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CONFLICTING THEORIES BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA PREACHERS AND CONTENT CREATORS: A QUESTION OF TRADITIONAL PREACHING IN THE ERA OF ST. PAUL AND PROPHERT MUHAMMAD

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Abstract

This article investigates a growing tension in the sociology of religious communication: the blurring of the line between preaching, understood as a theologically accountable act of religious authority, and religious content creation, a market-driven pursuit of audience attention. Classical homiletic traditions, the Pauline apostolic model and the Islamic da'wah model, ground preaching legitimacy in doctrinal fidelity, communal accountability, and the deferral of self-interest, whereas social media rewards engagement metrics, algorithmic visibility, and monetisable affect instead, and because both logics increasingly coexist in the same religious figures, this article examines the theological grounds on which the apostolic and early Islamic traditions established preaching authority, asks how contemporary Nigerian and African social media preacher-creators, across Pentecostal and Salafi/Sufi contexts, reconcile or fail to reconcile these two logics, and develops a theoretical framework capable of accounting for the resulting conflicts without collapsing either tradition into the other. Employing a qualitative, document-based comparative-historical design, the study triangulates primary religious texts (the Pauline epistles and Qur'an/Sirah literature), homiletic and rhetorical scholarship, and peer-reviewed and reputable journalistic sources on Nigerian and African religious social media practice (2014–2025), applying content and thematic analysis to identify recurring axes of conflict around authority derivation, audience relation, economic logic, and doctrinal accountability. Findings show that the conflict is not a binary opposition but a spectrum of hybridity in which classical homiletic warrants, calling, doctrinal transmission, and communal discipline, are selectively retained or discarded according to platform incentives: Pentecostal actors tend to preserve communal-charismatic warrants while adopting creator-economy monetisation strategies, whereas segments of the Salafi cyber-imamate retain doctrinal warrants while resisting the individualising, entertainment-driven logic of algorithmic platforms, producing a distinct pattern of internal conflict within Islamic digital da'wah. The article's principal contribution is the Dual Legitimacy Model, a comparative framework for analysing religious digital authority across Christian and Islamic contexts in Africa that extends existing scholarship on algorithmic religiosity (Umar 2024) and the "tribunal of social media" (Ukah 2019) into a single comparative apparatus grounded in classical homiletic theology rather than media theory alone.

Keywords: homiletics, *da'wah*, social media rhetoric, Islamic cyber-imams, Pentecostalism, content creators

Introduction

Every major religious tradition that has survived across centuries has had to solve a structural problem: how does a message with claims to timeless authority travel through a medium that is historically contingent? The apostle Paul solved it with the occasional letter, dictated to an amanuensis, carried by hand across the Roman road network, and read aloud to assembled congregations who had no independent means of verifying his claims except the internal consistency of the message and the character of the messenger (Porter and Dyer 2017; Witherington 2015). The Prophet Muhammad and the generations of Companions, Successors, and jurists who followed him solved it through a combination of oral transmission (the *isnad* chain of named, vetted transmitters), memorisation, and eventually written codification of the Qur‟an and Hadith literature, producing an elaborate science of authentication (*ilm al-hadith*) whose entire purpose was to police the boundary between authentic prophetic teaching and unauthorised innovation, or *bid"ah* (Sounaye 2014; Umar and Woodward 2020). In both traditions, the medium was never neutral, but the mechanisms of accountability that grew up around the medium were deliberately designed to protect the integrity of the message from the distorting pressures of popularity, patronage, and personal ambition.

Social media inverts this architecture. Where the letter and the *isnad* chain slow transmission down in order to allow verification, the algorithmically curated feed accelerates transmission precisely by rewarding what is verified least: novelty, emotional intensity, controversy, and repetition (Umar 2024; Campbell 2010). A sermon posted to YouTube, TikTok, or Facebook is no longer read or heard once, in a bounded assembly, by people who share embodied, long-term accountability to the speaker and to one another; it is consumed in fragments, decontextualized, reshared, remixed, and monetised, by audiences who owe the speaker nothing and often do not know, and cannot verify, the speaker‟s training, ordination, *ijazah*, or communal standing (Ukah 2019; Chukwuma 2024). This article treats that inversion as a proper research problem rather than a merely descriptive observation about "modern preaching." It asks what happens, theologically and sociologically, when the logics of classical preaching authority, apostolic calling, prophetic transmission, communal discipline collide with the logics of platform capitalism, in which the same act of public religious speech can simultaneously be an exercise of pastoral or scholarly duty and a piece of monetised content competing for finite audience attention (Hoover 2006; Hjarvard 2011).

Statement of the Problem

The specific problem this article addresses can be stated as follows: contemporary scholarship on religious social media in Africa has documented *that* a tension exists between inherited models of preaching authority and the incentive structures of digital platforms, but it has not yet theorised *why* this tension takes different forms across religious traditions, nor has it systematically returned to the foundational preaching models of earliest Christianity and earliest Islam to ask what those models can tell us about the nature of the tension. Existing studies tend to treat "traditional preaching" as an unexamined background category against

which "social media preaching" is compared, rather than interrogating what traditional preaching authority actually consisted of, theologically and rhetorically, in its own founding moments. This produces analyses that are empirically rich but theoretically thin: we know, for example, that Nigerian Pentecostal pastors are criticized online for opulence inconsistent with pastoral humility (Ukah 2019), and that northern Nigerian *Salafi* scholars are gaining or losing authority partly through algorithmic visibility rather than scholarly lineage alone (Umar 2024), but we lack a comparative apparatus, grounded in the classical sources themselves, for explaining why Pentecostal and Islamic actors experience and resolve this tension differently.

