Islamic Communicative Ethics and the Moral Crisis of Social Media in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The rapid expansion of social media in Nigeria has transformed civic engagement and public communication but has also intensified ethical challenges, including misinformation, cyberbullying, hate speech, political manipulation, and declining public civility. This study examines these developments through the normative framework of Islamic communicative ethics, grounded in Qur'ānic and Prophetic principles of truthfulness, verification, responsible speech, restraint, and harm-avoidance. Employing a multidisciplinary qualitative approach that integrates Islamic ethical theory, media studies, and analysis of Nigeria's socio-political context, the study interrogates the moral foundations of digital misconduct. The findings indicate that persistent abuses within Nigeria's online sphere are not merely regulatory or technological failures but manifestations of weakened moral orientation and diminished communicative responsibility. The erosion of ethical speech norms has contributed to ethno-religious tensions, political polarisation, reputational harm, and declining social trust. The study demonstrates that Islamic communicative ethics offers a coherent and contextually resonant framework for reorienting digital behaviour toward accountability, civility, and communal welfare. It concludes that embedding value-driven ethical principles in digital literacy, public discourse, and policy development is essential for fostering a healthier and more socially cohesive online public sphere in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Civic responsibility, Digital citizenship, Ethical communication, Islamic communicative ethics, Social media morality, Misinformation in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally reshaped Nigeria's communicative landscape. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok now function as central arenas for political engagement, social interaction, religious expression, and the circulation of information. Rising internet penetration and increased smartphone accessibility have expanded participation in the digital public sphere, enabling citizens to deliberate, mobilise, and disseminate opinions with unprecedented speed and reach. From the standpoint of communication theory, this transformation represents a structural reconfiguration of the public sphere in which digitally mediated interaction increasingly shapes civic meaning-making and political consciousness (Habermas, 1984; Christians et al., 2015). In Nigeria, as in many developing democracies, digital networks have therefore become critical sites for negotiating identity, power, and public legitimacy.

Yet these technological gains have coincided with a marked decline in ethical standards within online communication. The Nigerian digital environment is increasingly characterised by misinformation, orchestrated disinformation campaigns, cyberbullying, reputational harm, inflammatory ethno-religious rhetoric, and manipulative political propaganda. Empirical studies demonstrate that misinformation spreads rapidly during election cycles and periods of political contestation, intensifying public distrust and contributing to social instability (Owan & Edegoh, 2021; Osaghae, 2021). The architecture of virality, combined with emotionally charged narratives, amplifies communal anxieties and undermines confidence in democratic institutions. The resulting communicative climate reflects not merely technological misuse but a broader erosion of moral restraint in digital engagement.

Regulatory interventions and institutional reforms, though necessary, have proven insufficient in addressing the deeper roots of these challenges. Governance scholarship consistently argues that durable political order depends not solely on formal institutions but on normative commitments to integrity, transparency, and accountability in public communication (Fukuyama, 2014; Rothstein, 2024). Where ethical norms are weak, legal mechanisms alone struggle to contain systemic distrust and hostility. The persistence of digital toxicity in Nigeria therefore signals more than policy failure; it points to a deficit in the moral architecture underpinning communicative conduct.

Within this context, Islamic communicative ethics offers a structured normative framework for re-evaluating digital behaviour. Rooted in Qur'ānic injunctions and Prophetic teachings, Islamic ethical thought conceptualises speech as a morally consequential act subject to divine and social accountability. The Qur'ān commands believers to uphold truthfulness (ṣidq) and prohibits the concealment or distortion of truth (Qur'ān 33:70; 2:42). It further instructs that information must be verified before dissemination: "O you who believe, if a corrupt person brings you news, verify it, lest you harm people out of ignorance and then become regretful for what you have done" (Qur'ān 49:6). In another verse, believers are warned against spreading unverified allegations and reminded that speech carries moral responsibility before God (Qur'ān 24:15). Prophetic traditions reinforce this accountability; Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) declared, "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should speak good or remain silent" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 6018; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 47). Such teachings establish communication not as a morally neutral act but as an arena of ethical obligation.

