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Negotiating Religious Authority in AI-Mediated Religious Inquiry: A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study of Indonesian Muslim Youth

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) has transformed the ways individuals seek, interpret, and utilize religious knowledge in contemporary digital society. While previous studies have extensively examined digital religion and online religious communication, limited attention has been given to how Muslim users negotiate religious authority when interacting with conversational AI. This study aims to develop a conceptual understanding of how Muslim youth negotiate religious authority through the use of Generative AI in religious inquiry. Employing a qualitative approach based on Constructivist Grounded Theory, the study explores the experiences of Muslim youth in Surabaya, Indonesia, who have used Generative AI platforms such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot to obtain Islamic information and religious guidance. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using initial coding, focused coding, constant comparative analysis, and memo writing to generate conceptual categories and theoretical integration. The analysis proposes the AI-Mediated Religious Authority Negotiation (AMRAN) Model, which conceptualizes religious authority as a dynamic process consisting of four interconnected stages: initiating religious inquiry through Generative AI, constructing trust toward AI-generated religious knowledge, negotiating authority between artificial intelligence and traditional Islamic scholarship, and reconfiguring religious decision-making. The findings suggest that Generative AI functions primarily as an initial gateway for religious consultation rather than a replacement for traditional Islamic scholars. Religious authority is continuously negotiated through processes of evaluation, verification, and contextual interpretation involving AI systems, religious scholars, Islamic institutions, and classical religious sources. The study contributes to Digital Religion and contemporary Islamic Studies by extending discussions of religious authority beyond digital media toward AI-mediated religious interaction. Furthermore, the proposed AMRAN Model provides

a theoretical framework for understanding how algorithmic systems increasingly participate in the production, mediation, and negotiation of religious knowledge within contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Constructivist Grounded Theory; Digital Religion; Muslim Youth; Religious Authority

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has fundamentally transformed how people access, interpret, and utilize information across various domains of everyday life (Agarwal et al., 2024). Among recent technological developments, Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) has emerged as one of the most influential innovations due to its ability to generate human-like responses, synthesize knowledge from diverse sources, and facilitate interactive conversations through natural language (Anantrasirichai & Bull, 2022). Unlike conventional search engines that primarily retrieve existing information, GAI enables users to engage in dynamic dialogues that provide contextualized explanations, personalized recommendations, and iterative interactions (Bentley et al., 2024). Consequently, AI is increasingly being integrated into education, healthcare, business, public administration, and more recently, religious life (Dwivedi et al., 2023).

The integration of digital technologies into religious practice is not a new phenomenon. During the past two decades, scholars have documented how the internet, social media, and mobile applications have transformed religious communication, religious learning, and the construction of religious authority (’Ulyan, 2023). Digital platforms have enabled believers to access sermons, religious lectures, online fatwas, and virtual religious communities beyond geographical and institutional boundaries (Bentley et al., 2024). This phenomenon has been conceptualized through the framework of Digital Religion, which argues that online and offline religious experiences increasingly intersect and mutually shape contemporary religious life (Campbell & Bellar, 2023). Similarly, the theory of Mediatization of Religion explains that media technologies gradually influence religious institutions, religious practices, and public understandings of

religion by embedding media logic into everyday religious communication (Hjarvard, 2008).

Within Muslim societies, digital transformation has significantly expanded opportunities for accessing Islamic knowledge (Aldoseri et al., 2024). Previous studies demonstrate that digital platforms have become important channels for learning Islam (Abdullah et al., 2024), particularly among younger generations who actively engage with online religious content. In Indonesia, social media has facilitated the emergence of new religious actors, diversified religious discourse, and reshaped patterns of religious authority beyond conventional institutional settings (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019). Likewise, Islamic mobile applications have integrated religious practices into everyday digital routines, illustrating how technological innovation increasingly mediates interactions between Muslims and religious knowledge (Fakhruroji, 2019) (Fakhruroji, 2019). Collectively, these studies indicate that digital technologies have fundamentally altered the ways Muslims obtain, interpret, and disseminate religious information.

Despite these developments, the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence introduces a qualitatively different form of religious engagement that has received limited scholarly attention. Unlike websites, social media platforms, or mobile applications that primarily distribute human-produced religious content, GAI generates responses dynamically through interactive conversations. Users no longer merely search for religious information or select among competing religious authorities; instead, they formulate questions directly to AI systems, receive synthesized explanations, request clarification, compare interpretations, and refine their understanding through continuous dialogue. This interaction fundamentally changes the process of religious inquiry by positioning AI as an active conversational intermediary rather than a passive technological medium.

The increasing use of Generative AI in religious contexts raises important questions concerning the nature of religious authority in the digital age. Islamic religious authority has historically been grounded in scholarly expertise, mastery of classical sources, institutional legitimacy, and communal recognition. The emergence of AI does not possess these characteristics, yet many users

increasingly rely on conversational AI to obtain preliminary explanations regarding worship, Islamic jurisprudence, ethics, Qur'anic interpretation, and contemporary religious issues. This situation creates a new arena in which technological capability intersects with traditional structures of religious authority, requiring individuals to determine how AI-generated explanations should be understood, evaluated, and positioned alongside established Islamic scholarship.

Existing literature has extensively examined digital religion, online religious communication, social media-based da'wah, religious influencers, and the transformation of religious authority within digital environments (Campbell & Bellar, 2023; Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). However, most previous studies continue to focus on interactions involving human religious actors who utilize digital media as communication channels. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how religious authority is negotiated when the initial interaction occurs between Muslim users and Generative Artificial Intelligence. Furthermore, previous studies generally investigate digital platforms as environments for religious communication rather than examining the sequential process through which AI-assisted religious inquiry influences trust formation, authority negotiation, and religious decision-making. This represents an important theoretical gap within contemporary Digital Religion and Islamic Studies.

