



Shifting Religious Authority in the AI Era: A Comparative Study of Gen Z Trust in AI Guidance and Traditional Ulama

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ABSTRACT

The rapid proliferation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has fundamentally disrupted the landscape of Islamic communication, introducing chatbots as novel sources of religious information that challenge the traditional authority of Ulama. This study aims to analyze the shift in religious authority among Generation Z by examining the reliability of AI-generated fatwas versus traditional Islamic scholarship. Employing a qualitative virtual ethnography method, data were collected through digital observation of AI interactions and critical analysis of a sermon by Habib Abdurrahman Assegaf regarding AI errors in religious interpretation. The results demonstrate significant “algorithmic hallucination” in religious texts. Specifically, AI failed to interpret the theological context of Sahih Bukhari regarding “Al-Madinatu Tanfi Al-Khabats,” providing a literal, erroneous translation that strips away spiritual meaning. While Gen Z utilizes AI for privacy and speed, this finding proves that AI lacks scientific lineage (sanad) and spiritual taste (dzauq). The implications of this study highlight the urgency of digital literacy to prevent the trivialization of sacred texts. In conclusion, while AI functions as an efficient data aggregator, it cannot replace the authoritative role of Ulama, as authentic religious understanding requires human mentorship through talaqqi to ensure validity and contextual accuracy.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Digital Fatwa, Gen Z, Islamic Authority, Sanad Crisis.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of digital technology has fundamentally reconstructed the religious landscape of the Muslim Ummah, shifting the locus of knowledge from traditional Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) to digital platforms (Qorib 2025; Zaluchu 2024). While the previous decade was marked by the rise of “Google Sheikhs” and social media influencers, the current era introduces a more profound disruption through the emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), such as ChatGPT and Google Gemini (Amankwah-Amoah et al. 2024). Unlike search engines that merely retrieve existing information, Generative AI synthesizes answers, acting as a “Virtual Mufti” capable of issuing religious rulings (fatwas) instantaneously. For Generation Z (Gen Z), who are digital natives, this technological advancement offers unprecedented convenience, anonymity, and speed (Szymkowiak et al.

2021). However, this shift precipitates a severe epistemological crisis in Islamic communication: the displacement of authoritative human scholars, who possess scientific lineage (*sanad*) and spiritual integrity (*murū'ah*), by algorithmic systems trained on secular and often unverified datasets (Campbell and Evolvi 2020);(Solahudin and Fakhruroji 2020).

The core research problem lies in the tension between the “algorithmic logic” of AI and the “spiritual authority” of traditional Ulama. Traditional authority in Islam is built upon *talaqqi* (face-to-face transmission of knowledge), where the validity of a fatwa depends not only on the text but also on the pious character of the issuer (Famuji and Khotimah 2025). In contrast, AI operates as a “Black Box,” generating answers based on probability and pattern matching without understanding theological context or possessing faith (*iman*) (Dorobantu 2022). This creates a dangerous potential for the “commodification of fatwa,” where religious answers are treated as instant products rather than spiritual guidance. Furthermore, as highlighted by contemporary critiques from traditional scholars, AI is prone to “hallucinations”-fabricating hadiths or misinterpreting classical texts-which poses a direct threat to the purity of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) (Assegaf 2025); (Royhan and Haqiqi 2025).

To analyze this phenomenon, this article employs Max Weber’s Theory of Authority as a theoretical framework (Blau 1963). Weber classifies authority into three types: Traditional, Charismatic, and Legal-Rational. Traditional Ulama embody a synthesis of Traditional and Charismatic authority, deriving legitimacy from sacred history and personal sanctity. Conversely, AI introduces a deceptive form of what scholars term “Algorithmic Authority”-a machine-based authority that users trust because it appears objective, rational, and neutral, despite lacking moral agency (Cheong 2021). This study argues that Gen Z’s interaction with AI represents a negotiation between these conflicting authorities: the desire for rational, quick solutions provided by AI versus the need for spiritual validation provided by Ulama (Liu et al. 2025).

While extensive research has examined the impact of social media influencers on religious practices, studies specifically investigating the theological and sociological implications of Generative AI as a fatwa provider remain scarce (Famuji et al. 2025). Existing literature has not fully explored how “hallucinations” in AI fatwas affect the trust of educated Muslim youth (Sahrul 2025; Tarwiyyah 2025). This article addresses this gap by conducting a comparative study of Gen Z’s trust levels in AI-generated fatwas versus traditional Ulama. The objective is to determine whether AI is perceived as a functional substitute or merely a complementary tool, and to provide strategic recommendations for Islamic communicators in navigating this algorithmic era.