Classical and contemporary Islamic scholars have elaborated these principles within broader jurisprudential and ethical frameworks. Concepts such as *amānah* (moral trust), *ḥusn al-qawl* (refined speech), and the higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*) situate communication within a matrix of justice, public welfare, and social harmony (Kamali, 2011; Auda, 2008). Ethical speech is thus linked to the preservation of dignity, the prevention of harm, and the cultivation of communal cohesion. In a plural and religiously conscious society such as Nigeria, these normative commitments retain social relevance and moral resonance.

Despite the expanding body of scholarship on digital governance and media ethics in Nigeria, limited attention has been given to the constructive role of indigenous religious ethical traditions in shaping responsible digital citizenship. This omission is significant in a socio-political environment where religious values continue to influence public norms and political imagination (Sachedina, 2001). Engaging Islamic communicative ethics does not imply theological exclusivity; rather, it recognises the potential of faith-informed moral frameworks to contribute meaningfully to broader civic discourse.

Against this background, this study examines the moral crisis of social media in Nigeria through the lens of Islamic communicative ethics. It analyses the ethical dimensions of prevalent forms of digital misconduct, articulates foundational Islamic principles relevant to contemporary communication, and evaluates how these principles may contribute to restoring responsibility, civility, and trust within Nigeria's online public sphere. By integrating ethical theory with empirical realities, the study positions Islamic communicative ethics not as a purely devotional abstraction but as a viable normative resource for strengthening moral accountability and promoting socially constructive digital engagement within Nigeria's plural democratic context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodological framework to examine the moral crisis of social media in Nigeria through the normative lens of Islamic communicative ethics. Given the conceptual orientation of the research, the methodology prioritises textual interpretation, ethical analysis, and contextual evaluation rather than quantitative measurement. The objective is not to generate statistical generalisations but to provide a structured moral assessment of digital communication practices within a defined ethical tradition.

Study Design

The research is designed as a qualitative descriptive and analytical inquiry. This design is appropriate for examining moral concepts, doctrinal principles, and value-laden social phenomena embedded in communication practices. Qualitative normative analysis allows for systematic engagement with religious texts and ethical scholarship while situating those principles within contemporary socio-political realities. In line with established approaches in ethical and interpretive research, the study integrates conceptual clarification with contextual application, ensuring that normative claims are grounded in textual authority and contemporary relevance (Kamali, 2011; Auda, 2008).

Sources of Data

Data were derived from both primary and secondary sources.

Primary textual sources consist of the Qur'ān and authenticated Prophetic traditions (ḥadīth) that articulate principles governing ethical communication. Particular attention was given to Qur'ānic injunctions emphasising truthfulness and responsible speech, such as the command to "speak words directed to the truth" (Qur'ān 33:70), the prohibition against concealing or distorting truth (Qur'ān 2:42), and the directive to verify information before dissemination (Qur'ān 49:6). The moral gravity of unverified

transmission is further underscored in Qur'ān 24:15, which warns against spreading allegations without knowledge. These scriptural foundations are reinforced by Prophetic teachings, including the well-known narration: "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should speak good or remain silent" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 6018; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 47). Classical exegetical and juristic works were consulted to clarify interpretive nuances and doctrinal implications of these texts.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, and authoritative studies addressing media ethics, digital communication, political communication, and Nigeria's socio-political dynamics. Empirical scholarship documenting misinformation during electoral cycles, digital hostility, and identity-based polarisation in Nigeria provided contextual grounding for the analysis (Owan & Edegoh, 2021; Osaghae, 2021). Broader theoretical works on communicative rationality, media ethics, and governance contributed to conceptual framing (Habermas, 1984; Christians et al., 2015; Fukuyama, 2014; Rothstein, 2024).

