisms for establishing religious credibility.

Based on the author's netnographic observations of 40 popular religious YouTube channels from January to March 2024, it was found that 8 out of 10 *ustaz* or *dai* (preachers) in digital media relied on personal branding as their primary strategy for building legitimacy. These personal branding elements include a consistent Islamic fashion style, a soft and emotional tone of voice, dramatic personal narratives, and the use of cinematic production techniques. In content production, visual elements such as warm lighting, motivational background music, and close-up shots are often used to create an emotional atmosphere and a sense of intimacy between the *dai* and the audience.

These personal branding elements function as symbols perceived by the public as signs of religiosity. In other words, digital aesthetics becomes a new mechanism for establishing authority. While in the Islamic boarding school world, authority is produced through *sanad* and *ta'dzim* (respectful and obedient), in the digital world, it is produced through branding and engagement (Damopolii et al., 2023). This process of symbolization demonstrates a significant shift in how religious authority is perceived and accepted by the Muslim public in Indonesia.

One of the most prominent phenomena in the construction of religious symbolic capital in the digital space is the figure of a religious influencer, referred to here as Influencer B, who built his authority through a narrative of hijrah (migration to enlightenment). In his various videos, B recounts his life journey as a "naughty teenager" who was once immersed in promiscuity, alcohol, and a hedonistic lifestyle, before finally finding a spiritual turning point that led him to a religious life. These *hijrah* stories have even received between 800,000 and 2 million views, far surpassing the views of traditional *fiqh* lectures produced by institutional *ulama* such as the Indonesian Islamic Scholar Council (MUI) or *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools). The high level of public enthusiasm is evident in the thousands of comments stating that B's lectures felt "touching," "more honest," and "easier to understand," because they were based on true stories and delivered in a soft, empathetic voice. In many comments,

it appears that the audience's legitimacy is not rooted in sharia arguments or references to classical texts, but rather in the narrative's emotional power. In other words, personal experience has become a new source of authority, replacing scientific validity.

From the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic capital theory, public recognition of Influencer B's *hijrah* narrative is a clear example of impressionistic symbolic capital-a form of legitimacy constructed through visual impressions, aesthetic presentation, and religious performativity. This symbolic capital differs fundamentally from traditional symbolic capital within the Islamic scholarly tradition, which relies on scholarly habitus, *sanad*, intellectual reputation, and institutional affiliation. In the digital realm, impressionistic symbolic capital is more defined by visual narratives that present a spiritual journey as proof of authenticity, the use of production aesthetics such as warm lighting and emotional music, storytelling techniques that emphasize moral transformation, regular social interactions with the audience, and personal branding through dress and speech (Shamim & Islam, 2022). The combination of these various aspects transforms the image of religiosity into a modern, easily consumed symbol, while also becoming capital widely recognized by the Muslim public.

Within Bourdieu's field framework, Influencer B succeeds in seizing a dominant position in the digital authority field not because he possesses formal cultural capital such as a *sanad keilmuan* (chain of knowledge) or a sharia diploma, but because he can convert social capital in the form of several followers, economic capital in the form of content production tools, and impressionistic symbolic capital in the form of a religious image built through personal branding (Ragnedda et al., 2025). This capital is then converted into widely recognized authoritative capital. This demonstrates a fundamental transformation in the structure of spiritual authority: from authority based on a vertical scientific structure to authority born from a horizontal network of recognition.

Compared to traditional religious authority, this shift is significant. Scholars in the Islamic tradition attain their jurisdiction through a long process: mastery of classical texts, a rigorous chain of knowledge, academic reputation, and affiliation with formal institutions such as *pesantren* or MUI. Meanwhile, digital authority is built more quickly through visual presence, personal communication style, content consistency, and the ability to appeal to audiences' emotions (Kahfi et al., 2024). Legitimacy, previously structural, has now become impressionistic and highly dependent on public perception. This transformation has created what can be called "symbolic democratization," in which anyone can claim religious authority so long as they can construct a compelling,

relatable narrative. In this context, Influencer B's *hijrah* narrative becomes a new kind of credential that rivals formal scholarly credentials.