METHODS

This research employs a mixed-method approach with a dominant qualitative design, specifically utilizing virtual ethnography (*netnography*) to investigate the digital behavior of Muslim youth in the cyber-Islamic environment. This methodological choice allows for a comprehensive exploration of the shift in religious authority, capturing both the statistical trends of trust and the deeper theological implications of “algorithmic fatwas.” The research is descriptive-analytical in nature, aiming not only to describe the phenomenon but to critically analyze the contestation between Artificial Intelligence (AI) and traditional Ulama through the lens of authority theories (Bunt 2018).

The data collection process was conducted through three primary techniques: digital simulation, content analysis, and online surveys. First, the researchers performed an algorithmic simulation by inputting specific theological questions-including the

interpretation of Sahih Bukhari regarding “Al-Madinatu Tanfi Al-Khabats”-into Generative AI models (ChatGPT-4 and Google Gemini) to evaluate the accuracy, context, and potential “hallucinations” in the responses. Second, to represent the counter-narrative from traditional authority, the study analyzed the digital recording of a sermon by Al-Habib Abdurrahman bin Muhammad Assegaf which specifically critiqued AI errors. (Assegaf 2025). Third, primary data regarding user perception were collected via a purposive sampling survey distributed to 100 Muslim postgraduate students (Generation Z) to measure their level of trust and verification habits when consulting AI for religious issues. Secondary data were gathered from reputable journals and digital reports published between 2020 and 2025.

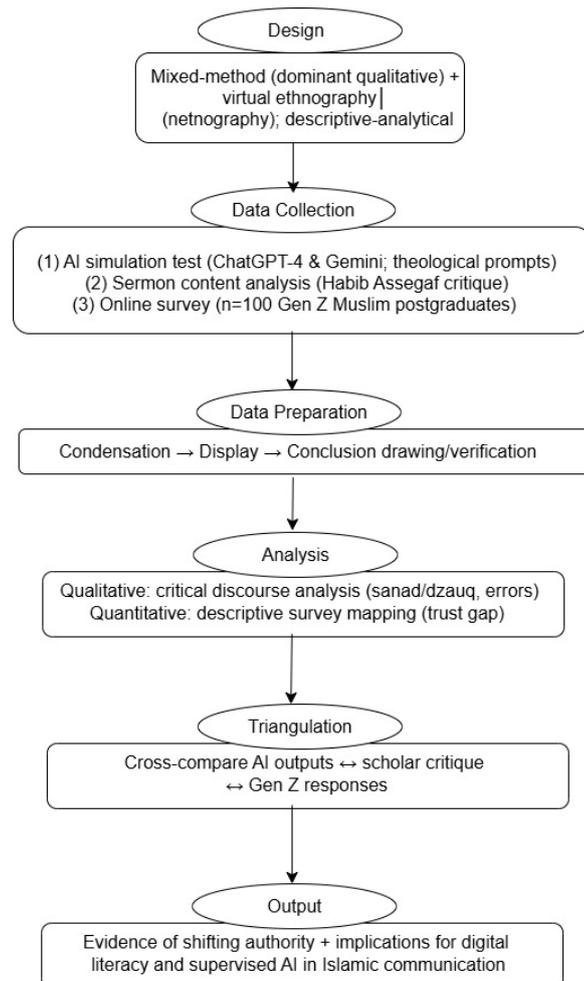


Figure 1: Research Flow Diagram

Figure 1 summarizes the research workflow employed in this study, from design to analytical validation. The study adopts a mixed-method approach with a dominant qualitative orientation using virtual ethnography (netnography). Data were generated through three complementary techniques: (1) AI simulation tests using theological prompts in ChatGPT-4 and Google Gemini, (2) content analysis of Habib Abdurrahman Assegaf’s sermon as a traditional counter-narrative, and (3) an online survey (n=100) of Gen Z Muslim postgraduate students to capture trust preferences and verification habits. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. (Hashimov 2015). AI-generated texts were

examined using critical discourse analysis to identify interpretive gaps related to sanad (scientific lineage) and dzauq (spiritual taste), while survey responses were analyzed descriptively to map the trust gap between AI and traditional Ulama. Finally, triangulation was conducted by cross-comparing AI outputs, scholarly critiques, and Gen Z responses to produce a validated interpretation of shifting religious authority in the AI era.

Survey Instrument and Measurement (Trust Constructs)

The survey instrument measured comparative trust toward two sources of religious guidance: (1) AI chatbots (ChatGPT-4 and Google Gemini) and (2) traditional Ulama. Responses were collected using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Trust was operationalized into five dimensions: perceived accuracy, perceived competence, perceived integrity, spiritual satisfaction, and verification habit. The items were adapted from trust and source-credibility concepts in digital communication research and contextualized for Islamic guidance-seeking. Content validity was ensured through expert review in Islamic communication, and a brief pilot test was conducted to refine item clarity.