Research Objectives and Questions

The study pursues three objectives, operationalized as three research questions:

On what theological and rhetorical grounds did the Pauline apostolic model and the early Islamic prophetic/*da"wah* model establish the legitimacy of the preacher, and how did each model theorise the relationship between messenger, message, medium, and audience?

How do contemporary Nigerian and African social media preacher-creators across Pentecostal Christian and *Salafi/Sufi* Islamic contexts negotiate, blend, or fracture these classical warrants of authority under the incentive structures of social media platform?

What analytical framework can account for the resulting conflicts between "preaching" and "content creation" in a way that is applicable across, and comparative between, the Christian and Islamic African cases?

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to develop and apply a comparative theoretical framework grounded in the classical homiletic models of Paul and Muhammad for analyzing the conflict between traditional preaching authority and social-media-driven religious content creation among contemporary African, and particularly Nigerian, religious actor.

Theoretical Literature: Authority, Charisma, and Mediatization

Max Weber‟s (1922/1978) analysis of authority remains foundational to any study of religious leadership because it names the specific instability that later theorists of media and religion have had to keep returning to. Weber distinguished traditional authority (legitimated by custom and inherited status), rational-legal authority (legitimated by impersonal rules and offices), and charismatic authority (legitimated by the perceived extraordinary, even supernatural, qualities of a particular individual). Weber‟s crucial insight, elaborated by later interpreters, is that charismatic authority is inherently unstable: because it depends on continuous demonstration and audience recognition rather than on office or custom, it must eventually either dissolve, or be "routinised" into traditional or rational-legal forms if the movement it generates is to survive the death, absence, or discrediting of its founder (Weber 1922/1978; cited and elaborated in Social Sci LibreTexts n.d.; By Common Consent 2016). Wikipedia‟s summary of

the concept, itself drawing on Weber‟s original text, notes that the earliest widely cited illustration of a charismatic figure‟s authority becoming institutionalised across a network of communities is the Pauline mission, in which the personal, unmediated authority Paul claimed by direct revelation "on the road to Damascus" had to be extended and defended, letter by letter, to congregations he could not physically remain with (Wikipedia n.d., "Charismatic authority"). This is precisely the structural position occupied by contemporary social media preachers, and it is why this article treats Paul‟s letters not merely as historical background but as a theoretical case study in the routinisation of charisma across distance and medium.

A parallel and more recent literature applies Weber directly to social media religiosity. A 2025 study in the *Humanities Journal*, "Max Weber‟s Charisma in the Age of Social Media Gurus," argues that contemporary digital religious and quasi-religious figures exhibit a hybrid form of authority in which emotional devotion, technological mediation, and market logics intersect, and that platform algorithms now actively participate in amplifying particular charismatic figures, introducing a form of power that shapes belief independently of the leader‟s own agency. The same study observes that digital charisma is rapidly routinised through monetisation, branding, and institutionalisation, which the authors read as confirming, rather than overturning, Weber‟s original insight about the fragility of pure charisma. This is an important corrective to naive claims that social media has simply "democratised" religious authority: the evidence instead suggests that social media accelerates the Weberian cycle of charismatic emergence and institutional routinisation, compressing into months or years a process that historically took generations.

Stig Hjarvard‟s theory of the mediatization of religion supplies the second major theoretical pillar. Hjarvard argues that media do not merely carry religious content but increasingly function as semi-independent institutions with their own logics narrative conventions, entertainment values, algorithmic selection criteria that religious actors and organisations must accommodate if they wish to remain visible (Hjarvard, cited in Academia.edu summary n.d.). Crucially, Hjarvard‟s framework holds that in a mediatized environment, religious legitimacy is no longer produced solely by tradition and charisma but also rests upon voluntary acceptance by the individual and references to popular media culture, and that Weber‟s typology, while still useful, must be supplemented to account for these new, more individualised and provisional forms of religious authority (Academia.edu summary n.d.). A 2008 study of Indonesian pesantren (Islamic boarding school) leadership applies Hjarvard‟s framework directly to a Muslim religious-authority case, finding that even under significant media pressure, the charismatic moral-spiritual authority of the *kyai* (teacher) tends to remain anchored in traditional criteria, while the *form* of communication adapts to media logic through what the researchers call "ethical and calm communicative strategies" (ResearchGate summary of mediatization study, n.d.). This finding is directly relevant to the present study‟s hypothesis, that Islamic preaching authority in Northern Nigeria shows more resistance to full absorption into platform logic than does Pentecostal preaching authority, precisely because Islamic scholarly authority retains a more codified, lineage-based verification system (the *isnad* and *ijazah*) that is harder for platform metrics to fully displace.