Analytical Framework

The central analytical framework is Islamic communicative ethics. Core principles -including ṣidq (truthfulness), *amānah* (trustworthiness), *tabayyun* (verification), *ḥusn al-qawl* (refined and dignified speech), and the legal-ethical maxim lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār (no harm and no reciprocating harm)- were operationalised as evaluative categories. These principles were not treated as abstract ideals but as functional standards against which observable patterns of social media conduct could be assessed.

Table 1: Core Principles of Islamic Communicative Ethics and Digital Implications

Principle	Source	Ethical Meaning	Digital Implication / Application
Ṣidq (Truthfulness)	Qur'an (Q33:70)	Uphold honesty in speech	Verification of posts; avoid fake news and disinformation
Amānah (Trust)	Qur'an & Hadith	Responsible stewardship of communication	Ethical sharing and commenting; avoid manipulation
Tabayyun (Verification)	Qur'an (Q49:6)	Confirm facts before dissemination	Fact-checking, avoid forwarding unverified content
Ḥusn al-Qawl (Refined speech)	Hadith & Qur'an	Use dignified, courteous language	Prevent cyberbullying, insults, and inflammatory commentary
Lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār (Avoid harm)	Prophetic teaching	Avoid causing social, emotional, or physical harm	Discourage character attacks, slander, and provocative content

To strengthen analytical depth, the study draws on insights from media ethics and public-sphere theory. The concept of communicative responsibility within democratic discourse (Habermas, 1984) and normative traditions in media ethics (Christians et al., 2015) were engaged to illuminate the broader implications of ethical breakdown in digital spaces. This interdisciplinary integration allows the study to situate Islamic ethical norms within wider debates on civic trust, institutional legitimacy, and democratic stability.

Procedure of Analysis

The analysis followed a structured three-stage procedure. First, key Islamic ethical principles governing communication were identified and synthesised from primary scriptural sources and classical scholarship. Second, documented patterns of social media misconduct in Nigeria -including misinformation, cyberbullying, political manipulation, and ethno-religious incitement- were thematically examined through existing empirical literature. Third, these documented practices were normatively evaluated against the articulated ethical framework to identify areas of violation, tension, and potential reform.

This comparative normative process enabled the study to move beyond descriptive critique toward constructive ethical prescription. By systematically aligning contemporary digital conduct with defined moral standards, the research establishes a coherent basis for ethical intervention.

Scope and Limitations

The study is limited to normative and conceptual analysis. It does not undertake quantitative content analysis, surveys, or experimental measurement of online behaviour. While this restricts the ability to determine prevalence rates of specific practices, it

allows for deeper moral interrogation of the underlying ethical issues. The findings are therefore interpretive rather than statistical in nature. They are intended to inform ethical discourse, policy reflection, and future empirical research rather than to provide numerical generalisation.

Within the above framework standards, this methodological approach ensures conceptual clarity, textual fidelity, interdisciplinary engagement, and analytical coherence while maintaining academic rigour and intellectual originality.

RESULTS

The thematic ethical analysis reveals a persistent misalignment between dominant social media practices in Nigeria and the normative standards articulated within Islamic communicative ethics. Across the reviewed literature and contextual observations, patterns of digital misconduct consistently reflect deficiencies in verification, restraint, truthfulness, and moral accountability. These findings are presented thematically, demonstrating how contemporary digital behaviour diverges from established ethical principles. A major pattern identified is the widespread circulation of misinformation and the routine absence of verification. Studies on Nigeria's digital communication environment indicate that unverified claims, manipulated visuals, and misleading narratives circulate rapidly, particularly during elections, public health crises, and moments of intercommunal tension (Owan & Edegoh, 2021; Osaghae, 2021). The architecture of social media platforms rewards speed and emotional intensity, often privileging virality over accuracy. When evaluated against the Qur'ānic directive of *tabayyun* -the obligation to verify information before dissemination (Qur'ān 49:6)- this pattern reveals a clear ethical deficit. Rather than exercising caution, users frequently share content without scrutiny, thereby amplifying confusion and contributing to institutional distrust. The findings therefore indicate a structural gap between the ethical imperative of verification and prevailing digital conduct.

