



Digital Schism: The Reconstruction of Religious Authority and the Emergence of Islamic Knowledge Elite in the AI Era

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the reconstruction of Islamic religious authority and the emergence of an Islamic knowledge elite in the digital era mediated by artificial intelligence (AI). The study's background stems from the phenomenon of digital transformation, which is shifting religious authority from centralized formal institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) to decentralized virtual spaces through algorithmic platforms and chatbots like "AI Mufti". The research employs an exploratory literature review method with a qualitative approach, collecting and analyzing indexed scholarly articles and recent publications related to concepts of digital authority, algorithms, and the Islamic knowledge elite. The findings identify the occurrence of a "digital schism", an epistemic tension between the hierarchical logic of sanad (chains of transmission) and the distributed logic of algorithms, which gives rise to a new knowledge elite, such as dakwah influencers and AI muftis, whose legitimacy is constructed through digital performativity and symbolic capital. The conclusion and core argument of this research is that the transformation of Islamic religious authority in the digital age is not merely a shift in medium, but a fundamental epistemological reconstruction, necessitating a new paradigm to integrate Islamic values with modern technological rationality.

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology has marked a new chapter in the socio-religious transformation of Muslim societies (Rozaanah, 2024; Sari Hernawati et al., 2024; Thoriquttyas & Rohmawati, 2024). Within an increasingly complex digital ecosystem, religious authority, once centralized in formal institutions such as pesantren (*Islamic boarding schools*), majelis taklim (*religious study groups*), and Islamic organizations, is now undergoing reconstruction in decentralized virtual spaces (Hefner, 2022; Muliana et al., 2024; Muthoifin & Surawan, 2023; Zhorabek et al., 2025). Algorithm-based digital platforms, social media, and Islamic chatbots, such as "AI Mufti" or "Ask the Scholar Bot", have become new sources

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for Muslims seeking religious guidance (Ali et al., 2021; Firnando & Cucu Setiawati, 2025; Raghavan, 2024). This phenomenon shifts the way Muslims understand and affirm religious truth: from one grounded in sanad (*chains of scholarly transmission*) and direct interpersonal interaction to one mediated by algorithmic systems and digital curation (Fadilla & Isma Indriyani, 2025; Masruha et al., 2025; Robinson, 2008).

Consequently, what emerges can be termed a digital schism, an epistemic rupture between traditional religious authority and new forms of authority produced by digital actors (Campbell & Golan, 2011; Cheong, 2010; Institute for Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies of the CS MSHE RK et al., 2025; Zhorabek et al., 2025). The rise of “algorithmic preachers,” “dakwah influencers,” and “AI preachers” illustrates that the legitimacy of Islamic knowledge is no longer solely determined by scholarly competence but also by visibility and performativity within the digital sphere. In this context, algorithms function as new gatekeepers that determine who, and which discourses, gain public authority (Alena Siti Maharani et al., 2025; Marlina & Yaza Azahra Ulya, 2024; Syakir, 2025). The logic of visibility replaces the logic of sanad, while public attention becomes the new metric for symbolic truth. Thus, the digital revolution not only transforms the methods of dakwah (*Islamic preaching*) but also reconstructs the epistemic order of Islam, producing a new elite of knowledge that operates through aesthetics, algorithms, and digital capital (Amin, 2025; Benevides, 2025; M. Rizqy Zamiluddin A & Muhammad Ni’am Masrukhil Hadi, 2025; Nuha, 2025).

Studies on Islam and digitalization have indeed grown rapidly, yet most still approach digital technology merely as an instrument of dakwah. This instrumentalist perspective regards technology as a mere extension for disseminating religious messages rather than as an epistemic force capable of transforming the very structure of Islamic knowledge itself (Azzahro & Fasha, 2025; Bergaudas, 2022; Purnomo & Efendi, 2024). As a result, many studies remain descriptive, focusing on how da’i (*preachers*), religious institutions, or Muslim communities use social media, without deeply analyzing how religious authority and legitimacy are reconstructed within digital contexts. Broadly speaking, three major tendencies can be found in existing literature.

First, studies emphasizing the functional role of digital technology in religious practices, such as dakwah dissemination via YouTube or TikTok (Khairullah & Recha Mardiianty Rachmi, 2024; Wisga Putra Julian et al., 2025). Second, research highlighting the fragmentation of authority due to digitalization, in which multiple competing voices emerge in interpreting Islam (Kuncoro, 2021; Zaid et al., 2022; Zuhri et al., 2024). Third, studies focusing on

religious consumption culture and Islamic performativity, as seen in the phenomena of modest fashion and Muslim influencers (Aruan & Wirdania, 2020; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Manzoor et al., 2024). While these approaches contribute valuable insights, few studies have examined the intersection between the transformation of religious authority and the emergence of a digital Islamic knowledge elite constructed through artificial intelligence. Yet the AI context introduces new epistemological challenges that threaten the traditional ulama monopoly over the production of religious knowledge. This gap constitutes the academic void that the present study aims to address.