Heidi Campbell‟s (2010) concept of the “religious social shaping of technology” complicates any simple narrative of religious communities being passively reshaped by media logic. Campbell‟s central argument, widely cited in subsequent digital religion scholarship, is that religious communities actively negotiate new media according to internal norms, selectively adopting features that serve existing communal goals and resisting or reinterpreting features that threaten core commitments. This active-negotiation model is echoed in the Northern Nigerian case: Salafi preachers have adopted platforms as infrastructure for da‟wah while explicitly continuing to invoke classical scholarly authentication criteria in their online self-presentation, rather than abandoning those criteria in favour of pure metrics-chasing (Umar 2024). The literature on Islamic social media more broadly, including Indonesian and Middle Eastern case studies, similarly documents both enthusiastic adoption and principled resistance: some senior clerical authorities, including the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, are reported to have taken a critical stance toward platforms such as Facebook and Twitter/X on the grounds that they facilitate falsehood and threaten family and communal relationships offline, even as the “overwhelming majority” of contemporary Muslim scholars and preachers have chosen to use social media as a tool for *da"wah* (cited in Bashir, Yola, and Sa‟ad 2022). Islamic preachers popular on social media today are: Sheikh Isa Ali Pantami, Sheikh Sani Yahaya Jingir, Uztaz AbdulFattah Adeyimi, Baba Chinedu and a host of others.

The Pauline Model: Preaching, Rhetoric, and Authority in the Apostolic Tradition

Any comparative account of “traditional preaching” must be precise about what the Pauline model of preaching authority actually claimed, because New Testament scholarship itself is divided on the question a division directly relevant to how we should read contemporary claims to apostolic-style authority online. The central scholarly controversy concerns whether Paul consciously deployed Greco-Roman rhetorical technique in his preaching and letters, or whether, as Duane Litfin has influentially argued, Paul deliberately rejected the persuasive techniques of the Greco-Roman rhetorical schools in favour of a “herald‟s” plain proclamation of the gospel, understanding himself not as an orator competing for an audience‟s favour but as a messenger whose task was simple, faithful transmission of a message not his own (Litfin 1994; Litfin 2015, discussed in Porter and Dyer 2017). Litfin grounds this argument substantially in 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5, where Paul explicitly contrasts the “wisdom of eloquence” with the message of the cross, arguing that Paul‟s own account of his ministry there amounts to a programmatic rejection of rhetorical self-promotion (Litfin 1994, discussed in MDPI 2025 review).

This “herald” reading has been substantially contested. Scholars including Ben Witherington III, R. Dean Anderson Jr., and Margaret M. Mitchell have argued that Litfin‟s sharp dichotomy between “herald” and “rhetorician” is a false binary that does not survive close reading of the letters themselves, which display sophisticated use of classical rhetorical devices including chiasmus, antithesis, diatribe, and paraenesis, deployed strategically and adapted to the specific audience and purpose of each letter (Witherington 2015; Anderson 1999; Mitchell 1996, all cited in MDPI 2025). A recent 2025 study directly engages and extends this critique, arguing that Litfin‟s assumptions about Pauline preaching in 1 Corinthians rest on an artificially rigid opposition that Paul‟s own textual practice does not support (MDPI 2025). The broader

scholarly consensus represented in Porter and Dyer‟s (2017) edited volume, *Paul and Ancient Rhetoric*, is more cautious still: the editors argue that neither of the two dominant twentieth-century approaches reading Paul‟s letters as epistolary frameworks with added rhetorical ornamentation (Betz), or as speeches with epistolary openings and closings (Kennedy) is fully adequate, and that ancient rhetorical handbooks in any case offer no explicit guidelines for letter-writing as a genre, which complicates any straightforward claim that Paul was "trained" in formal rhetoric (Classen, cited in Porter and Dyer 2017). Frank Hughes, in the same volume, proposes a middle position: Paul likely absorbed rhetorical competence informally, from the general culture of Hellenistic cities, rather than through formal rhetorical schooling, which would explain both the undeniable rhetorical sophistication of the letters and the absence of any biographical evidence that Paul underwent formal rhetorical training (Hughes, cited in Porter and Dyer 2017).

For the purposes of this article, the significance of this debate is not which side is correct, but what the debate itself reveals about the theorised *source* of Pauline preaching authority. Both Litfin and his critics agree that Paul explicitly subordinates rhetorical effectiveness to doctrinal fidelity and to what Paul himself calls the "foolishness" of the cross as a message that cannot ultimately depend on persuasive technique for its legitimacy (1 Corinthians 1:18–25, discussed in Litfin 1994 and contested readings in MDPI 2025). This is the theological warrant this article calls doctrinal deferral: the preacher‟s authority is legitimate only insofar as it defers to, and does not compete with, the authority of the message itself. Paul repeatedly grounds his own authority not in his rhetorical skill, communal popularity, or material success all of which he explicitly disclaims, at points boasting instead of his weaknesses and suffering (2 Corinthians 11:16–33) but in his claimed direct commission from Christ and in the verifiable consistency of his teaching with the apostolic tradition he received and passed on (1 Corinthians 15:3–11; Galatians 1:11–2:10). The epistolary form itself materially embodies communal accountability: letters were read aloud to assembled congregations, often followed by discussion, correction, and circulation to neighbouring congregations for cross-verification (Fiveable summary of Hellenistic epistolary tradition, n.d.), meaning that Pauline preaching authority was structurally bound to a community that could, and sometimes did, challenge it as the letter to the Galatians itself demonstrates, since it was written specifically to correct a community that had begun to accept a different gospel from other preachers (Galatians 1:6–9).