Composite scores were calculated by averaging item responses within each dimension for AI and Ulama separately. Mean scores were interpreted as low (1.00–2.33), moderate (2.34–3.66), and high (3.67–5.00). Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha for each construct, with values ≥ 0.70 considered acceptable; reliability results are reported in the Results section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This Researchers The research findings are divided into two main sections: the comparative analysis of Gen Z’s perception toward religious authority sources and the qualitative evidence of “algorithmic hallucinations” in AI-generated fatwas. The data presented below were obtained from a survey of 100 Muslim postgraduate students and digital observation of religious sermons.

Comparative Analysis of Trust Levels

Based on the survey distributed to Gen Z respondents regarding their preference between AI Chatbots (ChatGPT/Gemini) and Traditional Ulama when seeking religious answers, a significant dichotomy was found. The data indicates that while AI is preferred for its technical speed and privacy, it scores low on spiritual satisfaction. The summary of these findings is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Comparison of Attributes between AI Fatwas and Ulama Advice

Attribute / Variable	AI Chatbot (ChatGPT/Gemini)	Traditional Ulama (Human)
Response Speed	Instant (< 10 seconds)	Delayed (Depends on availability)
Accessibility	24/7, Private (No judgment)	Limited, Public/Social setting
Reference Basis	Internet Big Data (Pattern matching)	<i>Kitab Kuning & Sanad</i> (Lineage)
Contextual Nuance	Literal / Textual	Contextual (<i>Fiqh al-Waqi'</i>)

Trust Level (Gen Z)

High for General Information

High for Ritual Validity (*Ibadah*)

The data in Table 1 illustrates that Gen Z treats AI as a “Search Engine Plus” rather than a spiritual guide. While 65 percent of respondents admitted to consulting AI for sensitive questions (e.g., regarding puberty or private sins) due to anonymity, 88 percent stated they would strictly follow a Traditional Ulama for valid legal rulings on worship (prayer/fasting). This confirms that “Algorithmic Authority” is functional but not spiritual (Maulana and Fata 2025; Pabbajah 2024).

Algorithmic Hallucination and The Critique of Traditional Authority

To validate the reliability of AI in interpreting sacred texts, this research conducted a verification test inspired by the critique delivered by Al-Habib Abdurrahman bin Muhammad Assegaf. In a documented sermon, Habib Assegaf demonstrated a fatal error in AI translation regarding a Hadith from Sahih Bukhari. The visual evidence of this critique is captured in Figure 1.(Assegaf 2025).



Figure 2: Habib Abdurrahman Assegaf critiques AI translation errors

As observed in Figure 2, the specific case involved the translation of the Hadith chapter “*Al-Madinatu Tanfi Al-Khabats*” (Madinah eliminates impurities/sins). When inputted into the AI tool, the literal translation provided was related to “City gates removing filth” or physical dirt. Habib Assegaf emphasized that this literalism destroys the theological meaning, which refers to the spiritual purification of the city of Madinah, not physical sanitation. This finding serves as primary data confirming that AI lacks *Dzauq* (spiritual taste) and linguistic nuance (*Balaghah*), leading to what is technically termed as “Machine Hallucination.”

The Paradigm Shift in Authority: From Talaqqi to Algorithm

The findings above highlight a critical shift in the construction of religious authority that requires an in-depth reading of the epistemological transformation in the transmission of Islamic knowledge. Referring to Max Weber’s theory of authority typology, Gen Z’s engagement with AI represents a form of “Instrumental Rationality” (*Zweckrationalität*)-an action orientation that prioritizes technical efficiency in achieving goals (an answer) without considering the value dimension or substantive meaning behind it. However, the fatal error demonstrated in Figure 1 empirically proves that efficiency often comes at the cost of

theological accuracy, creating what can be termed “semantic dilution” in sacred texts (Wahyudi 2022);(Zein 2021).

Furthermore, the phenomenon of AI mistranslating Sahih Bukhari is not merely a technical linguistic error, but underscores the fundamental danger of disconnecting texts from their authoritative interpreters who possess Sanad. In classical Islamic tradition, knowledge (ilm) is understood not merely as cognitive information transfer, but as the transmission of spiritual light (Nur) that flows from the heart of the teacher to the heart of the student through the Talaqqi process involving physical, spiritual, and emotional presence. This process ensures not only textual accuracy but also moral integrity and deep contextual understanding of the objectives of Sharia (maqasid al-syari’ah). AI, operating as an algorithm “Black Box” with opaque neural network systems, is structurally incapable of replicating this spiritual and contextual dimension, thus disrupting the epistemological chain that has been preserved for centuries (Solahudin and Fakhruroji 2020).