Digital symbolic authority is also inseparable from the workings of algorithms. YouTube and TikTok algorithms tend to prioritize content that is emotional, inspirational, and highly personal, especially when presented in short, high-engagement formats. The *hijrah* narrative meets all of these characteristics, allowing the algorithm to automatically expand its reach and place it in the recommended content category (Zaman et al., 2025). As the public continues to like and share its videos, the algorithm strengthens its symbolic position, creating a snowball effect that magnifies its influence. Thus, the algorithm is no longer simply a channel for distributing messages, but also a producer of authority. It determines who appears on users' homepages, who is recommended, and who is lost in the deluge of digital content. At this point, Bourdieu's and Hjarvard's theories complement each other: symbolic capital explains the social mechanisms by which authority is formed, while Hjarvard's mediatization shows how media and algorithms structure the arena in which symbolic capital operates.

This phenomenon of the emergence of impressionistic authority carries several important epistemological implications. First, when authority is constructed through emotional narratives rather than through the validity of fiqh methodology, there is a risk of neglecting the fundamental principles of *istinbaṭ* (deduction), the validation of the *sanad*, the reading of historical context, and the *Maqaṣid al-Shari'ah* (objectives of Islamic law). Second, emotional authority tends to displace textual authority. The younger generation is far more likely to trust figures with inspiring life stories than senior scholars with detailed legal arguments. Third, virality is often used as an indicator of truth. Many commentators judge the credibility of religious opinions by the number of views or likes, rather than by their methodological quality. Fourth, religiosity risks becoming a visual commodity produced for the tastes of the digital market rather than for ethical and scientific principles. Fifth, the field of Islamic authority is increasingly layered and fragmented: traditional scholars, formal institutions, religious influencers, and "viral *ustaz*" all compete to produce religious meaning.

From a social and cultural perspective, these changes impact how society understands Islamic law. Religious authority becomes increasingly subjective and relative. Popular views are often trusted more than methodological academic perspectives. Many young people are more attached to inspirational figures than to traditional scholarly teachers. The phenomenon of *hijrah* is also reduced: from a profound epistemic process to merely visual aesthetics and emotional narratives. The digital space ultimately creates a parallel authority, detached from the genealogy of

Islamic scholarship but wielding significant influence over the public (Sunier & Buskens, 2022).

However, this change is not completely negative. Digital symbolic capital can also be a more relevant entry point for da'wah for the younger generation, especially if combined with strong scholarship and the principles of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*. The biggest challenge is not to reject digital transformation, but rather to ensure that impressionistic symbolic capital does not replace scientific capital, but rather complements and directs it so that it remains on the path of *sahih* (valid) Islamic epistemology.

Public Participation and the Formation of Digital Public Fiqh

The digital space creates a new landscape for the production and negotiation of religious meaning. While previously Muslims tended to be passive recipients of fatwas and religious opinions, the digital space now opens up opportunities for the public to participate in the interpretation process (Evolvi, 2021). The concept of the networked public, as explained by Boyd, illustrates how digital communities are not only consumers of information but also spaces for the production of collective discourse. On TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, phenomena such as commenting, video stitching, content duets, and sermon remixes demonstrate that the public is now directly involved in shaping religious understanding, including on issues of Islamic law previously under the authority of religious scholars (Setianto, 2026).

A case study of the *halal-haram* debate over music on TikTok in 2023 clearly illustrates this dynamic. A religious influencer uploaded a short video declaring that music is absolutely *haram*, citing several hadiths and the views of classical scholars. Shortly thereafter, a counter-video emerged from another creator refuting the claim, bringing in the perspectives of contemporary scholars, including Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who views music as a positive medium as long as it does not lead to sin. These two videos ultimately sparked thousands of public response videos: some supporting the *haram* ruling, others defending the permissible ruling. The comments section featured contested arguments, comparisons of religious schools of thought, and emotional arguments that were not always methodologically accurate.

This phenomenon demonstrates the emergence of digital public *fiqh*, a space for Islamic legal deliberation based on open participation. The public not only accepts fatwas but also reinterprets, questions, or rejects the views expressed. While such a space opens up opportunities for democratization of interpretation, it also carries epistemological risks. Not all commentary is scientifically grounded; much is influenced by the logic of virality, the defense of group identity, or fleeting emotions. Thus, the

process of negotiating Islamic law in the digital space is fluid and open, but not always scientific (Siregar et al., 2025). This indicates a shift in authority from religious scholars to public networks, where authority is shaped not by methodological expertise but by social resonance and collective support.

This shift demonstrates how the digital space has become a new arena for contesting religious identity in Indonesia. Several studies suggest that the digital public can pressure formal institutions to respond more quickly to certain issues. In other words, digital public *fiqh* is not merely a space for commentary, but an arena for negotiating authority, a place where the public tests, critiques, or redistributes religious authority based on their own perceptions. This simultaneously enriches discourse but also opens up the possibility of distorted interpretations that can deviate significantly from the methodology of *ushul fiqh*.