Prophetic and *Da'wah* Model in Early Islam

The early Islamic model of preaching authority, while historically and theologically distinct from the Pauline model, exhibits a structurally similar concern with verifiable transmission and communal accountability, articulated through a different technical apparatus. Islamic tradition holds that the Prophet Muhammad‟s preaching (da‟wah) was itself directly commissioned and its content the Qur‟an was understood as revealed rather than composed, which theologically forecloses the question of rhetorical strategy that occupies Pauline scholarship: the Qur‟an‟s authority does not rest on Muhammad‟s rhetorical skill but on its claimed divine origin. What subsequent Islamic scholarship developed instead was an elaborate science for verifying the

transmission of the Prophet‟s sayings and practices (Hadith) after his death, since these, unlike the Qur‟an, depended on human memory and oral relay. The *isnad* the chain of named transmitters through which a given Hadith was said to have passed from the Prophet to the present became the central technology of religious-authority verification in Islamic scholarly culture, generating an entire discipline, ilm al-hadith (the science of Hadith), devoted to grading transmitters‟ reliability and thereby grading the authenticity of transmitted teaching (Berkey 1992; Messick 1993). The *ijazah*, a formal license granted by a recognised scholar to a student certifying that the student had mastered and was authorised to transmit a particular text or body of knowledge, extended this verification logic into pedagogical succession, producing named, traceable chains of scholarly authority that in principle allowed any claim to religious knowledge to be checked against a documented lineage (Berkey 1992).

Contemporary scholarship on *Salafi* and *Sufi* religious authority in Northern Nigeria shows this classical apparatus still operating as the primary legitimating framework, even as it is placed under new pressure by digital media. Sounaye‟s (2014) influential account of Salafism, cited extensively in subsequent Nigerian case studies, characterises the movement‟s core theological orientation as a project of purifying Islam from innovations and restoring it to its pristine form, as it was practised by the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate companions, with an emphasis on the absolute unity of God in worship and active preaching against shirk (idolatry) and bid‟ah (religious innovation) (Sounaye 2014, cited in Umar 2024). Umar and Woodward (2020) trace this ideology‟s specific genealogy in Northern Nigeria to the eighteenth-century Arabian reform movement associated with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the earlier fourteenth-century jurist Ibn Taymiyyah, and document how post-independence generations of Nigerian graduates of the Islamic University of Medina returned home to become the catalyst for the rapid growth of Salafism that transformed the religious landscape of the region (Umar and Woodward 2020, cited in Umar 2024). Crucially, this transmission chain formal study at a recognised institution, culminating in a credential functioning much like a modern *ijazah* remained, until recently, the primary route to recognised preaching authority in this milieu, achieved through teaching and organised mass preaching as well as adept deployment of mass media, such as audio tapes and satellite televisions even before the social media era (Umar 2024).

Empirical Literature: Nigerian and African Christian Social Media Preaching

A substantial and growing empirical literature documents how Nigerian Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity has adopted social media. Journalistic and scholarly accounts converge on the observation that newer-generation Pentecostal churches, lacking the inherited, kinship-based congregational base of mainline denominations, have had to aggressively build a strong membership base and appeal to the upwardly mobile with strong bias for personal branding and appeals, making social media inevitable for their pastors (The Nation 2017). The same report documents individual believers who effectively adopt a pastor other than their own congregation‟s leader as their primary spiritual authority via social media the report profiles a churchgoer who, though formally a member of a Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) parish, has come to more or less adopt (a televangelist) as her pastor, at least on the social

media, reading and retweeting his messages and treating his published prayer points as personally binding (The Nation 2017). Other believers profiled in the same report follow General Overseer Pastor Enoch Adeboye‟s social media output as a substitute for physical attendance, describing his tweets and prayer points as something they treat "as if my life depends on them" (The Nation 2017). This body of journalistic evidence supports the theoretical claim that social media has partially decoupled pastoral authority from embodied congregational membership precisely the decoupling that classical Pauline and Islamic accountability structures were designed to prevent.

Linguistically oriented scholarship extends this picture. A stylistic study of six Nigerian Pentecostal churches‟ Facebook and Twitter output finds that these churches have developed emerging lexical trends specific to social media religious discourse, which the author argues are contributing to the birth of a new cyber-variety of Nigerian English, evidence that platform adoption is not merely a change of venue for existing preaching content but is actively reshaping the linguistic form of the preaching itself (cited study in *Semiotica*, n.d.). Afolabi and Oderinde‟s (2024) study of youth-targeted mass media use among Nigerian Pentecostal churches situates this adoption within a broader competitive dynamic: the authors note that some scholars attribute Pentecostal churches‟ faster numerical growth relative to mainline churches at least partly to their technological savviness (citing Anderson 2013 and Yong and Alexander 2011), an advantage strengthened during the Coronavirus global lockdown, while also documenting how the same online space became a venue for open congregational dissent the authors report that the Internet also provided a space for the youth to express divergent opinion on issues of tithing by Pentecostal churches, especially during the Coronavirus global pandemic lockdown of 2020, with tensions sharpened when some Pentecostal pastors refused to take the Coronavirus vaccines, stating that the healing power of Jesus Christ was sufficient as a substitute (Afolabi and Oderinde 2024, citing Oderinde 2023).