The present study addresses this gap by examining how Muslim youth negotiate religious authority when using Generative Artificial Intelligence for religious consultation. Muslim youth constitute a particularly relevant group because they are among the earliest adopters of emerging digital technologies while simultaneously navigating complex religious questions within rapidly changing social environments. Rather than asking whether AI replaces religious scholars, this study investigates how AI becomes integrated into the broader ecosystem of religious authority and how individuals evaluate, verify, and utilize AI-generated religious knowledge before making religious decisions.

Methodologically, this study employs Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) to develop a conceptual explanation grounded in participants' lived experiences. Instead of testing predetermined hypotheses, the study seeks to

generate theoretical insights through iterative coding, constant comparison, and conceptual abstraction. This methodological approach is particularly appropriate because the interaction between Generative AI and religious authority remains an emerging phenomenon for which comprehensive theoretical explanations are still limited.

The study proposes the AI-Mediated Religious Authority Negotiation (AMRAN) Model as its principal theoretical contribution. The model conceptualizes religious authority as a dynamic process consisting of four interconnected stages: initiating religious inquiry through Generative Artificial Intelligence, constructing trust in AI-generated religious knowledge, negotiating authority between artificial intelligence and traditional Islamic scholarship, and reconfiguring religious decision-making. By integrating these stages into a unified conceptual framework, this study extends existing discussions on Digital Religion beyond the analysis of digital platforms toward a deeper understanding of how algorithmic systems actively participate in the production, mediation, and negotiation of religious knowledge.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) How do Muslim youth initiate religious inquiry through Generative Artificial Intelligence? (2) How is trust toward AI-generated religious knowledge constructed? (3) How is religious authority negotiated between artificial intelligence and traditional Islamic scholarship? and (4) How does this negotiation influence religious decision-making? Answering these questions contributes to contemporary Islamic Studies by offering a theoretically grounded explanation of how religious authority is being reconfigured in an increasingly AI-mediated digital environment.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) as developed by Charmaz (2014). CGT was selected because the primary objective of this study was not to test an existing theory but

to develop a conceptual explanation of how Muslim youth negotiate religious authority when utilizing Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) for religious inquiry. The constructivist perspective assumes that meanings are co-constructed through interactions between researchers and participants, allowing theoretical categories to emerge inductively from participants' experiences rather than being imposed by predetermined theoretical assumptions (Charmaz, 2014).

The study was conducted in Surabaya, Indonesia, one of the country's largest metropolitan cities with high levels of digital technology adoption and a diverse Muslim population. The research focused on Muslim youth aged 18–30 years who had experience using Generative AI platforms, such as ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Claude, or similar applications, to obtain information or explanations related to Islamic teachings. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure that each individual possessed direct experience relevant to the research objectives. As data collection and analysis progressed, participant recruitment followed the principle of theoretical sampling, whereby additional participants were selected to elaborate emerging categories until theoretical saturation was achieved. The final number of participants was therefore determined by the adequacy of conceptual development rather than a predetermined sample size.

The inclusion criteria required participants to (1) identify as Muslims, (2) be between 18 and 30 years of age, (3) reside in Surabaya, (4) have experience using Generative AI for religious purposes, and (5) be willing to participate voluntarily in in-depth interviews. To maximize variation in perspectives, participants were selected from diverse educational, occupational, and religious backgrounds, including university students, professionals, entrepreneurs, alumni of Islamic boarding schools, and individuals actively engaged in digital communities. This strategy was intended to capture a broad range of experiences concerning AI-assisted religious consultation.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, allowing participants to describe their experiences, motivations, perceptions, and decision-making processes when interacting with Generative AI in religious contexts. The

interview protocol explored several broad themes, including participants' initial motivations for using AI, types of religious questions submitted to AI platforms, perceptions of AI-generated responses, strategies for evaluating credibility, relationships between AI-generated information and traditional religious authorities, and the influence of AI on religious decision-making. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes documenting contextual observations and researchers' analytical reflections were maintained throughout the research process to support theoretical sensitivity.

Data analysis followed the iterative procedures of Constructivist Grounded Theory proposed by Charmaz (2014). The analysis began with initial coding, during which interview transcripts were examined line by line to identify actions, meanings, and recurring patterns reflected in participants' narratives. This stage was followed by focused coding, in which the most significant and analytically meaningful codes were synthesized into broader conceptual categories. Constant comparison was employed throughout the analytical process by continuously comparing incidents within interviews, across participants, and between emerging categories. Analytical memo writing accompanied every stage of coding to document conceptual reflections, theoretical insights, and relationships among emerging categories. Through repeated comparison, abstraction, and theoretical integration, the analysis culminated in the development of the AI-Mediated Religious Authority Negotiation (AMRAN) Model, which explains the sequential process through which Muslim youth initiate religious inquiry, construct trust toward AI-generated knowledge, negotiate religious authority, and formulate religious decisions.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study adopted the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants, iterative questioning during interviews, and member clarification where necessary. Transferability was supported by providing rich contextual descriptions of participants and research

settings. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining a transparent audit trail documenting methodological decisions throughout the research process. Confirmability was ensured through reflexive memo writing and systematic documentation of analytical procedures, enabling interpretations to remain grounded in participants' narratives rather than researchers' personal assumptions.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Prior to data collection, all participants received information regarding the objectives of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained before interviews commenced. Participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms, and all interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored to protect privacy. The study adhered to general principles of research ethics concerning respect for participants, confidentiality, and responsible management of qualitative research data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Initiating Religious Inquiry through Generative Artificial Intelligence

The emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) has fundamentally transformed how individuals initiate religious inquiry in contemporary digital society. Unlike conventional search engines that require users to navigate multiple sources and independently evaluate information, Generative AI enables conversational interactions that generate immediate, contextualized, and adaptive responses through natural language. Consequently, the initial process of seeking religious knowledge is no longer limited to locating authoritative texts or identifying appropriate religious experts but increasingly involves engaging with intelligent conversational systems capable of synthesizing diverse sources of information (Campbell & Bellar, 2023).