In the context of the growing production of digital fatwas, the *Maqaṣid al-Shari'ah* has become an important instrument for assessing the quality of legal opinions. The tenets of *maqāṣid*, which are oriented towards *ḥifẓ al-dīn* (protection of religion), *ḥifẓ al-nafs* (protection of life), *ḥifẓ al-'aql* (protection of intellect), *ḥifẓ al-nasl* (protection of lineage), and *ḥifẓ al-māl* (protection of property), provide an evaluative framework capable of weighing benefits and harms in a rapidly changing social context. This study found three prominent patterns related to digital fatwas: first, digital fatwas tend to prioritize rapid response over methodological validity; second, many viral fatwas actually contradict the *maqāṣid* by generating anxiety, misunderstanding, or social harm; and third, formal institutions are often late in responding to issues that have already spread widely in the digital public space.

One of the most significant case studies is the controversy surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine in 2020–2021. A religious influencer, known as Influencer C, uploaded a video claiming that vaccines contain *haram* elements and therefore should not be used by Muslims. The video quickly went viral, reaching hundreds of thousands of views and accompanied by comments expressing deep anxiety (Supena, 2021). Many people subsequently became reluctant to get vaccinated, believing vaccines to be contrary to Islamic law. At the same time, the Indonesian Islamic Scholar Council (MUI) issued a fatwa permitting the use of vaccines based on the *ḍarūrah* (principles of emergency) and the *maqāṣid* of *ḥifẓ al-nafs* (protection of life). However, this formal fatwa was less widely disseminated, losing out to more emotional and easily understood viral content.

An analysis of the *Maqaṣid al-Shari'ah* reveals that the informal fatwa disseminated by Influencer C is clearly problematic. Not only does its content fail to follow proper *istinbaṭ* procedures, but it also undermines

life protection by leading some members of the public to reject pandemic prevention efforts. In this case, the digital fatwa actually threatens the *maqāṣid*, rather than supporting it. This phenomenon demonstrates that virality is not only an epistemological issue but also an ethical and public-safety issue. When fatwas are not filtered based on the *maqāṣid*, religious content can become a source of disinformation that endangers society.

This evaluation demonstrates the need for new standards in managing digital authority. *Maqāṣid* can serve as a normative framework for assessing whether digital fatwas are relevant, ethical, and aligned with the primary objectives of sharia. In the context of a competitive digital space, a good fatwa is not merely popular, but one that safeguards the community's well-being. Therefore, integrating *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* into the production and distribution of digital fatwas is a strategic step to minimize epistemic risk while ensuring the sustainability of Islamic legal ethics in an era of media disruption.

Evaluation of the Quality of Digital Fatwas through Maqaṣid al-Shari'ah

An evaluation of digital fatwas requires a theoretical framework better suited to the dynamics of new media. In this context, *Maqaṣid al-Shari'ah* becomes the most relevant instrument for measuring whether a legal opinion, especially one circulated through digital platforms, aligns with the primary objectives of sharia, namely *ḥifẓ al-dīn* (protection of religion), *ḥifẓ al-nafs* (protection of life), *ḥifẓ al-'aql* (protection of intellect), *ḥifẓ al-nasl* (protection of lineage), and *ḥifẓ al-māl* (protection of property). The findings of this study indicate that most digital fatwas do not undergo adequate istinbaṭ, so viral religious interpretations do not always reflect the methodological substance of Islamic law.

One of the main tendencies in digital fatwas is the dominant focus on speed over methodological rigor. Religious content creators are often compelled to respond to current issues as quickly as possible, especially when they are at the peak of public attention. This aligns with the logic of algorithms that prioritize the newest and most frequently shared content. As a result, digital fatwas are often delivered without primary or secondary arguments, without explanation of the principles of *ushul fiqh*, and without consideration of the broader social context. Speed of response becomes more important than accuracy, and the logic of virality dominates over methodological logic (Sito Rohmawati et al., 2025).