This paper seeks to fill that gap by examining how artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems are shaping a new elite of Islamic knowledge and reconstructing religious authority in digital spaces. This phenomenon warrants attention because religious authority is no longer built solely upon sanad, educational institutions, or recognition by the community of ulama, but also through algorithmic logic and symbolic capital within social media. In line with Foucault's (1980) perspective on the relationship between knowledge and power, the digital sphere has created a "new regime of truth" in which Islamic knowledge is produced through algorithmic selection mechanisms, popularity metrics, and audience engagement. Accordingly, this study poses three central questions: first, how do algorithms and digital platforms reconstruct Islamic religious authority in online spaces? Second, who are the new actors forming the digital Islamic knowledge elite? Third, how do artificial intelligence and media logic influence the ways Muslims produce, verify, and consume religious truth? Addressing these questions will illuminate the new relationship between technology, authority, and Islamic epistemology. Furthermore, this study aims to open theoretical reflection on the need to redefine religious authority in the AI era, where authority is no longer hierarchical and linear, but rather networked, dynamic, and distributed (Campbell & Golan, 2011).

This study argues that the digital schism within Islam is a direct consequence of the epistemic tension between sanad-based tradition and algorithmic logic. In classical Islamic epistemology, authority rests upon scholarly transmission (*isnad*), moral integrity, and recognition from the community of ulama as custodians of truth. However, in a digital ecosystem governed by AI, authority is no longer determined solely by scholarly but also by performance, narrative, and emotional connectivity with online audiences (Karpenko et al., 2025; Masih et al., 2025). This condition gives rise to a digital knowledge elite that operates outside traditional mechanisms of legitimacy yet gains authority through algorithms and symbolic capital. (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Van Der Nagel, 2018) describes algorithms as "ideological actors" because

they determine what becomes visible and what is deemed relevant. Thus, AI is not a neutral technology but part of a regime of meaning that co-constructs the contours of religious truth in the digital age. Moreover, the emergence of AI mufti applications and automated fatwa systems introduces a new epistemological dilemma: can machines legitimately interpret revelation without faith consciousness? This question invites a profound reflection on the meaning of authority and the limits of human knowledge. Therefore, this research underscores the necessity of developing a new paradigm that integrates Islamic values with modern technological rationality. Such epistemic awareness is essential to navigate the digital sphere without losing spiritual integrity and scholarly authenticity.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to ensure rigor and transparency throughout the process of data collection and analysis. The approach was selected for its ability to explore the subjective dimensions of social phenomena, allowing for an in-depth understanding from the perspective of the actors, or the emic viewpoint (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By examining how academics and scholars, as key participants in knowledge production, conceptualize and construct the reality of religious authority in the digital age, the research uncovers the values, tensions, and conceptual dynamics embedded within scholarly discourse. The study's material focus centers on academic discourse addressing the reconstruction of Islamic religious authority amid digital transformation. Its objects of analysis include journal articles, monographs, and recent scholarly publications that engage with key concepts such as digital schism, algorithmic authority, and the emergence of a digital Islamic knowledge elite. The research is designed as an exploratory study that relies entirely on the library research method. This design enables a systematic and thorough investigation into the development of theoretical perspectives and arguments in the field.

The data sources, or "participants", in this study are the academic texts themselves. Selection was conducted purposively, prioritizing literature published in Scopus or Web of Science-indexed journals, along with seminal works identified through citation chains. Data collection proceeded through systematic literature searches using strategic keywords, followed by the extraction and organization of key concepts, theories, and findings. To ensure validity and reliability, the study applied source triangulation by comparing and corroborating findings across multiple texts, thereby constructing a robust and comprehensive interpretation (Bowen, 2009). Data analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis. This process involved data reduction to identify core themes, thematic analysis to map relationships and contradictions among concepts, and the presentation of results in the form of a coherent analytical

narrative. By focusing on the perspectives and meaning-making presented by authors in the literature, this exploratory qualitative approach enables the research to accommodate the complex norms, logics, and epistemic frameworks operating within the academic community, while also providing a clear discursive map of the future of religious authority in the digital landscape.

Algorithm as the New Authority: From Sanad to Digital Systems

The development of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed the landscape of authority and knowledge dissemination within the Islamic context. This transformation is not merely about a change in medium, but also an epistemological shift that touches the very foundation of religious knowledge legitimacy. In traditional Islamic society, religious authority was constructed through the sanad system, a chain of scholarly transmission that ensured the authenticity and legitimacy of teachings from teacher to student in an unbroken lineage. However, in the digital era, algorithms and metrics such as visibility, engagement, likes, and followers have begun to replace these traditional mechanisms as indicators of social legitimacy and epistemic authority (Campbell & Golan, 2011). This shift raises fundamental questions about what constitutes authority in the digital age and how Muslim communities renegotiate the meaning of religious authority and truth in cyberspace.

