
Digital Fatwa Culture in Pakistan Authenticity and Ethical Boundaries in Social Media-Based Islamic Counseling

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Abstract

This article investigates the rise of digital fatwa culture in Pakistan, where Islamic legal and ethical guidance is increasingly sought and dispensed through social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Fueled by high mobile penetration (over 85%) and limited access to qualified local scholars, Pakistani Muslims—particularly youth—are turning to online muftis for rulings on matters ranging from ritual purity to marriage, finance, and mental health. While digital fatwas enhance accessibility and democratize religious knowledge, they also raise critical questions about scholarly authority, contextual understanding, and ethical responsibility. Drawing on content analysis of 120 fatwa videos and posts (2020–2024), interviews with digital muftis and users, and classical *usul al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence), this study examines how authenticity is constructed in the digital sphere and identifies key ethical boundaries that ought to govern online Islamic counselling. The article argues that without robust mechanisms of accountability, verification, and contextual sensitivity, digital fatwa culture risks promoting decontextualized, rigid, or even harmful rulings. It proposes a framework for ethical digital *ifta'* grounded in the *maqasid al-shari'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law) and aligned with Pakistan's national priorities of religious moderation and digital literacy. The research adheres to Higher Education Commission (HEC) Category Y standards, avoids sectarian

discourse, and situates its findings within Pakistan's contemporary socio-religious landscape.

Keywords: Digital Fatwa, Social Media, Islamic Counseling, Pakistan, Usul Al-Fiqh, Religious Authority, Digital Ethics, Maqasid Al-Shari'Ah

Introduction

In the bustling digital landscape of contemporary Pakistan, a new form of religious engagement has emerged: the social media fatwa. With over 110 million internet users and near-ubiquitous smartphone access, Pakistanis increasingly seek Islamic guidance not in the mosque or madrasa but through YouTube videos, WhatsApp forwards, and Instagram reels.¹

A young woman in Karachi may send a voice note to a mufti's official page asking whether her makeup invalidates wudu; a university student in Lahore might watch a TikTok-style clip on "Is cryptocurrency halal?"; a farmer in southern Punjab could join a Facebook Live session to inquire about zakat on solar-powered irrigation systems.²

This shift represents a profound transformation in the ecology of Islamic knowledge. Traditionally, fatwas were issued through face-to-face consultation (*istifta'*), where the mufti assessed the questioner's circumstances, intent, and local custom (*'urf*) before delivering a nuanced ruling.³

Today, digital mediation collapses this relational context. Questions are often anonymized, abbreviated, or stripped of socio-cultural detail, while responses are broadcast to mass audiences rather than tailored to individuals.⁴

While digital fatwas offer unprecedented access—especially for women, rural populations, and religious minorities—they also introduce significant risks: oversimplification of complex issues, lack of scholarly credentials among self-proclaimed "muftis," and the viral spread of extreme or decontextualized opinions.⁵

In some cases, digital fatwas have exacerbated family conflicts, stigmatized mental illness, or justified financial exploitation under the guise of religious compliance.⁶

This article explores the tension between accessibility and authenticity in Pakistan's digital fatwa culture. It asks: How is religious authority constructed and contested online? What ethical principles should govern digital ifta'? And how can Pakistan harness the benefits of digital counseling while mitigating its harms?

The Study Draws On Three Methodological Strands

(1) qualitative analysis of fatwa content from 15 prominent Pakistani digital platforms (2020–2024); (2) semi-structured interviews with 20 digital muftis and 30 users across Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; and (3) normative analysis using classical *usul al-fiqh* and contemporary *maqasid* theory.⁷

Historical and Jurisprudential Foundations of Fatwa

In classical Islamic tradition, a fatwa is a non-binding legal opinion issued by a qualified jurist (*mufti*) in response to a specific query (*mas'alah*).⁸

Unlike a court judgment (*qada'*), it carries moral but not legal force, relying on the seeker's trust in the mufti's knowledge and piety.⁹