This transformation is particularly significant among Muslim youth, whose daily lives are deeply embedded within digital ecosystems. Growing up in an environment characterized by constant internet connectivity, algorithmic personalization, and mobile communication has shaped a generation that expects

information to be immediate, interactive, and accessible. Within this context, Generative AI provides a new entry point for religious inquiry by allowing users to ask questions regarding worship, Islamic jurisprudence, ethics, Qur'anic interpretation, or contemporary socio-religious issues using ordinary language rather than specialized theological terminology. Such accessibility potentially reduces psychological, geographical, and informational barriers that have traditionally constrained access to religious consultation.

The shift from conventional information retrieval toward conversational interaction also reflects broader changes in religious learning. Earlier digital religious engagement largely relied on websites, online forums, recorded sermons, social media, or mobile applications where users primarily consumed content created by religious authorities. Although these platforms expanded opportunities for Islamic learning, they generally maintained one-directional communication in which users searched, selected, and interpreted information independently. Generative AI introduces a substantially different communication model by facilitating continuous dialogue in which users may refine questions, request clarification, compare interpretations, and explore complex religious issues through iterative interaction. Religious inquiry therefore evolves from passive information consumption into an active process of knowledge construction.

Previous scholarship has demonstrated that digital technologies have substantially reshaped Islamic learning and religious communication. In the Indonesian context, digital platforms have become important spaces where Islamic knowledge is disseminated, negotiated, and consumed beyond conventional institutional settings, allowing Muslim communities to access religious information more efficiently while simultaneously creating new configurations of religious authority (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). Likewise, studies of Islamic mobile applications indicate that digital technologies have expanded everyday religious engagement by integrating religious practices into routine digital activities, illustrating how technological innovation increasingly mediates the relationship between believers and religious knowledge (Fakhruroji, 2019). These studies collectively confirm that digital environments have become

integral components of contemporary Islamic learning.

Nevertheless, Generative AI represents a qualitative transformation beyond earlier forms of digital religion. Previous digital platforms primarily functioned as repositories or distribution channels for human-produced religious content, whereas Generative AI dynamically produces responses through interactive dialogue based on users' prompts. Consequently, users are no longer merely selecting among competing religious authorities but actively constructing individualized religious consultations through iterative conversations with artificial intelligence. This distinction suggests that the object of religious negotiation is gradually shifting from evaluating religious speakers toward evaluating algorithmically generated religious explanations.

From the perspective of Digital Religion, this phenomenon illustrates that digital technologies increasingly function not only as communication media but also as environments in which religious identities, beliefs, and practices are negotiated. Campbell and Bellar (2023) argue that digital religion is characterized by the convergence of online and offline religious experiences, where technological infrastructures participate in shaping religious authority, community formation, and religious practice. In this sense, Generative AI should be understood not merely as another digital tool but as an emerging component of the contemporary religious ecosystem through which individuals encounter, interpret, and discuss religious knowledge.

This transformation is further illuminated through the theory of Mediatization of Religion, which explains that media technologies gradually reshape religious institutions, religious communication, and religious authority by embedding media logic into everyday religious practices (Hjarvard, 2008). The integration of Generative AI into everyday religious inquiry represents an advanced stage of mediatization because technology no longer simply transmits religious information but actively structures the interaction through which religious understanding is developed. Simultaneously, theories of religious authority suggest that authority is socially negotiated through processes of legitimacy, recognition, and trust rather than being inherently possessed by

individuals or institutions. The emergence of Generative AI therefore should not be interpreted as replacing ulama or traditional Islamic scholarship but as introducing a new actor that participates in the earliest stage of religious consultation before authority is subsequently negotiated through broader religious networks.

Taken together, these developments indicate that the emergence of Generative AI requires scholars of Islamic Studies to reconsider conventional assumptions regarding religious inquiry in the digital era. The central transformation does not simply involve technological innovation but concerns the changing pathways through which religious knowledge is initially accessed and interpreted. Understanding this initial stage is essential because it provides the conceptual foundation for examining how trust in AI-generated religious knowledge is subsequently constructed, negotiated, and verified through interactions with traditional religious authorities, a process that becomes the focus of the following sections.

Constructing Trust in AI-Generated Religious Knowledge

Following the initial stage of religious inquiry through Generative Artificial Intelligence, an equally important process concerns how users evaluate the credibility of AI-generated religious information. Accessing religious knowledge does not automatically imply accepting it as authoritative. Instead, Muslim users engage in a process of cognitive and religious evaluation in which AI-generated responses are assessed before being incorporated into personal religious understanding or practice. Accordingly, trust should not be understood as an immediate consequence of technological interaction but as a socially and cognitively constructed process shaped by users' previous religious experiences, digital literacy, and perceptions of credibility.

Unlike traditional religious authorities whose legitimacy is often grounded in institutional recognition, scholarly expertise, and communal acceptance, Generative AI derives its perceived credibility primarily from the quality, coherence, responsiveness, and comprehensiveness of its generated answers. Consequently, users may initially perceive AI as informative because of its ability

to produce structured explanations, summarize multiple viewpoints, and respond instantly to follow-up questions. Nevertheless, the absence of identifiable religious accountability distinguishes AI from conventional religious scholars, encouraging users to remain cautious when interpreting religious guidance generated by artificial intelligence.