Closely related to this trend is the normalisation of cyberbullying and harmful speech. Evidence from the literature highlights the prevalence of reputational attacks, defamatory commentary, and coordinated harassment, with women, public officials, religious leaders, and ethnic minorities often targeted. Such conduct stands in direct contradiction to the Qur'ānic call to "speak words directed to the truth" (Qur'ān 33:70) and the Prophetic instruction that one should "speak good or remain silent" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 6018; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 47). The ethical principle of *ḥusn al-qawl*, which emphasises dignified and constructive speech, alongside the maxim *lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār* (no harm and no reciprocating harm), underscores the moral prohibition of injurious communication. However, the findings suggest that digital anonymity and performative online culture weaken moral inhibition, enabling forms of hostility that would be socially censured in physical settings.

The analysis further reveals the intensification of ethno-religious polarisation within Nigeria's online public sphere. Social media platforms frequently function as accelerators of identity-based antagonism, circulating divisive rhetoric and emotionally charged commentary that reinforces communal boundaries. Such patterns deepen mistrust among Nigeria's plural communities and undermine social cohesion. From the perspective of Islamic communicative ethics, this erosion of fairness and communal responsibility conflicts with the broader moral objectives of justice and social harmony embedded within the ethical tradition (Kamali, 2011; Auda, 2008). The findings therefore indicate that digital discourse often departs from norms intended to preserve dignity and prevent social fragmentation.

Political manipulation and strategic disinformation also emerge as significant themes. The literature documents the coordinated use of digital campaigns, manipulated narratives, and algorithmically amplified propaganda designed to influence public perception and electoral outcomes (Owan & Edegoh, 2021). Such instrumentalisation of communication reflects a departure from the principle of *ṣidq* (truthfulness) and a violation of *amānah* (moral trust). In this context, communication becomes a strategic tool for advantage rather than a medium for sincere civic deliberation. The findings suggest that this transformation weakens democratic trust and undermines the moral integrity of public discourse.

Beyond overt misconduct, the analysis identifies a broader culture of expressive excess and moral indiscipline. Sensationalism, intrusive commentary, and attention-driven content production frequently dominate digital engagement. Influencer culture and monetised visibility often prioritise popularity over responsibility, encouraging communicative impulsiveness. This pattern contrasts sharply with the Prophetic ethic of disciplined speech and the avoidance of matters devoid of benefit. The cumulative effect is a weakened culture of self-regulation in online spaces, where internal moral restraint is frequently subordinated to algorithmic reward structures.

Table 2: Policy and Practical Recommendations

Recommendation	Target Group / Stakeholders	Expected Outcome	Implementation Mode
Ethical literacy curricula	Schools, universities, community centres	Enhanced digital citizenship and critical thinking	Curriculum integration, workshops, seminars
Religious & community engagement	Mosques, churches, civic organisations	Promote responsible online behaviour	Sermons, public lectures, interfaith dialogues
Influencer ethical charter	Social media influencers, content creators	Reduce misinformation, model ethical conduct	Voluntary ethical pledges, collaborations with civil society
Regulatory & institutional reform	NOA, NCC, civil society, digital platforms	Enforce fact-checking, protect dignity, deter harmful speech	Policy frameworks, platform partnerships, reporting systems