Furthermore, research shows that some popular digital fatwas contradict the principles of *maqāṣid* (righteousness), particularly the principles of *ḥifẓ al-nafs*, *ḥifẓ al-'aql,* and *ḥifẓ al-māl*. Many viral content articles provide legal explanations that confuse the public, or even trigger fear and misunderstanding. This phenomenon is clearly evident in various

religious issues that develop on social media, such as the use of certain products, the consumption of certain foods, or certain spiritual practices. When fatwas are not issued based on thorough research, viral religious content can have detrimental impacts on people's social lives and mental health. The third trend is the minimal presence of formal institutions in the digital space during the early stages of an issue's development. The response of institutions like the Indonesian Islamic Scholar Council (MUI) or the National Council of Muslim Scholars (DSN-MUI) is often delayed compared to viral content that has already spread widely. This information vacuum is then filled by religious influencers who lack formal scientific authority but can produce content and build large followings. This situation allows non-institutional opinions to have greater room to shape public perception before official institutions provide clarification.

The case study of the COVID-19 vaccine in 2020–2021 provides a clear example of how digital fatwas can contradict the *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*. In one viral video, a religious influencer called Influencer C declared that the COVID-19 vaccine was "not *halal*" because it contained elements considered *haram* (impure). The video garnered millions of views and was widely shared across various platforms, creating concern among the Muslim community. Comments on the video suggest that the public largely believed the claim without seeking further validation from official institutions.

At the same time, MUI issued an official fatwa declaring the use of vaccines permissible based on the principle of *ḥifẓ al-nafs*. Despite the questionable *halal* status of the ingredients, the MUI emphasized that the emergency and the threat of a pandemic make vaccination a mandatory measure to maintain public safety. However, this fatwa did not achieve the same level of virality, as its narrative lacked emotional appeal, was not delivered in a short video format, and did not employ the popular rhetorical style employed by digital influencers. From the perspective of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, the opinion expressed by Influencer C violates the principle of *ḥifẓ al-nafs*. This informal fatwa has led some people to refuse vaccination, thereby increasing the risk of virus spread (Wahid & Abdulloh, 2026). Refusing to vaccinate not only endangers oneself but also others and society at large. This demonstrates how digital fatwas that do not undergo proper scientific scrutiny can have significant social impacts.

Maqaṣid analysis shows that viral digital fatwas often fail to consider the primary objectives of sharia. Rather than providing legal solutions that safeguard the safety of the community, many viral fatwas actually create confusion and fear. The principle of *ḥifẓ al-nafs*, which should be the primary consideration in health issues, is neglected by emotional narratives easily spread by digital influencers. Similarly, the principle of *ḥifẓ al-'aql* is threatened when circulating information is not

grounded in scientific methodology, thereby reducing the quality of public religious literacy. Meanwhile, the principle of *ḥifẓ al-māl* is also often ignored when viral fatwas cause economic harm, both to individuals and society. These findings suggest that *Maqaṣid al-Shari'ah* can be used as a critical tool to assess the quality of digital fatwas. A good digital fatwa must not only follow the correct principle of *istinbaṭ* but must also consider its broader social impact. Thus, *maqāṣid* can bridge the gap between classical methodology and contemporary needs in addressing digital media disruption. In an era when religious influencers wield significant influence, integrating maqaṣid into the production and evaluation of spiritual content is crucial to avoid distorting Islamic law and to safeguard public safety and well-being.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the transformation of religious authority in the digital era has fundamentally reshaped the production, legitimacy, and dissemination of fatwas by shifting authority from institution-centered jurisprudence toward algorithmically mediated religious discourse. Rather than being determined solely by formal institutions such as the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI), the legitimacy of contemporary fatwas is increasingly influenced by symbolic digital capital, emotional narratives, visual performativity, and audience engagement, resulting in epistemic fragmentation and a growing orientation toward virality over methodology-based *istinbāṭ* and the objectives of *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*. The principal contribution of this study lies in advancing an interdisciplinary framework that combines Bourdieu's symbolic authority, Hjarvard's theory of religious mediatization, and *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* to explain how digital platforms function as new epistemic actors in the construction of Islamic legal authority. This framework extends existing scholarship by providing evaluative criteria for assessing the legitimacy and ethical quality of digital fatwas in algorithm-driven environments. Practically, the findings highlight the urgency of strengthening digital religious literacy, promoting methodological transparency in online fatwa production, and integrating the *maqāṣid* approach into digital Islamic legal governance to safeguard the public interest. Nevertheless, this study is limited to selected digital fatwa cases and qualitative analysis. Future research should undertake comparative cross-country studies, examine the role of artificial intelligence in religious legal authority, and employ quantitative approaches to assess the relationship between algorithmic exposure, public trust, and the legitimacy of digital fatwas.

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