This distinction suggests that trust in AI-generated religious knowledge is inherently conditional rather than absolute. Instead of replacing traditional religious authorities, AI functions as a preliminary informational resource whose credibility continues to be evaluated throughout the consultation process. The construction of trust therefore involves continuous assessment of whether AI-generated explanations appear logically consistent, correspond with users' prior religious knowledge, and align with established Islamic teachings. In this sense, trust is negotiated through interaction rather than automatically attributed to technological systems.

From an interpretive perspective, the emergence of conditional trust reflects broader transformations in digital information behaviour. Contemporary users are increasingly accustomed to interacting with algorithmic systems that provide personalized recommendations, intelligent assistance, and immediate access to information. Consequently, credibility is no longer determined exclusively by institutional status but is also influenced by users' experiences of efficiency, transparency, and communicative responsiveness. Within religious contexts, this shift suggests that technological competence may contribute to initial perceptions of reliability, although it does not necessarily confer religious legitimacy.

Previous scholarship has consistently emphasized that trust remains a central element in digital religious communication. Research on digital religion argues that technological platforms influence not only the dissemination of religious knowledge but also the processes through which users evaluate religious credibility and construct authority in online environments (Campbell & Bellar, 2023). Likewise, studies on Indonesian Islamic digital practices demonstrate that the expansion of digital media has diversified access to religious information while simultaneously requiring users to exercise greater discernment when

selecting trustworthy religious sources (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). These findings indicate that increased accessibility is accompanied by greater responsibility for users to evaluate the credibility of religious information independently.

The emergence of Generative AI extends these discussions by introducing a new object of trust evaluation. Whereas previous studies primarily examined trust toward religious preachers, institutions, or digital content creators, conversational AI shifts attention toward evaluating algorithmically generated explanations. Rather than assessing the reputation of a speaker, users increasingly assess the quality of the response itself. This represents an important conceptual transition because credibility becomes associated with the interactional performance of artificial intelligence instead of the personal characteristics of religious authorities.

The phenomenon may also be interpreted through theories of epistemic trust, which explain that individuals develop confidence in information sources through repeated experiences of perceived accuracy, consistency, and usefulness. Applied to religious contexts, epistemic trust suggests that users may gradually develop confidence in AI when previous interactions are perceived as informative and coherent. However, because Islamic religious authority is simultaneously grounded in scholarly competence, ethical responsibility, and institutional legitimacy, epistemic trust alone remains insufficient to establish AI as an independent religious authority. Users may trust AI as a source of preliminary explanation while continuing to rely on qualified scholars for normative religious judgments.

This interpretation is further reinforced by theories of religious authority, which emphasize that legitimacy emerges through communal recognition and sustained social relationships rather than technological capability alone. Artificial intelligence may contribute to expanding access to religious knowledge, but it lacks the institutional accountability, spiritual responsibility, and interpretive tradition that characterize Islamic scholarship. Consequently, the process of constructing trust in AI-generated religious knowledge should be understood as

complementary rather than substitutive. AI assists users in exploring religious questions, whereas the validation of religious truth continues to depend upon broader networks of religious authority.

The discussion above demonstrates that trust occupies a pivotal position between religious inquiry and religious authority negotiation. The extent to which users consider AI-generated explanations credible influences whether those explanations become accepted, questioned, or verified through alternative religious sources. Accordingly, understanding how trust is constructed provides an essential analytical bridge for examining the subsequent process in which AI-generated knowledge is compared, negotiated, and validated alongside traditional Islamic authorities.

Negotiating Religious Authority between Generative Artificial Intelligence and Traditional Islamic Scholarship

The growing adoption of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) in religious information seeking has fundamentally altered the landscape of religious authority in contemporary Muslim societies. The emergence of conversational AI does not merely introduce an alternative source of information but creates a new arena in which authority is continuously evaluated, interpreted, and negotiated by users. Unlike previous stages of digital religion, where authority remained attached to identifiable religious figures, institutions, or organizations, Generative AI introduces an algorithmic actor that participates in the earliest stages of religious consultation despite lacking institutional legitimacy or formal religious credentials. Consequently, the central issue is no longer whether AI can replace religious scholars, but rather how Muslim users negotiate the authority of AI alongside established Islamic scholarship.

Religious authority has traditionally been understood as a socially recognized capacity to interpret, explain, and transmit religious knowledge. Within Islamic intellectual tradition, such authority is developed through years of scholarly training, mastery of classical sources, recognition by scholarly communities, and moral responsibility toward society. The legitimacy of ulama therefore extends beyond the possession of knowledge itself, encompassing

ethical integrity, interpretive competence, and accountability within established religious traditions. These characteristics distinguish traditional religious authority from algorithmic systems whose responses are generated through computational models rather than scholarly responsibility.

Despite these differences, the accessibility and responsiveness of Generative AI have created new patterns of interaction between Muslim users and religious knowledge. AI enables individuals to obtain immediate explanations regarding Islamic practices, theological concepts, ethical dilemmas, and contemporary religious issues without temporal or geographical constraints. The ability to ask unlimited follow-up questions, request simplified explanations, compare different schools of Islamic jurisprudence, or explore hypothetical scenarios provides a level of flexibility that conventional religious consultation may not always offer. These technological affordances explain why AI increasingly occupies the initial stage of religious inquiry, particularly among digitally connected Muslim youth.