Based on an analytical synthesis of the reviewed academic discourse, the transformation of Islamic religious authority in the digital era can be mapped through five interrelated core concepts that constitute the dominant scholarly conversation. These concepts not only describe surface-level changes but also encapsulate the deeper epistemological tensions underlying the reconstruction of authority, from the hierarchical logic of sanad to the distributed logic of algorithms. As a conceptual framework, this discursive map is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Discursive Map of Academic Discourse on the Reconstruction of Islamic Religious Authority in the Digital Era

Core Concept	Definition/ Characteristics	Actors / Mechanisms	Epistemic Implications	Key References
Digital Schism	Epistemic disconnection between sanad-based authority and algorithm-based authority.	Traditional ulama vs. digital influencers; logic of transmission vs. logic of virality.	Fragmentation of religious truth; contestation of authority between depth and popularity.	Campbell & Golan (2011); Cheong (2010)
Algorithmic Authority	Algorithms as the new gatekeepers	Social media platforms	Shift of legitimacy from scholarly	Shin (2025); Alena Siti

	that control the visibility and legitimacy of religious discourse.	(YouTube, TikTok), recommendation systems, AI muftis.	credentials to engagement metrics (likes, shares).	Maharani et al. (2025)
Digital Islamic Knowledge Elite	A new group gaining authority through digital performativity, symbolic capital, and emotional proximity to audiences.	Da'wah influencers, digital ustaz, AI content creators.	Democratization of access vs. commodification of religion; authority becomes distributed and fluid.	Arriagada & Ibáñez (2020); Zaid et al. (2022)
Regimes of Truth (Digital)	Formation of new regimes of truth in which religious "truth" is produced through the logic of popularity and algorithmic curation.	Attention economy, filter bubbles, viral culture.	Blurring of institutional fatwa authority; truth becomes plural and contested.	Foucault (1980); Prozorov (2019); Hasyim (2020)
Epistemic Tension	Tension between the authenticity of religious knowledge (sanad, turats) and the efficiency of algorithmic knowledge.	Traditional Islamic education systems vs. the digital ecosystem.	Threats to the epistemic integrity of Islam; pushes for digital literacy and algorithmic ethics.	Huda (2024); Popova (2020)

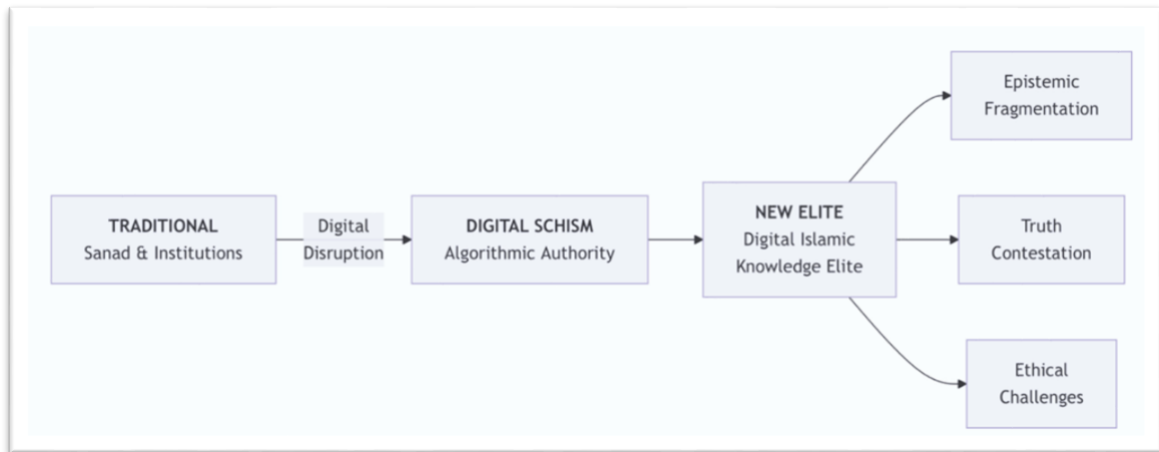
Source: Developed by the author based on literature synthesis, 2025.

As shown in Table 1, the concept of digital schism serves as the analytical pivot explaining the epistemic rupture between traditional and digital authority. Meanwhile, algorithmic authority and digital Islamic knowledge elite outline the new mechanisms and actors shaping authority, while regimes of truth (digital) and epistemic tension provide a critical lens for understanding the philosophical implications of this transformation. This mapping not only clarifies the structure of academic discourse but also establishes a conceptual foundation for analyzing more complex authority dynamics in the following sections. The dynamic relationships and transformational processes among the key concepts in Table 1 can be further visualized through a conceptual diagram that illustrates the flow of authority reconstruction from traditional systems to digital ecosystems. This

visualization, as shown in Figure 1, helps clarify how the digital schism operates as the transformational axis connecting various old and new authority elements:

Figure 1

Conceptual Flowchart of Islamic Religious Authority Reconstruction in the Digital Era



Source: Developed by the author based on literature synthesis, 2025.