Dual-Trust Behavior: The Paradox of Digital Generation Trust

The survey results (Table 1) reveal an interesting paradox that reflects the complexity of authority negotiation in the digital age. The data shows that Gen Z is subconsciously aware of the epistemological limitations of AI; they utilize AI for “Information” (raw data and quick answers) but consistently return to Ulama for “Validation” (legal and spiritual legitimacy). This behavioral pattern confirms what can be called “dual-trust behavior”-an adaptive strategy where users differentiate between pragmatic needs and sacred needs. This finding aligns with the theory of mediatization of religion proposed by Hjarvard (2016), which states that technology does not completely replace traditional religious institutions but rather creates new layers of interaction that transform how authority is negotiated.

However, what needs to be monitored is the potential “normalization” of AI use in contexts that should require human authority. Although Gen Z still has the awareness to verify AI fatwas with Ulama, this trend may change as dependence on technology increases and direct access to traditional scholars decreases, especially in regions with limited formal Islamic education infrastructure. This creates the risk of what Cheong (2021) calls “algorithmic authority creep”-the gradual expansion of algorithmic authority into domains that should remain the exclusive territory of humans possessing spiritual and moral competence.

Implications for Islamic Communication and Education

In the context of Islamic Communication and Broadcasting (KPI) studies, these findings demand a strategic repositioning of AI not as a substitute for the Mufti, but as a “digital catalog” or “smart reference index” that requires human supervision to prevent the spread of theological misconceptions and meaning distortion. The concept of “supervised AI” becomes imperative, where AI outputs must be curated, verified, and contextualized by competent scholars before being disseminated to the public (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2020; Maulana and Fata 2025).

Furthermore, Islamic educational institutions need to develop an “Islamic Algorithmic Literacy” curriculum that not only teaches students how to use AI but also how to critique, audit, and verify AI outputs from a theological perspective. This includes understanding how Large Language Models (LLMs) are trained, what biases may exist in datasets, and how cultural and theological contexts can be lost in statistical computation processes. Future Da’i

and Islamic communicators must become “bilingual”-proficient in reading Kitab Kuning while being able to read the “language” of algorithms (Sahrul 2025; Tarwiyah 2025).

Finally, from a policy perspective, collaborative efforts among scholars, technologists, and regulators are needed to develop ethical and technical standards for the use of AI in religious contexts. This may include certification for “halal AI” or “Islamic-compliant AI” that ensures AI models have been trained with theologically verified datasets and supervised by councils of scholars (Papakostas 2025). Without these proactive measures, the risks of “fatwa commodification” and “shallowing of religious understanding” will continue to threaten the integrity of the Islamic intellectual tradition (Possamai and Turner 2020).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of survey data and critical examination of algorithmic responses, this research concludes that Generation Z exhibits “dual-trust” behavior: they rely on Artificial Intelligence (AI) for privacy and speed in acquiring general religious information, but fundamentally distrust it for ritual validation (ibadah) due to its lack of sanad (scientific lineage). The study confirms that AI acts merely as a data aggregator subject to “hallucinations,” as evidenced by the fatal mistranslation of Sahih Bukhari detected in field observations, proving that algorithms lack the dzauq (spiritual taste) and contextual understanding possessed by traditional Ulama.

The logical consequence of these findings for the development of Islamic Communication and Broadcasting (KPI) science is the urgent need to redefine “religious authority” in the digital age. The discipline must evolve from merely studying human-to-human transmission (talaqqi) to include human-machine interaction criticism. In the praxis of Islamic education, this necessitates a curriculum transformation where “Algorithmic Literacy” is integrated with traditional Turath studies. Future Da’is and KPI graduates must not only be fluent in reading Kitab Kuning but also capable of auditing and verifying digital fatwas. Ultimately, the preservation of Islamic authority relies on the ability of scholars to occupy the digital space with valid datasets, ensuring that AI serves as a tool for checking references rather than a substitute for the spiritual guidance of a teacher.

Declaration of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly and Mendeley to assist with grammar checking and reference formatting. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and originality of the publication's final version.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

- a. **Untung Famuji:** Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft, and Writing - Review & Editing.
- b. **Ahmed Abdul Malik:** Supervision, Validation, Theoretical Framework Development, and Writing - Review & Editing.
- c. **Siti Nuri Nurhaidah:** Data Collection, Visualization, Resources, and Writing - Review & Editing.

- d. **Sofia Fahrany:** Project Administration, Software, Data Analysis Support, and Writing - Review & Editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study, including survey responses and content analysis materials, are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author at oentoengf@gmail.com. Due to ethical considerations regarding participant privacy, raw survey data will only be shared in an anonymized format.

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Ethical Approval Statement

The authors confirm that this study adheres to ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all survey participants, and no personally identifying information was collected or used. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of UIN Prof. K.H. Saifuddin Zuhri Purwokerto.

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