However, the convenience offered by AI does not automatically translate into unconditional religious authority. Religious authority is neither technologically determined nor algorithmically assigned. Instead, authority is constructed through continuous social negotiation involving trust, legitimacy, expertise, and communal recognition. Muslim users therefore engage in an evaluative process in which AI-generated explanations are compared with religious teachings acquired from scholars, educational institutions, family traditions, religious communities, and authoritative Islamic literature. This evaluative process illustrates that authority is dynamic rather than static, emerging through continuous interaction between technological innovation and established religious structures.

From an interpretive perspective, this negotiation reflects the coexistence of two different forms of authority. On one hand, traditional Islamic scholarship represents institutional authority derived from recognized religious expertise, educational lineage, and scholarly accountability. On the other hand, Generative AI represents functional authority derived from efficiency, accessibility, responsiveness, and informational comprehensiveness. Users may perceive AI as

highly effective for obtaining preliminary explanations because it rapidly synthesizes diverse information into coherent responses. Nevertheless, the normative legitimacy required for determining religious obligations, issuing legal opinions, or resolving complex theological disputes continues to be associated with qualified religious scholars.

This coexistence suggests that AI should not be interpreted as a competitor to traditional religious authority but as an intermediary that influences the pathways through which religious authority is approached. Rather than replacing scholars, AI increasingly functions as an initial interpretive assistant that prepares users before they seek validation from recognized religious authorities. Consequently, authority negotiation involves sequential rather than mutually exclusive processes. Individuals may begin by consulting AI to gain an overview of a religious issue, continue by examining Qur'anic verses or prophetic traditions referenced in the response, and finally seek confirmation from ulama or trusted religious institutions before making religious decisions. Such a process demonstrates that AI contributes to expanding access to religious knowledge while leaving final normative authority within established Islamic scholarship.

Previous studies have demonstrated that digital technologies significantly influence the configuration of religious authority. Research on digital religion argues that technological environments have transformed religious communication by decentralizing access to religious knowledge and enabling individuals to participate more actively in religious learning (Campbell & Bellar, 2023). Similarly, Hjarvard (2008) explains that media technologies gradually reshape religious institutions by embedding media logic into religious communication and everyday religious practice. These perspectives suggest that authority in digital environments is increasingly mediated through technological infrastructures rather than exclusively through institutional channels.

In the Indonesian context, Solahudin and Fakhruroji (2020) demonstrate that social media has become an influential arena for disseminating Islamic knowledge while simultaneously creating new forms of religious authority beyond traditional religious institutions. Their findings indicate that digital platforms enable broader

participation in religious discourse, allowing religious influencers, online communities, and digital content creators to contribute to the circulation of Islamic knowledge. Nevertheless, these studies primarily examine human actors operating within digital environments. The emergence of Generative AI introduces a substantially different phenomenon because the interaction occurs directly between users and computational systems capable of generating adaptive religious explanations without direct human intervention during the interaction itself.

The emergence of conversational AI therefore extends previous discussions on digital religious authority by introducing algorithmic mediation into religious consultation. Rather than selecting among competing preachers or institutions, users increasingly evaluate the quality, coherence, neutrality, and perceived usefulness of AI-generated responses. This shift represents an important conceptual development because authority is no longer negotiated solely through interpersonal relationships but also through interactions with intelligent technological systems. Nevertheless, algorithmic performance alone cannot establish religious legitimacy because legitimacy remains dependent upon interpretive traditions, scholarly accountability, and communal recognition.

This phenomenon may also be understood through the perspective of negotiated authority. Contemporary theories increasingly emphasize that religious authority is relational, emerging through ongoing interactions between knowledge producers and knowledge seekers rather than existing as a fixed institutional attribute. Within digitally mediated environments, users actively participate in determining which sources deserve trust, which explanations require verification, and which authorities ultimately influence religious decision-making. The presence of Generative AI expands this negotiation by adding a new participant to the authority ecosystem without eliminating the significance of traditional Islamic scholarship.

The concept of epistemic trust further strengthens this interpretation. Individuals tend to develop confidence in information sources through repeated experiences of consistency, coherence, and perceived usefulness. AI systems may

gradually gain epistemic trust because they provide rapid, structured, and context-sensitive explanations that satisfy users' immediate informational needs. However, epistemic trust differs fundamentally from religious legitimacy. While users may trust AI to explain concepts, summarize scholarly opinions, or identify relevant scriptural references, questions involving religious obligation, jurisprudential reasoning, or moral accountability continue to require human scholarly judgment grounded in Islamic intellectual traditions. Consequently, AI-generated knowledge may be perceived as informationally valuable without being regarded as normatively authoritative.

Taken together, these discussions indicate that the emergence of Generative AI should be understood as reconfiguring rather than replacing religious authority. The contemporary religious landscape is characterized by a hybrid authority structure in which artificial intelligence, religious scholars, Islamic educational institutions, classical texts, and digital communities simultaneously participate in shaping religious understanding. Within this evolving ecosystem, authority becomes an ongoing process of negotiation in which Muslim users actively compare, evaluate, validate, and integrate multiple sources of religious knowledge before arriving at informed religious judgments. This negotiated understanding of authority provides the conceptual bridge toward the subsequent discussion on how these interactions ultimately influence religious decision-making and contribute to the development of the AI-Mediated Religious Authority Negotiation (AMRAN) Model proposed in this study.

Reconfiguring Religious Decision-Making in the Age of Generative Artificial Intelligence

The negotiation of religious authority between Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) and traditional Islamic scholarship ultimately influences how Muslims formulate religious decisions in their everyday lives. While previous discussions have emphasized the transformation of religious inquiry and the construction of trust toward AI-generated religious knowledge, the next stage concerns how individuals translate information into religious judgment and practice. Religious decision-making is not a simple consequence of obtaining

information; rather, it is a complex interpretive process in which multiple sources of knowledge are evaluated, reconciled, and integrated before an individual determines an appropriate religious course of action.