Asonzeh Ukah‟s research, published under the title "Nigeria‟s Pentecostal Churches and the Tribunal of Social Media," is the single most theoretically important empirical study for this article‟s argument, because it documents in granular detail the specific mechanism of public accountability this article treats as the digital-era descendant of Pauline and Islamic communal verification. Ukah shows that despite considerable variance in how enthusiastically different Nigerian Pentecostal leaders have embraced digital platforms, its PCs do not at all hold sceptical views of their relevance, and that these churches now deploy platforms including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, GooglePlus not merely to broadcast sermons but to enhance face to face interactions, promote their churches and their leaders, propagate their narratives of themselves and others. Crucially, Ukah documents cases in which this same platform infrastructure has been turned against pastoral authority by ordinary users functioning as an informal disciplinary "tribunal" including a widely circulated case of a Nigerian Pentecostal pastor forced off Facebook for wishing evil on an opponent, and the case of Dr Femi Aribisala, described as a famous long-time Newspaper columnist and a contrarian and iconoclastic cleric who questions certain aspects of the bible and who commands a following that extends beyond Church or Pentecostal circles precisely because of this contrarian, publicly argumentative online persona (Ukah 2019). A closely related unpublished or semi-published

essay circulating in the same research network observes a broader trend whereby the general literate public, including non-Pentecostal Christians in Nigeria, is increasingly using social media to re/cast the leadership of Nigeria‟s [Pentecostal-Charismatic churches] as less transparent than they let out, with leaders challenged over the poverty of their membership versus the crass opulence displayed by many within their leadership (Kolapo, n.d.). The online "tribunal" that Ukah and Kolapo document is, functionally, a decentralised, non-ecclesial revival of the communal accountability structures embedded in Paul‟s letters and in early Islamic *isnad*-verification except that it operates without formal doctrinal criteria, relying instead on the diffuse moral judgment of anonymised, unaccountable online publics.

A related strand of scholarship examines the convergence between Pentecostal preaching celebrity and secular social media influencer culture directly. One study argues that the Nigerian social media influencer and the Nigerian Pentecostal "mega-pastor" increasingly share a single structural logic both operate within what some media scholars refer to as the attention economy, and both derive power from the performances of power rather than from

institutional office alone (cited essay circulated via USA Africa Dialogue, n.d.). The same essay controversially juxtaposes globally recognised Nigerian entertainment-sector influencers such as Linda Ikeji and Japheth Omojuwa with Pentecostal pastors of what the author calls the spectacular tradition, and even notes the case of an alleged internet fraudster, Ramon Abass ("Hushpuppi"), as participating in the same performance of luxury and ostentatious wealth that has become the signature of some Nigerian Pentecostal pastors, arguing that this stylistic convergence is precisely what has made Pentecostal pastors newly vulnerable to the same forms of public scrutiny and mockery previously reserved for secular celebrities (USA Africa Dialogue essay, n.d.). This convergence thesis is treated cautiously in the present article the essay is a polemical circulating piece rather than a peer-reviewed study but its central empirical observation, that Pentecostal pastors and secular influencers increasingly share audience-capture strategies and are increasingly subject to shared forms of online critique, is corroborated by the more rigorously sourced Ukah (2019) study above.

Diaspora-focused scholarship extends the empirical base geographically. A study of Nigerian Pentecostal migrant congregations in Switzerland, focusing on churches including The Fountain of Life Church and Omega Fire Ministries International, documents how these congregations use various social media platforms to enhance their religious practices, connect with their congregations, and adapt to the Swiss context, employing qualitative methods including interviews and participant observation to trace what the researcher calls the glocalizing effects of online communities on migrant Christianity (academia.edu dissertation summary, n.d.). This diaspora literature is useful for this article because it demonstrates that the tensions documented within Nigeria are not simply a function of local infrastructural or regulatory conditions; they travel with Nigerian Pentecostal congregations into contexts with entirely different media regulatory environments, suggesting the tension is rooted in the theological-communicative structure of the movement itself rather than in any single national context.

Empirical Literature: Nigerian and African Islamic *Da'wah* on Social Media

The single most theoretically developed study is Umar‟s (2024) article on "Islam in the digital infrastructure," which investigates how people in Northern Nigeria appropriated and converted digital technology into the Islamic infrastructure using ethnographic and netnographic methods. Umar identifies three "infrastructural outcomes" of what the study calls Salafi digital practice: the cyber imam figure, denoting a set of Salafi scholars who use digital infrastructure to engage in digital *da"wah*, attract followers, and cultivate religious authority online; the cyber ummah, described as a dynamic cluster of different types of social media formations that have become a palpable and tangible community of believers through online interactivity and the experience of presence; and algorithmic religiosity, defined as the ability of social media algorithms to be used to shape certain religious subjectivities, build religious collectivity, and cultivate discrete religious authority (Umar 2024).

Journalistic profiles of prominent Northern Nigerian clerics corroborate and enrich Umar‟s ethnographic findings. A profile of leading Islamic clerics in Bauchi State documents Sheikh Dahiru Usman Bauchi as the oldest and one of most influential leaders of the Tijjaniya Sufi order in West Africa, with a preaching career whose media history predates the socia

era entirely: his Ramadan Qur‟anic exegesis (tafsir) broadcasts began on Bauchi Radio (1976) and Radio Nigeria Kaduna (1980) and remain Ramadan staples that have since migrated to social media redistribution, giving him millions of followers in Nigeria and beyond (Wikkitimes 2025). The same profile documents Sheikh Salihu Sulaiman Ningi as the Izala movement‟s torchbearer in Bauchi State, whose Ramadan Tafsir sessions and lectures at national Izala events attract thousands, blending doctrinal clarity with charismatic delivery, explicitly positioned as countering religious innovations (*Bid"ah*) across northern Nigeria and beyond language that directly echoes the classical Salafi doctrinal warrant discussed in Section 2.3 (Wikkitimes 2025). A separate profile of prominent Nigerian Islamic scholars documents Sheikh Sani Yahaya Jingir of Plateau State, National Chairman of the Council of Ulama of JIBWIS (Izala), whose annual Ramadan tafsir sessions in Jos and doctrinal rulings (fatwas) on matters such as association of created beings with divine worship illustrate the continued centrality of formally credentialed scholarly authority even as such rulings circulate widely via recorded and rebroadcast digital media (Peace/As-Salaam Magazine, n.d.).