The issuance of fatwa is governed by rigorous ethical and methodological standards outlined in *usul al-fiqh* literature. Key principles include:

- **Qualification (*ahliyyah*):** The mufti must master Qur'an, hadith, Arabic, legal theory, and consensus (*ijma'*).¹⁰
- **Contextual Awareness (*tafaqquh fi al-nawazil*):** Rulings must account for time, place, custom, and individual circumstance.¹¹
- **Precaution (*ihtiyat*):** In ambiguous matters, the mufti should err on the side of leniency to avoid hardship (*'usr*).¹²
- **Intention (*niyyah*):** The mufti must seek Allah's pleasure, not fame or profit.¹³

Classical scholars like Al-Nawawi (d. 1277) warned against issuing fatwas without full knowledge, stating, “Whoever gives a fatwa without understanding has sinned.”¹⁴

Similarly, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 1350) emphasized that fatwa is a form of worship that requires spiritual readiness.¹⁵

These principles assumed a relational, localized model of ifta’. Digital platforms disrupt this model by decoupling the mufti from the questioner’s lived reality.

The Rise of Digital Fatwa in Pakistan

Pakistan’s digital fatwa ecosystem has grown rapidly since 2015, driven by:

- **Technological Access:** 96% of internet users access the web via mobile phones, enabling instant religious queries.¹⁶
- **Scholar Shortages:** Rural areas often lack qualified muftis, creating demand for remote guidance.¹⁷
- **Youth Preferences:** 78% of Pakistanis under 30 prefer digital sources for religious information.¹⁸
- **Commercial Incentives:** Popular fatwa channels monetize through ads, donations, and premium services.¹⁹

Major platforms include:

- **YouTube:** Channels like “Darul Ifta Pakistan Official” and “Mufti Men” offer daily fatwa videos.
- **Facebook:** Pages such as “Ask the Mufti” receive thousands of private messages weekly.
- **WhatsApp:** Verified muftis operate “fatwa helplines” where users text questions.
- **Instagram/TikTok:** Short clips address trending topics like “Halal dating?” or “Is insurance haram?”

Content analysis reveals that 65% of digital fatwas concern personal rituals (prayer, fasting, purity), 20% address family law (marriage, divorce, inheritance), and 15% cover contemporary issues (finance, technology, health).²⁰

Notably, mental health queries—e.g., “Is depression a test from Allah or a sin?”—have surged post-pandemic.²¹

Constructing Authenticity in the Digital Sphere

In the absence of physical credentials, digital muftis construct authenticity through symbolic and performative markers:

- **Visual Signifiers:** Turbans, beards, and traditional attire signal piety and scholarly lineage.
- **Institutional Affiliation:** Mentioning ties to reputable madrasas (e.g., “Graduate of Jamia Ashrafia”) builds trust.
- **Scriptural Fluency:** Rapid citation of Qur’anic verses and hadiths demonstrates knowledge.
- **Emotional Resonance:** Compassionate tone and use of Urdu (rather than Arabic) enhance reliability.

However, these markers can be mimicked. Several unqualified individuals pose as muftis, using AI-generated backgrounds of mosques or fake ijazah certificates.²²

In one documented case, a Lahore-based influencer with no formal training issued over 500 fatwas before being exposed by the Wafaq ul Madaris.²³

Moreover, algorithmic logic favors sensationalism. Fatwas declaring common practices “haram” (e.g., birthday cakes, music, co-education) garner more views than nuanced, context-sensitive rulings.²⁴

This incentivizes rigidity over mercy—a distortion of the Prophetic principle of “making things easy, not difficult.”²⁵

Ethical Challenges in Digital Ifta’

The digital medium introduces four core ethical challenges:

1. Decontextualization

Fatwas require knowledge of the questioner’s intent, capacity, and environment. A digital query like “Is it haram to work in a bank?” omits whether the bank is Islamic or conventional, the employee’s role, and economic alternatives. Yet

many online muftis issue blanket prohibitions, ignoring the maqasid principle of preventing harm (*dar' al-mafasid*).²⁶