Taken together, these findings demonstrate a systematic decline in verification practices, the normalisation of degrading speech, the amplification of identity-based polarisation, the strategic manipulation of information ecosystems, and a broader erosion of moral self-regulation in digital engagement. The evidence indicates that Nigeria's social media challenges extend beyond regulatory insufficiency; they reflect a deeper ethical deficit in communicative conduct. The results therefore substantiate the central premise of this study: that meaningful reform in Nigeria's digital public sphere requires not only institutional responses but also a reinvigoration of normative ethical commitments capable of shaping responsible digital citizenship.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that the moral crisis characterising Nigeria's social media environment is fundamentally ethical rather than merely technological or regulatory. Although digital infrastructures shape the speed, reach, and amplification of information, the recurring patterns of misinformation, cyberbullying, ethno-religious incitement, and political manipulation reflect deeper deficiencies in communicative responsibility. Media ethics scholarship has long maintained that communication systems cannot sustain democratic culture where moral reasoning and accountability deteriorate (Christians et al., 2015). The Nigerian digital landscape illustrates this breakdown with particular intensity, as online engagement increasingly privileges immediacy and emotional mobilisation over truth and restraint.

The documented absence of verification practices aligns with broader global anxieties about post-truth communication and digitally accelerated misinformation. In Nigeria, however, the consequences are heightened by fragile intergroup relations, electoral volatility, and historically embedded identity cleavages. Empirical research demonstrates that misinformation significantly influences political instability and public distrust within Nigeria's digital environment (Owan & Edegoh, 2021). Governance theory further emphasises that institutional legitimacy depends on informational integrity and sustained public trust (Fukuyama, 2014; Rothstein, 2024). Within this context, the Qur'ānic principle of *tabayyun* (verification) (Qur'ān 49:6) assumes structural relevance beyond its theological origin. It introduces an epistemic discipline capable of reinforcing democratic stability by embedding caution and accountability into communicative practice. Verification, in this sense, is not simply a devotional obligation but a civic safeguard.

Similarly, the escalation of cyberbullying and harmful speech reflects a deterioration of deliberative culture. Hostile digital environments weaken rational discourse and polarise public reasoning, thereby undermining the deliberative ideals central to public-sphere theory (Habermas, 1984). Islamic communicative ethics offers a virtue-based corrective grounded in the cultivation of disciplined moral agency. The emphasis on ḥusn al-qawl (refined speech), reinforced by the Qur'ānic instruction to "speak words directed to the truth" (Qur'ān 33:70), and the Prophetic guidance that one should "speak good or remain silent" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 6018; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 47), shifts attention from reactive moderation to character formation. Classical ethical scholarship situates speech within the broader purification of the self and the regulation of intention (Al-Ghazālī, 2005; Ibn Taymiyyah, 2013). The findings therefore suggest that sustainable reform requires internal moral discipline, not merely external enforcement.

The intensification of ethno-religious polarisation further demonstrates how digitally mediated communication amplifies pre-existing structural tensions. Plural societies depend upon justice, fairness, and communicative restraint to maintain social cohesion (Sachedina, 2001). Islamic political jurisprudence similarly links truthful and responsible speech to the preservation of communal

welfare and public order (Al-Māwardī, 1996; Kamali, 2015). When digital discourse erodes these commitments, the consequences extend beyond online hostility to tangible threats against national integration. In Nigeria's religiously conscious society, the weakening of ethical speech norms contributes to widening mistrust and deepened identity fragmentation.

Political manipulation through coordinated disinformation campaigns illustrates the instrumentalisation of communication for strategic advantage. When information becomes weaponised, democratic deliberation is replaced by calculated persuasion and narrative control. Governance theory identifies the corruption of public communication as a precursor to democratic decay (Fukuyama, 2015). Islamic ethical doctrine reinforces this concern through the principles of ṣidq (truthfulness) and amānah (moral trust), which conceptualise communicative integrity as a binding obligation tied to accountability before both society and God (Kamali, 2011). The erosion of these principles in digital spaces weakens not only electoral processes but also the moral fabric sustaining public trust.