Traditionally, religious decision-making within Muslim communities has relied upon a relatively structured hierarchy of authority. Individuals sought guidance from religious scholars, consulted classical Islamic texts, referred to institutional fatwas, or relied upon trusted religious communities. These mechanisms provided not only religious explanations but also normative legitimacy because decisions were grounded in recognized scholarly traditions. The emergence of Generative AI does not eliminate these mechanisms; instead, it introduces an additional layer within the decision-making process by functioning as an initial source of explanation, comparison, and clarification.

From an interpretive perspective, the integration of AI into religious decision-making reflects a broader transformation in contemporary knowledge practices. Individuals increasingly adopt iterative rather than linear approaches when confronting religious questions. Instead of consulting a single authority and accepting its explanation, users may begin with AI-generated responses, compare them with Qur'anic verses and Hadith, examine different schools of Islamic jurisprudence, search for supporting lectures from respected scholars, and finally consult local religious authorities before determining the most appropriate religious action. Decision-making therefore becomes a process of continuous verification rather than immediate acceptance.

This transformation also demonstrates that religious decisions are increasingly shaped by information abundance rather than information scarcity. Digital technologies have dramatically expanded access to religious resources, enabling individuals to encounter diverse theological perspectives within a very short period. While this abundance enriches religious learning, it simultaneously requires greater interpretive competence. Users are no longer challenged primarily by the availability of religious information but by their ability to distinguish authoritative explanations from incomplete, inaccurate, or contextually inappropriate interpretations. In this environment, Generative AI functions as a

facilitator of information synthesis rather than the final arbiter of religious truth.

The role of AI in religious decision-making is therefore better understood as augmentative rather than substitutive. Artificial intelligence assists users in organizing complex information, identifying relevant concepts, comparing scholarly opinions, and simplifying difficult theological discussions. However, decisions concerning religious obligations, ritual practices, ethical responsibilities, and jurisprudential judgments continue to require contextual interpretation grounded in Islamic scholarship. This distinction illustrates that AI contributes to cognitive support while normative authority remains embedded within established traditions of Islamic jurisprudence and scholarly interpretation.

Earlier studies on digital religion have consistently demonstrated that digital media encourage greater individual participation in religious learning. Campbell and Bellar (2023) argue that digital environments reshape religious engagement by enabling believers to become active participants in constructing religious understanding rather than passive recipients of religious instruction. Likewise, Hjarvard (2008) explains that media technologies transform the structures through which religion is communicated, thereby influencing how religious practices are interpreted and experienced in everyday life. These theoretical perspectives suggest that religious decision-making increasingly occurs within digitally mediated environments where multiple sources of authority coexist.

Research conducted in Indonesia similarly illustrates that digital platforms have diversified access to Islamic knowledge while expanding opportunities for religious participation beyond conventional institutional settings (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). However, these studies primarily examine interactions involving human religious communicators operating through digital media. The integration of Generative AI introduces a fundamentally different dimension because the interaction occurs through conversational systems capable of generating personalized responses based on users' specific questions. Consequently, religious decision-making increasingly incorporates algorithmically generated explanations alongside human scholarly guidance.

This development may also be interpreted through the framework of

bounded rationality. Individuals rarely possess complete religious knowledge when confronting complex ethical or jurisprudential issues. Instead, they seek information incrementally, evaluate available alternatives, and construct decisions using the resources accessible to them. Generative AI expands these informational resources by providing immediate explanations that help users formulate preliminary understanding. Nevertheless, bounded rationality also implies that individuals recognize the limitations of available information and therefore continue seeking additional verification from trusted religious authorities when uncertainty persists. AI thus becomes one component within a broader ecology of religious reasoning rather than its ultimate destination.

The process of religious decision-making also reflects the interaction between epistemic trust and normative legitimacy. Epistemic trust encourages individuals to value AI-generated explanations when they appear coherent, comprehensive, and consistent with prior knowledge. Normative legitimacy, however, depends upon whether those explanations correspond with accepted principles of Islamic jurisprudence, scholarly consensus, and recognized interpretive traditions. Consequently, Muslim users may appreciate the informational value of AI while simultaneously acknowledging that final religious decisions require broader ethical, theological, and jurisprudential consideration. This distinction explains why technological credibility cannot automatically substitute for religious legitimacy.

From the perspective of Islamic Studies, the incorporation of Generative AI into religious decision-making represents a significant reconfiguration of contemporary religious practice. The transformation does not lie in the displacement of traditional religious authority but in the emergence of hybrid decision-making processes that combine algorithmic assistance with human scholarly judgment. Such hybridity reflects the adaptive capacity of Muslim communities in responding to technological innovation while maintaining commitment to established religious principles.

The implications of this transformation extend beyond individual religious practice. Islamic educational institutions, religious organizations, and scholars are

increasingly challenged to develop new models of digital religious literacy that equip Muslims with the competencies required to evaluate AI-generated religious information critically. Rather than discouraging the use of artificial intelligence, these institutions may play a more constructive role by strengthening users' interpretive skills, enhancing awareness of AI's limitations, and reinforcing the importance of scholarly verification in religious decision-making. In this context, digital literacy becomes inseparable from religious literacy, as both are essential for navigating an increasingly AI-mediated religious environment.