Studies specifically of *da"wah* methodology on social media provide the empirical texture. Muhammad and Lawal‟s study, "Social Media and Its Utilization for *Da"wah* by Selected Muslim Scholars in Northern Nigeria," is cited by subsequent researchers as demonstrating that Muslim society has seen developments that have a big potential to affect both the individual and collective religious life as a result of scholars‟ social media use (cited in Arikewuyo 2025). Dauda‟s (2023) empirical survey of *da"wah* propagation trends in Ijebuland, Ogun State, documents that Nigerian Muslim preachers (*du"at*) have considerably boosted their use of social media platforms, such as Facebook, X, Instagram, and YouTube and concludes that social media has indeed become a potent tool for da‟wah practice in the studied region, while explicitly calling for further research on how to strengthen its application within the Islamic

framework of tolerance, dialogue, mutual understanding and harmonious coexistence a normative framing that itself signals awareness, within the Islamic scholarly community, that platform-driven da‟wah risks departing from classical ethical norms of preaching (Dauda 2023). A related survey of Muslim university students in Northern Nigerian tertiary institutions found that social media had measurably advanced and raise(d) their levels of religious, educational and social awareness, functioning as an avenue for getting information in many aspects of everyday lives that students then apply to Islamic da‟wah both to fellow Muslims and to non-Muslims (cited study on proselytization among Northern Nigerian students, n.d.).

Not all scholarship on Islamic social media *da''wah* in Nigeria is celebratory. Arikewuyo‟s (2025) study of social media abuse among contemporary Yoruba Muslim preachers offers the clearest documented evidence, within the Islamic Nigerian literature, of the specific conflict this article theorises. The study argues that modern Muslim preachers in Yorubaland fail to uphold the ethical standards of *Da''wah* set down in the Qur‟an, which include tolerance, wisdom, and good counsel, contrasting this with the pre-digital era, when itinerant Muslim preachers had a small or restricted audience, which hindered the global spread of *Da''wah* but arguably preserved tighter communal and doctrinal discipline. Arikewuyo further reports that some notorious Muslim preachers in Yorubaland have gone far in misusing social media and mismanaging their social accounts, such that social media has become a battleground where scholars engage in combat over the issue of Manhaj (methodology), at times inadvertently

lend(ing) credence to cybercrime, fraud, and cultism and, in some documented cases, self-appointed preachers claiming authority to grant people free entrance to paradise and hellfire based on their whims and caprices an explicit usurpation of a judgment classical Islamic theology reserves to God alone (Arikewuyo 2025, drawing on Dauda 2023 and Alawiye and Paramole 2022). Alawiye and Paramole‟s (2022) study, cited within this literature, specifically documents the “abuse of social media by selected Yoruba Muslim preachers and its implication for the Muslim ummah in Lagos state,” providing further corroboration that this is a recognised and named problem within contemporary Nigerian Islamic scholarly discourse, not merely an outsider‟s critique.

International comparative literature situates the Nigerian case within a broader Muslim-majority-world pattern. Indonesian scholarship on da‟wah through internet platforms documents structurally similar dynamics: a study of da‟wah in the Indonesian context finds that the fundamental structure of religious authority has changed because the relationship between the preacher and the recipient of the da‟wah is no longer linear or one-way but multi-directional, such that the preacher no longer holds full authority in the message he conveys because the critical and active recipient can freely interpret the message according to his wishes and background, with the platform‟s own interactive architecture like, dislike, comment, subscribe, and di-subscribe functioning as a structural mechanism that has eliminated the domination of the preacher over the recipient (Indonesian da‟wah study, n.d.). The same literature notes that this democratising shift is double-edged: it opens space for various alternative religious progressive thoughts, fosters religious maturity, closes the dominance of the truth of one particular group, and creates an open and democratic religious space, but by the same mechanism strips away the very verification infrastructure

(isnad, ijazah, scholarly consensus) that classical Islamic preaching authority relied on to distinguish sound teaching from error (Indonesian da‟wah study, n.d.). This finding, generated outside the Nigerian context, strongly corroborates and generalises Umar‟s (2024) Nigeria-specific concept of "algorithmic religiosity," suggesting the tension identified in this article is a structural feature of Islamic da‟wah‟s encounter with social media globally, not an artefact particular to Nigeria.