Importantly, the study demonstrates a significant convergence between Islamic communicative ethics and contemporary political and media theory. Both traditions emphasise accountability, justice, civic responsibility, and harm-prevention as foundational to stable public life. This convergence challenges the assumption that religious moral frameworks operate outside modern governance discourse. Rather than existing in isolation, Islamic ethical thought provides a culturally resonant normative vocabulary capable of enriching debates on digital citizenship and public ethics within religiously grounded societies such as Nigeria.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study advances three principal contributions. First, it integrates Islamic virtue ethics with contemporary media and governance scholarship, demonstrating that classical moral categories retain analytical relevance in diagnosing digital disorder. Second, it reframes Nigeria's social media crisis as an ethical malfunction rather than solely a regulatory deficiency, thereby redirecting scholarly attention toward moral reconstruction. Third, it situates Islamic communicative ethics within broader discussions of democratic stability, social trust, and institutional legitimacy, extending its application beyond devotional discourse into civic theory.

Strengths and Limitations

A central strength of this study lies in its interdisciplinary synthesis, drawing from Islamic jurisprudence, political theory, governance scholarship, and media ethics to produce a structurally grounded diagnosis of Nigeria's digital moral crisis. This integration enhances conceptual depth and ensures that ethical analysis remains connected to institutional realities.

However, the study is limited by its normative and qualitative orientation. It does not incorporate primary survey data, behavioural metrics, or experimental interventions measuring the direct impact of ethical literacy on digital conduct. Consequently, the conclusions are interpretive rather than statistically generalisable. Future research may empirically examine how structured ethical-education programmes influence online behaviour among Nigerian users, thereby operationalising the theoretical framework developed in this study.

Implications and Future Directions

The findings suggest that regulatory reform alone is insufficient without ethical reorientation. Sustainable improvement in Nigeria's digital ecosystem requires embedding principles of verification, restraint, accountability, and harm-avoidance within digital literacy curricula, religious education, and civic training initiatives. Further research may explore institutional pathways for integrating Islamic communicative ethics into public policy frameworks, interfaith digital dialogue initiatives, and algorithmic governance structures. By aligning technological regulation with moral formation, Nigeria's evolving information ecosystem may move toward a more responsible, stable, and trust-oriented digital public sphere.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the moral crisis of social media in Nigeria through the normative lens of Islamic communicative ethics. The analysis demonstrates that the recurring patterns of misinformation, harmful speech, ethno-religious antagonism, and coordinated political disinformation are not merely technological distortions or regulatory gaps. Rather, they reveal a deeper erosion of communicative responsibility and moral discipline within the digital public sphere. The persistence of these patterns indicates that structural reforms alone cannot restore integrity where ethical foundations are weakened.

By evaluating contemporary digital practices against the core principles of *ṣidq* (truthfulness), *tabayyun* (verification), *amānah* (moral trust), ḥ\usn al-qawl (refined speech), and the prohibition of harm (*lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār*), the study establishes that Islamic communicative ethics provides a coherent and internally consistent moral framework for diagnosing and addressing digital misconduct. These principles move beyond abstract moral exhortation; they function as operational standards capable of shaping responsible engagement, fostering epistemic discipline, and reinforcing civic trust. In doing so, they align with broader governance and media-ethics concerns regarding accountability, justice, and democratic stability.

The findings underscore that sustainable reform in Nigeria's online environment requires more than content moderation policies or legal restrictions. Meaningful transformation depends on embedding value-driven ethical commitments within digital literacy programmes, civic education, religious instruction, and public communication norms. Ethical internalisation must complement institutional regulation if communicative culture is to improve in durable ways.

Ultimately, this study positions Islamic communicative ethics as a culturally resonant and normatively robust resource for strengthening moral accountability in Nigeria's digital ecosystem. When thoughtfully operationalised within a plural and democratic context, it offers constructive pathways toward restoring civility, reinforcing institutional legitimacy, and cultivating social trust in an increasingly networked society.

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