Both Table 1 and Figure 1 collectively demonstrate that the transformation of Islamic religious authority in the digital era is not a simple linear shift, but rather a complex process involving epistemic tensions, actor reconfigurations, and continuous negotiations between tradition and innovation. The digital schism functions as an analytical pivot that explains the rupture between the logic of sanad and the logic of algorithms, while its derivative concepts, such as algorithmic authority and the digital Islamic knowledge elite, detail the new mechanisms and actors shaping the contemporary authority landscape. These complementary visual and textual understandings provide a solid conceptual foundation for an in-depth analysis of the philosophical and practical implications of this transformation, as will be discussed in the following sections.

According to (Campbell & Golan, 2011), in his theory of digital authority, the digital sphere generates a new framework of authority that diverges from traditional systems. In classical models, authority was typically defined by academic credentials, mastery of knowledge, and one's position within the sanad network of scholarship. In contrast, within digital spaces, authority is more often determined by one's ability to present oneself effectively online, to build a following, and to sustain high engagement levels (Salahudin et al., 2025). In other words, legitimacy is no longer grounded in institutional recognition or intellectual tradition, but rather in the algorithmic logic that governs the circulation of visibility. This phenomenon gives rise to what some scholars call

algorithmic charisma, a form of authority and appeal that emerges not from scholarly credentials, but from digital performativity and symbolic proximity to one's audience (Odorico, 2025)

In the Islamic context, this change has produced significant epistemological tensions. On the one hand, digital spaces provide broader access to religious knowledge, enabling the decentralization of authority and fostering more participatory and egalitarian knowledge environments. On the other hand, the shift from knowledge-based to popularity-based authority risks undermining the long-standing epistemic integrity of the Islamic scholarly tradition (Zayyadi et al., 2025). A person with thousands of followers on YouTube or TikTok can easily be perceived as an "ustaz" or "Islamic influencer," even without formal scholarly background. As (Huda, 2024) points out, this marks a transition from textual-based authority to performative-based authority. (Shin, 2025) further argues that algorithms are not neutral tools but active agents shaping how we perceive and understand truth. Social media algorithms decide what is visible and what is hidden, who gains the spotlight and who is ignored. In the Islamic digital ecosystem, algorithms can determine which religious discourses become mainstream and which are marginalized. A digital preacher adept in visual aesthetics and popular communication styles may capture public attention more easily than traditional scholars who emphasize textual depth and interpretative rigor (Busro et al., 2025; Francis et al., 2025). Consequently, the structure of Islamic scholarly legitimacy is shifting, from a sanad-based hierarchy to an algorithmic hierarchy, where "truth" is increasingly determined by what is most clicked and shared.

The implications of this new system of authority extend far beyond issues of visibility. Digital platforms tend to prioritize content that aligns with patterns of user engagement rather than with substantive truth or intellectual depth. As a result, religious knowledge disseminated through social media often follows the logic of the attention economy, where controversial or sensational content goes viral more easily than calm, reflective scholarly discussions (Persuit, 2017). According to (Huda, 2024), this dynamic can lead to "epistemic dilution" in Islamic religious discourse: the more popular the content, the more likely its scholarly value diminishes. This is not necessarily due to the creators' intent but rather because algorithmic systems are designed to sustain engagement, not depth. Nevertheless, the rise of digital authority also has positive dimensions. Digital platforms enable the emergence of a new generation of preachers, intellectuals, and Muslim activists who can bridge religious discourse with millennial and Gen-Z cultural sensibilities (Gunada et al., 2024). Muslim YouTubers, hijab influencers, and digital preachers are able to articulate Islamic

values in more contextual and communicative ways, expanding the reach of dakwah and religious literacy among younger audiences. In this sense, algorithms act as “curators” that connect audiences with content relevant to their interests and identity affiliations. However, as (Campbell & Golan, 2011) cautions, the success of digital dakwah should not be measured solely by engagement metrics but also by its contribution to the formation of authentic ethical and spiritual consciousness.

This shift calls for a reinterpretation of how Muslim communities understand legitimacy and religious authority. According to (Marjani, 2023), one of the major challenges for Islamic education in the digital age is reconciling faith and reason, tradition and innovation. As the acquisition of religious knowledge becomes increasingly detached from traditional institutions, it is crucial for Muslims to develop critical digital literacy that enables them to distinguish between valid and manipulative knowledge. Algorithmic literacy, the ability to understand how algorithms function and shape our epistemic experiences, has become an essential component of contemporary Islamic ethics. Thus, Islamic education must evolve beyond normative teaching toward cultivating reflective and critical epistemic awareness (Gao & Zhang, 2021). Moreover, algorithms also have the potential to intensify polarization among Muslims. The mechanisms of filter bubbles and echo chambers expose users only to perspectives that align with their preexisting beliefs, thereby narrowing the space for cross-sectarian and inter-ideological dialogue (Gunada et al., 2024). As a result, the Islamic digital public sphere becomes fragmented into rigid and exclusive ideological enclaves. This underscores the importance of promoting religious moderation and inclusive discourse in online interactions. In this regard, platforms such as Surau Digital or Madrasah Online, which focus on cross-perspective dialogue, play a significant role in addressing the epistemic challenges of the algorithmic era.