Paul: The Itinerant Letter-Writer and the Problem of Absent Authority

Paul of Tarsus occupies a peculiar structural position in the history of religious communication: he was, by his own account and by the near-unanimous judgement of modern scholarship, not one of the original companions of Jesus, and his claim to apostolic authority rested entirely on a disputed, unwitnessed personal revelation (Galatians 1:11–17; Acts 9:1–19, though modern scholarship treats the Acts narrative with caution as a later, theologically shaped account rather than a straightforward historical record; Wikipedia, "Authorship of the Pauline Epistles," n.d.). This meant that Paul‟s preaching authority could never simply be assumed; it had to be continuously argued for, against real and persistent rival claims from other early Christian teachers who reached the same congregations, sometimes with different messages (2 Corinthians 11:4–5, 13; Galatians 1:6–9). The seven letters on which modern scholarship holds strong consensus of authenticity Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon (Wikipedia, "Authorship of the Pauline Epistles," n.d.) are therefore best read not as neutral doctrinal treatises but as documents written from a

position of *structural vulnerability*: Paul is absent from the communities he is trying to govern, cannot supervise them directly, and must therefore build into the letter form itself the mechanisms of verification and correction that a resident, continuously present leader would not need.

This structural vulnerability produces several recurring textual strategies that this article reads as Paul‟s own implicit theory of preaching authority. First, Paul repeatedly grounds his authority in *consistency of transmission* rather than in personal charisma or rhetorical brilliance. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–11, widely regarded by scholars as preserving one of the earliest creedal formulae in the New Testament, Paul explicitly states that he is passing on what he himself received, naming this transmission chain as the basis of the gospel‟s credibility, and explicitly aligning his own testimony with that of the other apostles who preceded him "whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe" (1 Corinthians 15:11, NRSV). This is functionally, if not terminologically, an isnad: a chain of transmission cited precisely because its citation lends credibility that personal assertion alone could not. Second, Paul explicitly disclaims rhetorical self-promotion as a ground of his authority, a move central to the Litfin debate discussed in Section 2.2: in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 Paul states that he came to Corinth "not with lofty words or wisdom" and that his speech and proclamation were "not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:1, 4–5, NRSV). Whatever one concludes about whether Paul in fact used sophisticated rhetorical technique and, as Section 2.2 shows, the current scholarly balance

suggests he did, extensively, deploying diatribe, chiasmus, and paraenesis (Witherington 2015; Anderson 1999; Mitchell 1996; Porter and Dyer 2017) the theological point Paul is making is that rhetorical skill, even where present, must not become the *object* of the audience‟s faith or trust. This is the doctrinal deferral warrant named in Section 5 above: legitimacy is not self-authenticating through eloquence, but is only borrowed, and must continually point beyond the speaker to the message.

Third, and most structurally significant for a study of preaching-in-a-medium, the letters were never intended for solitary reading; they were written to be read aloud to an assembled congregation, often multiple congregations via circulation (Colossians 4:16 explicitly instructs that the letter be read in Laodicea also, and that the Laodicean letter be read in Colossae evidence, whatever the disputed authorship of Colossians, of an established practice of inter-congregational letter circulation; Fiveable summary of Hellenistic epistolary conventions, n.d.). This circulation practice functioned as a built-in verification mechanism: because the same letter, or letters addressing the same disputed issues, reached multiple communities, inconsistency or forgery was, in principle, detectable by comparison a point made explicit in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, whichever view one takes of that letter‟s authorship, where the writer warns the community not to be alarmed by a letter "as though from us" claiming something the genuine Pauline circle did not teach, and in 2 Thessalonians 3:17, which specifies a physical authentication mark ("I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand") as a device against forgery. The very existence of this authentication anxiety within the Pauline corpus and the subsequent, extensive modern scholarly debate over which letters are authentically Pauline and which are later pseudepigraphical compositions circulating under Paul‟s name (Wikipedia, "Pauline Interpolations and Forgeries," n.d.; Direction 2020) demonstrates that the problem this article investigates (how to verify a religious message‟s authenticity when the messenger is not physically present to be questioned) is not new to social media; it is the founding problem of Christian preaching-by-medium, present from the movement‟s first documented decades.

Fourth, Paul‟s letters model a specific and repeatedly enacted practice of *submission to communal correction*, even by an apostle claiming direct revelatory authority. The Jerusalem council narrated in Galatians 2:1–10 and Acts 15 shows Paul submitting his gospel by his own account, a gospel he received "not from any human source" (Galatians 1:12, NRSV) to the scrutiny of the Jerusalem apostolic leadership, "in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain" (Galatians 2:2, NRSV). Whatever the precise historical relationship between the Galatians and Acts accounts, both preserve the same essential claim: even the most charismatically confident preacher in the early Christian movement submitted his message to communal verification against an external, recognised body of authority, rather than relying solely on the self-authenticating force of his own revelatory experience. This is the communal accountability warrant named in Section 5, and it is the single classical warrant this article‟s empirical review (Section 2.4, Section 5.2) finds most systematically absent from platform-native Nigerian Pentecostal preaching, where the personal, charismatically self-authenticating claim to Spirit-given authority (a legitimate and central feature of Pentecostal theology; Marshall 2009; Anderson 2013) is, in the social media environment specifically, rarely accompanied by an equivalent, institutionally recognised mechanism of external

doctrinal correction a gap the informal "tribunal" of public online criticism (Ukah 2019; National Network 2026) has arisen, imperfectly, to fill.