Overall, the reconfiguration of religious decision-making illustrates that Generative AI has become an influential component within contemporary religious life without fundamentally displacing the normative role of Islamic scholarship. Instead, AI contributes to reshaping the pathways through which religious understanding is developed, verified, and translated into practice. This evolving process ultimately provides the conceptual foundation for the AI-Mediated Religious Authority Negotiation (AMRAN) Model, which integrates the stages of religious inquiry, trust construction, authority negotiation, and religious decision-making into a comprehensive framework for understanding Muslim engagement with Generative Artificial Intelligence.

The AI-Mediated Religious Authority Negotiation (AMRAN) Model

The preceding discussions demonstrate that the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) has not simply introduced another digital technology into religious life but has fundamentally reconfigured the processes through which Muslim users seek, evaluate, negotiate, and ultimately utilize religious knowledge. Rather than functioning as an isolated technological innovation, Generative AI operates within a broader ecosystem of religious authority where algorithmic systems, religious scholars, Islamic institutions, classical religious texts, and digital communities simultaneously contribute to shaping contemporary religious understanding. This study conceptualizes these interactions through the AI-Mediated Religious Authority Negotiation (AMRAN) Model, which explains how religious authority is dynamically negotiated throughout the process of AI-assisted religious consultation.

The AMRAN Model proposes that religious authority in the age of Generative AI is not transferred from traditional scholars to artificial intelligence. Instead, authority emerges through a sequential process of interaction in which users continuously evaluate multiple sources of religious knowledge before arriving at religious judgments. This perspective is consistent with the view that religious authority is socially constructed through legitimacy, trust, expertise, and communal recognition rather than being inherently possessed by either individuals or technological systems (Campbell & Bellar, 2023; Hjarvard, 2008).

The first stage of the model is Initiating Religious Inquiry through Generative Artificial Intelligence. At this stage, AI functions as the primary gateway through which users formulate religious questions. The conversational nature of AI enables individuals to express religious concerns using natural language, obtain immediate explanations, and explore multiple dimensions of a religious issue without the practical constraints commonly associated with conventional consultation. This stage reflects broader transformations in digital religious practices, where technological accessibility increasingly shapes the initial pathways through which religious knowledge is accessed (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020).

The second stage involves Constructing Trust in AI-Generated Religious Knowledge. Access to information alone does not establish authority. Instead, users gradually develop trust by evaluating the clarity, coherence, consistency, and perceived usefulness of AI-generated responses. Such trust remains provisional because users recognize that artificial intelligence does not possess religious accountability or institutional legitimacy. Consequently, trust in AI is epistemic rather than normative, reflecting confidence in informational assistance rather than unconditional acceptance of religious authority (Origgi, 2012).

The third stage is Negotiating Religious Authority between Artificial Intelligence and Traditional Islamic Scholarship. At this point, users begin comparing AI-generated explanations with alternative religious authorities, including ulama, Islamic educational institutions, classical religious texts, fatwas, and trusted religious communities. Rather than replacing existing authorities, AI

becomes one participant within a wider network of religious interpretation. Authority is therefore negotiated through continuous comparison, verification, and contextual interpretation rather than through technological determinism. This stage illustrates that contemporary religious authority increasingly operates as a relational process involving interactions among human actors, institutions, and intelligent technologies (Campbell & Bellar, 2023).

The fourth stage concerns Reconfiguring Religious Decision-Making. Religious decisions emerge through the integration of multiple informational resources rather than reliance upon a single authority. AI contributes by simplifying complex religious information, presenting diverse scholarly perspectives, and facilitating preliminary understanding. However, final religious judgments continue to depend upon broader considerations of Islamic jurisprudence, theological reasoning, ethical responsibility, and scholarly legitimacy. Consequently, decision-making becomes increasingly iterative, combining algorithmic assistance with human interpretation and religious verification.

These four stages collectively demonstrate that religious authority in the digital era should be understood as a dynamic negotiation process rather than a zero-sum competition between technology and traditional scholarship. The AMRAN Model therefore rejects deterministic assumptions suggesting that artificial intelligence will inevitably replace religious scholars. Instead, the model proposes a hybrid authority structure in which AI expands access to religious knowledge while traditional Islamic scholarship continues to provide normative legitimacy, jurisprudential interpretation, and ethical accountability. This hybrid configuration reflects the adaptive capacity of Muslim communities in responding to technological innovation without abandoning established religious traditions.

The proposed model also extends existing scholarship on Digital Religion and the Mediatization of Religion. Previous studies have primarily emphasized how digital media facilitate religious communication, online communities, and new forms of religious participation (Campbell & Bellar, 2023; Hjarvard, 2008). Similarly, Indonesian scholarship has demonstrated how social media has

diversified religious learning and transformed patterns of religious authority within digital environments (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2020). However, these studies largely focus on human actors operating through digital platforms. The AMRAN Model advances this discussion by positioning Generative AI as an algorithmic intermediary that actively participates in the earliest stages of religious consultation while remaining embedded within broader structures of religious authority. Accordingly, this study shifts analytical attention from digital platforms themselves toward the relational processes through which authority is constructed, negotiated, and validated in AI-mediated interactions.

The theoretical contribution of the AMRAN Model lies in its integration of four interrelated dimensions that have rarely been examined simultaneously: religious inquiry, epistemic trust, authority negotiation, and religious decision-making. Existing literature frequently investigates these dimensions independently, whereas this model demonstrates their sequential and mutually reinforcing relationships within the context of AI-assisted religious consultation. By conceptualizing these processes as an integrated framework, the model provides a more comprehensive explanation of how Muslim users navigate religious knowledge in increasingly complex digital environments.