This transformation of digital authority also carries profound ethical dimensions. As (Zhang et al., 2019) observe, phenomena such as philanthropic visibility and moral branding among Muslim elites reveal that even altruistic acts are now mediated by the performative logic of digital culture. Within religious contexts, *amal saleh* (*good deeds*) and dakwah can become part of the attention economy, where spiritual intentions are commodified into content. Thus, the main challenge for Muslim communities is not merely how to use digital media, but how to maintain sincerity (*ikhlas*) and moral integrity within a system that evaluates truth based on quantitative metrics. The transformation of Islamic authority and epistemology in the algorithmic era demands serious reflection from scholars, educators, and Muslim communities alike. Algorithms have become new epistemic agents that shape who has the right to speak in the name

of Islam and what counts as truth or authenticity. To confront this change, a dual approach is necessary: first, strengthening digital and algorithmic literacy among Muslims; and second, revitalizing traditional scholarly values such as sanad, adab (*ethical conduct*), and sincerity within contemporary contexts. As (Campbell & Golan, 2011) emphasizes, digital authority should not be seen merely as a threat but also as an opportunity to reform systems of scholarly legitimacy in ways that are more adaptive to contemporary realities without losing their roots. Therefore, the future of Islamic authority in the digital age will be determined not only by technology but also by the critical awareness of Muslim communities in renegotiating the relationship between knowledge, faith, and algorithms.

The Digital Islamic Knowledge Elite: Between Scholarly Credibility and Symbolic Capital

The emergence of figures such as digital ustaz (preachers), AI-based muftis, and dakwah influencers marks a profound transformation in the landscape of contemporary Islamic authority. For centuries, religious authority rested on traditional systems of scholarship, clerical institutions, and the rigorous sanad (chain of transmission). Today, that authority has shifted toward a new paradigm rooted in digital performance, social media visibility, and emotional appeal that fosters intimacy with online audiences. This transformation is not merely technological but also epistemological and cultural, disrupting the long-established foundations of Islamic scholarly legitimacy. In this context, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital and networked authority offers a critical lens for understanding how religious authority in the digital era is constructed, negotiated, and exercised. According to Bourdieu, various forms of capital, economic, social, cultural, and symbolic, determine an individual's position within a given social field. In the field of digital dakwah, the ability to manage social and symbolic capital becomes key to building credibility and influence within the digital public sphere.

Social capital is especially crucial for understanding the dynamics of digital ustaz and dakwah influencers. In the digital world, social networks such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (Twitter) function as arenas for accumulating social capital, where relationships, collaborations, and interactions with followers can be converted into sources of symbolic power. (Gupta & Singh, 2024) explain that social capital plays a vital role in leveraging new and unpredictable opportunities, such as during the pandemic, when physical religious spaces were replaced by online ones. In this context, digital ustaz use social media not only as a channel for preaching but also as a space for forming virtual communities that strengthen emotional and symbolic ties between

preacher and audience. Each post, live stream, or cross-platform collaboration generates a new form of digital capital, a combination of social and symbolic capital that arises from connectivity and presence.

This phenomenon is transforming how Muslim societies interact with religious knowledge. Authority no longer emanates from formal institutions such as pesantren, Islamic universities, or religious councils, but rather from charismatic figures who master algorithms and digital communication styles. An ustaz who engages actively on TikTok with a casual and humorous approach can gain millions of followers who feel more emotionally connected to him than to traditional scholars. Beyond social capital, symbolic capital plays a central role in shaping the authority of digital religious figures. Bourdieu views symbolic capital as a form of recognition and social legitimacy granted by society to certain individuals or groups. In the context of digital dakwah, this legitimacy is no longer determined solely by sanad or institutional endorsement but by one's ability to craft an engaging, authentic, and relatable persona for digital audiences. (Surya Permana, 2022) emphasizes that symbolic capital is acquired through participation and engagement within cultural contexts. A digital ustaz who skillfully blends popular communication styles with substantive Islamic teachings gains legitimacy through public recognition in the form of likes, shares, views, and positive comments.