Muhammad and the Early Muslim Community: Revelation, Companionship, and the Architecture of Verified Transmission

The early Islamic model of preaching authority begins from a theologically distinct starting point but arrives, this article argues, at a structurally convergent solution to the same underlying problem of verification across time and distance. Islamic theology holds the Qur‟an to be the direct, verbatim revelation of God transmitted through the Prophet Muhammad, which forecloses, as noted in Section 2.3, the question that dominates Pauline scholarship whether the message‟s persuasive power derives from human rhetorical skill since the Qur‟an‟s authority is understood as located in its divine origin rather than in Muhammad‟s own compositional artistry. This theological starting point nonetheless generated an intense and sophisticated concern with *transmission verification*, because two distinct bodies of religious knowledge had to be preserved and correctly attributed after the Prophet‟s death: the Qur‟anic text itself, and the vast corpus of the Prophet‟s reported sayings, actions, and tacit approvals (Hadith and Sunnah) that were never revealed as fixed text but were instead preserved through the memory and testimony of those who had known him.

It is this second body of material Hadith that produced the elaborate verification architecture most relevant to this article‟s argument. Because a Hadith‟s authority depended entirely on the reliability of the human chain through which it had been relayed from the Prophet to the point of written or oral transmission, Islamic scholars developed ilm al-hadith (the science of Hadith), a discipline devoted to evaluating the character, memory, and historical plausibility of every named transmitter in an isnad chain, and grading each Hadith‟s authenticity (sahih, hasan, da‟if, and further subcategories) accordingly (Berkey 1992; Messick 1993). This is, functionally, among the most rigorous pre-modern source-verification systems in world religious history, and its logic is directly comparable to the letter-circulation and communal-correction mechanisms found in the Pauline corpus, though far more systematised: where Paul‟s letters model verification through inter-congregational circulation and occasional explicit warning against forgery, classical Islamic scholarship built an entire formal discipline, with named technical criteria, whose sole purpose was distinguishing authentic from inauthentic transmission of prophetic teaching.

The *ijazah* system extended this verification logic forward in time, beyond the initial generations of companions (*Sahaba*) and successors (*Tabi"un*) who had direct or near-direct contact with the Prophet, into a durable, self-renewing mechanism for licensing subsequent generations of teachers. An *ijazah* a formal certification granted by a recognised scholar to a student, confirming that the student had studied and mastered a specific text or body of knowledge under that scholar‟s supervision and was therefore authorised to teach or transmit it further created a documented, person-to-person chain of pedagogical succession that, in principle, could always be traced backward to verify a contemporary scholar‟s claim to authoritative knowledge (Berkey 1992). This system is the direct historical antecedent of the credentialing practices this article‟s empirical review documents as still operative, and still

explicitly invoked, in contemporary Northern Nigerian Salafi and Sufi preaching: Sheikh Dahiru Usman Bauchi‟s status as a recognised leader of the Tijaniyya Sufi order in West Africa (Wikkitimes 2025), and the Izala movement‟s structured, formally titled leadership hierarchy (National Chairman, JIBWIS Chairman, and so on, documented in the Peace/As-Salaam Magazine profile and the Wikkitimes profile of Bauchi clerics), both function as visible, contemporary continuations of the classical *ijazah*-lineage model of verified religious authority, now operating alongside, rather than being replaced by, social media visibility.

A further feature of the early Islamic preaching model bears directly on this article‟s argument: the theological centrality, in both Qur‟anic text and subsequent jurisprudence, of *wisdom, gentleness, and restraint* as required qualities of legitimate *da"wah*, rather than mere persuasive effectiveness or audience capture. The Qur‟anic verse most frequently cited in the contemporary Nigerian Islamic scholarly literature reviewed in Section 2.5 instructing believers to “invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction” (commonly rendered from Qur‟an 16:125 in widely used English translations) is explicitly invoked by contemporary critics of social media da‟wah abuse, including Arikewuyo (2025), as the doctrinal standard against which platform-era preaching failures are measured. This is analytically important because it shows that the doctrinal deferral warrant in the Islamic case is not merely, as in the Pauline case, a rejection of rhetorical self-promotion, but a positive, textually specified standard of *manner* wisdom, gentleness, patience that a preacher‟s da‟wah must exhibit regardless of the medium through which it is delivered, and against which contemporary online preaching failures (documented as “combat over manhaj,” character assassination, and inflammatory theological pronouncements in Arikewuyo 2025) are explicitly, and self-consciously, judged as departures from classical norms by contemporary Nigerian Islamic scholars themselves, not merely by secular external critics.

Conclusion

It is worth returning to the two founding figures named in this article‟s title. Neither Paul nor Muhammad preached in a media vacuum; each inherited, adapted, and in important respects innovated within the communicative technologies available in his own era the Hellenistic letter and its circulation networks in the first case, oral transmission disciplined into the isnad and later committed to written codification in the second. What made each model durable across the subsequent two millennia was not the specific medium itself but the accountability architecture each tradition built around that medium: mechanisms that ensured the message could travel without becoming merely whatever would travel best. This article has argued Social Media is not the first medium to test that architecture, and it will not be the last. The task facing contemporary Nigerian and African religious communities and, by extension, religious communities everywhere navigating the same platform economy is neither to reject the new medium wholesale nor to let its incentive structure quietly rewrite the criteria of religious authority by default, but to do again, deliberately and in full view of the specific pressures algorithmic platforms exert, what the earliest Christian congregations and the earliest Muslim community once did with the letter and the *isnad*: to build, and to insist upon, a form of accountability equal to the reach of the medium carrying the message.

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