2. Lack of Accountability

Unlike traditional muftis accountable to local communities or scholarly bodies, digital muftis operate in a regulatory vacuum. There is no mechanism to correct erroneous fatwas or retract harmful advice.²⁷

3. Commodification

Monetization transforms ifta' from worship into content production. Some muftis offer "premium fatwas" for paid subscribers or promote affiliated businesses (e.g., halal certification services), violating the classical prohibition on profiting from religious knowledge.²⁸

4. Psychological Harm

Fatwas on mental health often pathologize distress as "weak iman" or "jinn possession," discouraging professional help. One Karachi woman reported being told her anxiety was "punishment for missing sunnah prayers," leading to severe guilt.²⁹

Toward an Ethical Framework for Digital Fatwa

To address these challenges, this article proposes an ethical framework for digital ifta' grounded in three pillars:

1. Scholarly Verification

Digital muftis should be certified by recognized bodies like Wafaq ul Madaris or the Council of Islamic Ideology. Platforms could display verified badges, similar to Twitter's blue check.

2. Contextual Responsiveness

Fatwa requests should include optional fields for age, gender, location, and background. Muftis must acknowledge uncertainty and avoid definitive rulings on complex issues without follow-up.

3. Maqasid-Based Reasoning

Rulings should explicitly reference the higher objectives of shari‘ah—preserving life, intellect, dignity, and social harmony. For instance, a fatwa on mental health should prioritize the maqasid of protecting life (*hifz al-nafs*) and intellect (*hifz al-‘aql*).

Additionally, digital fatwa platforms should:

- Partner with mental health professionals for psychosocial queries;
- Include disclaimers that fatwas are general guidance, not substitutes for personal consultation;
- Establish feedback mechanisms for error correction.

The State Bank of Pakistan’s model for regulating Islamic fintech offers a useful parallel: it certifies shari‘ah advisors while requiring transparency and consumer protection.³⁰

A similar regulatory body for digital ifta’ could be established under the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Case Studies

Case 1:

The “Music Fatwa” Controversy (2022)

A viral YouTube fatwa declared all musical instruments haram, citing Ibn Taymiyyah. The video received 2 million views but ignored classical diversity of opinion (e.g., Al-Ghazali’s permissibility of spiritual music). Music students reported anxiety and family conflicts. Later, the Darul Uloom Karachi issued a corrective statement emphasizing contextual interpretation—a rare instance of institutional pushback.³¹

Case 2:

WhatsApp Fatwa on Domestic Violence (2023)

A woman in Multan messaged a mufti’s WhatsApp line asking if she could leave an abusive husband. The reply: “Patience is obligatory; divorce is the

most hated halal.” The fatwa ignored the maqasid of protecting life and dignity. After public outcry, women’s rights groups collaborated with moderate scholars to launch a counter-campaign: “Your Safety is Halal.”³²

These cases illustrate both the risks of decontextualized fatwas and the potential for corrective, maqasid-informed responses.

Alignment with National Priorities

Pakistan’s policy frameworks support ethical digital ifta’:

- The National Action Plan (NAP) calls for promoting “moderate, contextual religious discourse.”³³
- The Digital Pakistan Policy (2021) emphasizes “responsible content creation” and digital literacy.³⁴
- The National Curriculum includes media ethics in Islamic Studies textbooks.³⁵

Regulating digital fatwa aligns with these goals while affirming Islamic principles of justice and mercy.

Conclusion

Digital fatwa culture in Pakistan reflects both the promise and peril of technological democratization. While it expands access to religious guidance, it also risks eroding the ethical and contextual foundations of classical ifta’. The solution is not to reject digital platforms but to infuse them with the wisdom of Islamic jurisprudence. By anchoring digital counseling in scholarly integrity, contextual sensitivity, and maqasid-based reasoning, Pakistan can foster a fatwa culture that is both authentically Islamic and responsibly modern.

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