Beyond its theoretical significance, the AMRAN Model also offers practical implications for Islamic educational institutions, religious organizations, policymakers, and developers of artificial intelligence technologies. Islamic educational institutions may utilize the model to strengthen digital religious literacy by equipping students with competencies for critically evaluating AI-generated religious information while maintaining commitment to established Islamic scholarship. Religious organizations may use the framework to develop strategies that position scholars not in opposition to technological innovation but as essential partners in guiding responsible AI-assisted religious learning. Likewise, AI developers may consider incorporating greater transparency regarding sources, limitations, and levels of confidence when generating religious content in order to support more responsible human decision-making.

Overall, the AMRAN Model demonstrates that the future of religious

authority is unlikely to be characterized by the replacement of human scholars with artificial intelligence. Instead, contemporary religious life is increasingly shaped by collaborative interactions among technological systems, religious institutions, scholarly traditions, and individual believers. Religious authority thus becomes an ongoing process of negotiation in which artificial intelligence expands informational accessibility while Islamic scholarship continues to provide interpretive legitimacy, ethical guidance, and normative direction. Understanding this dynamic relationship contributes not only to the growing field of Digital Religion but also to broader discussions concerning the implications of artificial intelligence for contemporary Islamic Studies.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) has fundamentally transformed the landscape of religious inquiry among contemporary Muslim communities. This study argues that the primary transformation does not lie in the replacement of traditional Islamic scholarship by artificial intelligence but in the reconfiguration of the processes through which religious knowledge is initially accessed, interpreted, evaluated, and ultimately translated into religious decision-making. Generative AI has become an increasingly important entry point for religious consultation by providing immediate, interactive, and personalized explanations that enable users to explore religious questions more efficiently than conventional digital platforms.

Building upon the perspectives of Digital Religion and the Mediatization of Religion (Campbell & Bellar, 2023; Hjarvard, 2008), this study demonstrates that religious authority in the digital era should be understood as a dynamic and negotiated process rather than a fixed institutional attribute. The integration of Generative AI into everyday religious life has created new patterns of interaction in which Muslim users continuously evaluate AI-generated explanations alongside established religious authorities, including ulama, Islamic educational institutions, classical Islamic texts, and recognized religious communities. Consequently,

authority is no longer exercised through a single source but emerges through continuous processes of comparison, verification, and contextual interpretation.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the development of the AI-Mediated Religious Authority Negotiation (AMRAN) Model. The model conceptualizes religious authority as a sequential process consisting of four interconnected stages: initiating religious inquiry through Generative AI, constructing trust toward AI-generated religious knowledge, negotiating authority between artificial intelligence and traditional Islamic scholarship, and reconfiguring religious decision-making. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine digital media as channels for religious communication, the AMRAN Model positions Generative AI as an algorithmic intermediary that actively participates in the formation of religious understanding while remaining embedded within broader structures of Islamic authority. This model therefore extends existing discussions on Digital Religion by explaining not only where religious knowledge is obtained but also how authority is continuously negotiated throughout AI-assisted religious consultation.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the necessity of strengthening both digital literacy and religious literacy among Muslim communities. Islamic educational institutions, religious organizations, and policymakers should recognize that the increasing use of Generative AI cannot be addressed solely through technological regulation or rejection. Instead, greater emphasis should be placed on developing critical competencies that enable Muslims to evaluate AI-generated religious information responsibly, understand the limitations of algorithmic systems, and maintain appropriate engagement with qualified religious scholars when addressing complex theological, jurisprudential, and ethical issues. Likewise, developers of AI systems should consider incorporating greater transparency regarding data sources, limitations, and confidence levels when generating religious content to support more informed user decision-making.

This study is not without limitations. As a qualitative investigation grounded in the experiences of Muslim youth within a specific socio-cultural context, the

findings are intended to generate theoretical understanding rather than statistical generalization. Patterns of AI adoption, perceptions of religious authority, and decision-making processes may differ across age groups, Islamic traditions, national contexts, or technological environments. Furthermore, the rapid evolution of Generative AI suggests that patterns of human-AI interaction will continue to develop alongside technological innovation, requiring ongoing scholarly attention.

Future research may extend the proposed AMRAN Model by examining different demographic groups, comparing religious authority negotiation across various Muslim societies, or exploring interactions involving specific AI platforms with distinct technological capabilities. Comparative studies involving different religious traditions may also enrich understanding of how artificial intelligence influences religious authority beyond the Islamic context. In addition, mixed-method and longitudinal research designs may provide deeper insights into the long-term implications of AI-mediated religious consultation for religious practice, institutional authority, and digital religious literacy.

In conclusion, this study argues that the future of religious authority is unlikely to be characterized by a contest between artificial intelligence and traditional Islamic scholarship. Rather, it is increasingly shaped by collaborative and negotiated interactions among technological systems, religious institutions, scholarly traditions, and individual believers. Understanding this evolving relationship is essential for advancing contemporary Islamic Studies and for developing more comprehensive theoretical perspectives on the role of artificial intelligence in the production, mediation, and negotiation of religious knowledge in the digital age.

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DECLARATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) USE

The authors declare that Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to support language refinement, grammar enhancement, academic writing improvement, and manuscript organization during the preparation of this article. AI was not used to generate research data, fabricate findings, perform data analysis, or make scientific interpretations. All conceptual development, methodological decisions, data interpretation, theoretical analysis, and final conclusions are the sole responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, verified, and revised all AI-assisted outputs to ensure their accuracy, originality, and compliance with academic integrity and ethical research standards.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no commercial, financial, professional, or personal relationships that could be construed as potential conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of social science research. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted. Participants' identities were anonymized to protect their privacy, and all research data were stored securely and used exclusively for academic purposes.