This demonstrates that digital presence is not merely a communication strategy but a form of performative authority. For example, several AI muftis recently developed in the Middle East and Southeast Asia can now deliver fatwas almost instantly using machine learning systems trained on classical Islamic jurisprudence. However, their legitimacy is not defined solely by the accuracy of their answers but also by the extent to which the public trusts the "Islamicity" of these digital entities. Here, symbolic capital becomes a new battleground between human and artificial intelligence, between spiritual warmth and algorithmic efficiency. This transformation of authority inevitably brings complex moral and ethical consequences. (Belhaj, 2023) notes that traditional Islamic spirituality has emphasized collectivity and inner depth, while digital practices often lead to the individualization and personalization of religious experience. As a result, the digital sphere produces a form of ambiguity: on one hand, it democratizes access to religious knowledge; on the other, it risks fragmenting religious authority into competing personal narratives. Dakwah influencers often position themselves as modern "spiritual educators" with aspirational lifestyles, stylish attire, cinematic video production, and emotionally resonant rhetoric. While this makes Islamic teachings more appealing to younger generations, it also risks the commodification of religion, where spiritual values

are replaced by the logic of markets and algorithms. Hence, an important question arises: can digital dakwah preserve the authenticity of Islamic values in an ecosystem governed by likes and engagement rates? This is where the ethics of digital Islam becomes essential, not only concerning content, but also the intentions, methods, and social impact of religious communication.

(Zahari et al., 2019) introduce the concept of emotional capital as a key element in digital dakwah practices. This form of capital involves not only the ability to evoke emotions but also the skill to cultivate empathy, resonance, and a sense of closeness with audiences. In the realm of digital dakwah, authenticity is often measured not by scholarly depth but by the warmth of communication and sensitivity to everyday concerns of the ummah. A digital ustaz who personally responds to followers' worries through direct messages or comment sections gains a kind of legitimacy unattainable through conventional sermons. Such interactions foster deep emotional relationships and strengthen affective-based authority. In other words, emotionality becomes a new epistemology in the relationship between preacher and audience in the digital age. This also explains why many digital ustaz are known more for their persona than for theological argumentation. They command Islamic narratives through empathy, storytelling, and emotional literacy, the ability to read and respond to audience emotions. This aligns with the logic of digital platforms that measure success based on users' emotional reactions.

The fusion of classical teachings and modern technology has created a new face of Islamic education. (Badruzaman et al., 2023) emphasize that Islamic education systems in the digital era must adapt to the learning styles of millennials and Gen Z, who are visual, interactive, and network-oriented. Digital ustaz play an essential role in transmitting Islamic values in formats accessible to these generations without compromising doctrinal essence. The phenomenon of Islamic micro-learning, through one-minute dakwah videos, interactive hadith quizzes, or fiqh Q&A in live sessions, illustrates how Islam adapts to the attention economy. While this trend invites criticism, it also represents a form of cultural *ijtihad* to maintain Islam's relevance amid information overload and rapid technological change.

From these dynamics, it is clear that the shift of authority from traditional ulama to a new digital elite reflects a profound transformation in how Islamic knowledge is produced, disseminated, and interpreted. Within Bourdieu's framework, digital dakwah constitutes a new field in which various forms of capital, social, symbolic, and emotional, interact to determine who is considered knowledgeable, authoritative, and worthy of being followed. Yet, this shift is not merely technological but paradigmatic, requiring deep reflection on the meaning

of authority and scholarship in Islam. As digital performance becomes a new measure of legitimacy, Muslim societies must cultivate digital religious literacy to discern between popularity and authenticity, between influence and knowledge. Thus, digital ustaz, AI muftis, and dakwah influencers are not merely symbols of technological progress but mirrors reflecting Islam's ongoing negotiation with modernity and globalization. They demonstrate that religious authority in the digital age emerges from an ever-evolving negotiation between knowledge, morality, technology, and emotion. Amid this transformation, Bourdieu's theory remains vital in understanding how legitimacy, credibility, and faith are enacted, not on the pulpit or in the majlis, but on screens and networks connecting millions of Muslims around the world.

Digital Schism and Epistemic Fragmentation: The Contestation of Truth in Cyberspace

The epistemic tension that arises between traditional ulama and digital actors in defining religious authority can be understood through various perspectives, particularly by highlighting the forms of knowledge production, legitimacy, and power dynamics explained by Michel Foucault's concept of "regimes of truth." Traditionally, ulama rely on established methods of disseminating knowledge, especially through the use of sanad (*chains of transmission*) in Islamic scholarship, which grants legitimacy through historical continuity and theological rigor. This stands in stark contrast to digital actors who depend on algorithms that prioritize content based on popularity rather than intellectual precision. This methodological shift in the production of knowledge affects how religious discourse is understood and validated within different social contexts (Sunier, 2012). While the use of algorithms represents a form of democratization of knowledge, it also risks fostering a superficial engagement with complex theological issues. This condition leads to what (Mifdal, 2023) terms the "banalization of religious knowledge." The tension reveals a fracture in epistemic authority: ulama emphasize depth and authenticity, whereas digital platforms prioritize reach and engagement, ultimately creating a cultural schism between the two.

Legitimacy in knowledge claims has become increasingly contested within the digital landscape. Traditional fatwas issued by institutions such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) represent institutional authority derived from scholarly consensus and historical precedent (Shuhufi et al., 2022). These fatwas are formulated through deliberation among scholars and are thus regarded as definitive responses to contemporary issues. Conversely, the popularity of Islamic content creators on social media has

generated an alternative form of legitimacy that relies more on personal charisma than on formal academic training. Digital platforms have paved the way for the emergence of non-traditional actors who disseminate Islamic interpretations through viral content, thereby reshaping the landscape of religious authority and potentially undermining traditional fatwa-issuing institutions (Aida Humaira et al., 2022; Hasyim, 2020).

The reviewed literature further demonstrates varied, and often conflicting, scholarly responses to digital challenges. These responses can be thematized into three primary stances, as summarized in Table 2, which maps the academic debate across key issues:

Table 2
Matrix of Academic Responses to Digital Challenges in Islamic Religious Authority

Digital Challenge	Conservative Response (Tradition-Based)	Adaptive Response (Integration-Based)	Critical-Radical Response	Supporting Literature Examples
AI Muftis & Digital Fatwas	Rejecting machine authority; upholding the authority of human ulama.	Accepting AI as an assistive tool, with human supervision and ethical frameworks.	Questioning the authority structure itself; viewing AI as an epistemic disruptor.	Popova (2020); Firnando & Setiawati (2025)
Influencers as Sources of Authority	Considering them illegitimate without sanad and formal scholarly credentials.	Viewing them as complementary to da'wah as long as content aligns with sharia.	Critiquing the commodification of religion and the reduction of Islam into content.	Zaid et al. (2022); Aruan & Wirdania (2020)
Fragmentation of Religious Discourse	Attempting to consolidate authority through official institutions (MUI, councils of ulama).	Encouraging inter-madhab dialogue and media literacy among the community.	Seeing fragmentation as an inevitable postmodern condition.	Hasyim (2020); Zayyadi et al. (2025)
Quantification of Worship through Digital Metrics	Rejecting the quantification of worship; emphasizing intention (niyyah) and sincerity.	Using data for self-evaluation without making it the primary measure.	Critiquing data capitalism infiltrating spiritual spaces.	Belhaj (2023); Zhang et al. (2019)

Source: Developed by the author based on literature synthesis, 2025.

The matrix in Table 2 highlights that the digital transformation of religious authority is not a monolithic process but a contested field of interpretation. The divergence between conservative, adaptive, and critical-radical positions underscores that the central debate extends beyond technological adoption to fundamental questions about the nature of religious knowledge, legitimacy, and community in the digital age. This spectrum of responses enriches the discourse by framing digital challenges not merely as problems to be solved, but as catalysts for deeper theological and epistemological reflection within Muslim societies

This dynamic can be critically analyzed through Foucault's framework of regimes of truth, which posits that every society possesses mechanisms that shape and regulate its understanding of truth. Foucault emphasizes that power is always intertwined with discourse, leading certain forms of knowledge to be legitimized while others are marginalized (Prozorov, 2019). In this context, the struggle for epistemic authority becomes a battleground where popular culture and social media challenge long-established scholarly traditions. (Hasyim, 2020) notes that the fluctuating authority of MUI's fatwas reflects tensions in knowledge production in Indonesia, mirroring broader trends in the Muslim world. As digital platforms expand, the influence of established scholarly institutions has waned, replaced by content that is fast, accessible, and often unverifiable. As a result, a phenomenon of "contentious truth" emerges, in which competing forms of knowledge vie for public recognition and acceptance.

Furthermore, the symbolic conflict arising from these dynamics can be observed in public discourse surrounding controversial fatwas that attempt to regulate online interactions. For instance, certain MUI fatwas that restrict expressions of freedom in digital spaces can be understood as institutional efforts to reclaim authority over religious interpretation amid rapid digital change (Arisandy et al., 2022; Islamy, 2020). Such efforts can be interpreted as defensive reactions to the erosion of control over religious discourse, while also raising questions about how individuals negotiate their interpretive freedom in an increasingly connected world. Within the post-truth context, competing truths emerge from distinct power bases, complicating the relationship between authority and legitimacy (Harsin, 2015). In conclusion, the ongoing debate between traditional ulama and digital actors reflects a deeper epistemic tension rooted in differing methodologies of knowledge production, varying forms of legitimacy, and the cultural values shaping religious authority. By applying Foucault's notion of regimes of truth to the context of religious authority in the digital age, we can better understand how divergent epistemic frameworks confront and negotiate with each other. Ultimately, this dynamic reveals that the

digital sphere is not merely a medium for dakwah dissemination, but a new arena for the formation, contestation, and transformation of religious authority in contemporary Islam.

From Da'wah to Data: Social Engineering and the Ethical Challenges of Islam in the Digital Era

In the digital era, Muslims face a dual challenge: how to harness technological advancements while preserving the integrity of their scholarly and spiritual traditions. The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital media into Islamic practice and religious knowledge dissemination presents immense opportunities, such as enhancing the efficiency of da'wah (inviting others to Islam) and improving access to religious education. However, these technologies also introduce layered risks, including the potential erosion of spiritual meaning, algorithmic bias, and growing concerns about the authenticity of fatwas (Islamic legal opinions) (Firnando & Cucu Setiawati, 2025; Marlina & Yaza Azahra Ulya, 2024).

The application of AI in Islamic contexts brings both transformative benefits and serious ethical challenges. On one hand, AI can significantly improve da'wah effectiveness by using digital platforms to reach wider audiences. Through sophisticated data analysis and strategic communication, Islamic teachings can be delivered in a more personalized and relevant manner (Marlina & Yaza Azahra Ulya, 2024) appealing to diverse audiences and ensuring that religious guidance remains accessible (Ishak & Mohamed, 2023). Additionally, AI can simplify the teaching and learning of Islamic sciences, fostering a more interactive and engaging educational environment for contemporary learners (Moh. Mauluddin, 2024). However, behind these advancements lie serious risks. One major concern is the diminishing authenticity of Islamic teachings. The use of AI-based platforms to disseminate religious content raises questions about the reliability and ethical soundness of the information shared. Algorithmic biases embedded in technology may lead to the spread of distorted or oversimplified versions of Islam, undermining the spiritual depth of its teachings (Marlina & Yaza Azahra Ulya, 2024). Furthermore, algorithmic systems that govern information flow may inadvertently marginalize alternative Islamic interpretations or suppress the diversity of ulama voices (Ramadhan, 2024).

As Muslims navigate this digital landscape, it becomes crucial to cultivate a new form of epistemic awareness, one that aligns spiritual needs with the ethical implications of technology. The integration of Islamic values and technological progress requires a reconciliatory approach known as social engineering, an effort

to harmonize digital practices with the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law) (Firnando & Cucu Setiawati, 2025; Hudaefi, 2024). This framework emphasizes justice, transparency, and the preservation of human dignity as core principles in the application of AI and digital technologies within Islamic contexts. For instance, the use of AI to assess the performance of Islamic institutions should not be limited to economic efficiency, but must also incorporate ethical measures that respect Islamic intentions and moral values (Abdullah et al., 2024). Integration of AI and digital media into Islamic practice demands a critical evaluation of both the opportunities and challenges it brings. By building a value-based model grounded in *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and Islamic epistemic ethics, Muslims can navigate the complexities of the digital age without compromising their spiritual integrity, while strengthening their engagement with broader society. Therefore, AI's role should not be viewed merely in terms of practical utility but as a means of reinforcing Islam's fundamental ethical values within an increasingly digitalized world (Popova, 2020)

Conclusion

This study reaches a critical finding that the transformation of Islamic religious authority in the digital era represents a fundamental epistemological reconstruction, rather than merely a shift in medium. A “digital schism” has emerged, creating an unavoidable tension between the hierarchical sanad logic, which emphasizes depth of knowledge, moral integrity, and traditional scholarly transmission, and the decentralized algorithmic logic, which prioritizes visibility, audience engagement, and the accumulation of symbolic capital. This dynamic has given rise to a new knowledge elite, including *da'wah* influencers and AI muftis, whose legitimacy is constructed through digital performativity and emotional proximity, often blurring the line between knowledge-based authority and popularity-based authority. The findings provide not only a comprehensive understanding of socio-religious transformations in digital spaces but also insights into the necessity of balancing engagement with digital modernity without losing the authentic epistemological roots of Islam. The scholarly contribution of this research lies in offering an integrative theoretical framework that combines perspectives from the sociology of religion, digital media studies, and the philosophy of technology. By analyzing the phenomenon through Bourdieu's lens of symbolic capital and Foucault's concept of regimes of truth, this study enriches the discourse of digital Islamic Studies, showing how religious authority has evolved into a fluid and distributed form within digital networks. This understanding paves the way for developing interdisciplinary

approaches to examine the complex relationships between religion, technology, and society.

However, the study acknowledges methodological limitations. As a literature-based analysis, it does not directly capture the lived experiences or negotiation strategies of actors in the field. Therefore, these findings should be considered a foundational step for further empirical research that can test and deepen the discourse developed here. Based on these limitations, at least three urgent future research agendas are identified: first, digital ethnographic studies to directly observe the production and consumption of religious knowledge across various digital platforms; second, normative research to formulate frameworks for Islamic digital ethics and AI governance aligned with *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*; and third, comparative studies on the responses and adaptive strategies of formal religious institutions in facing the disruption of digital authority. Advancing these three areas will enrich our understanding of the future of religious authority in increasingly digitalized Muslim societies.

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