

The Crisis of Religious Authority of the Digital Generation and Its Implications for Islamic Religious Education in Schools

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Konjin, H. C. T., Aidil, A., Rahman, M. I., & Zahara, R. (2026). The Crisis of Religious Authority of the Digital Generation and Its Implications for Islamic Religious Education in Schools. *Varied Knowledge Journal*, 4(1), 957–970. <https://doi.org/10.71094/vkj.v4i1.415>

Diterima: 23-07-2026

Direvisi: 18-08-2026

Disetujui: 22-08-2026

Publish: 24-08-2026



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Abstract: The emergence of digital platforms from search engines and social media to religious podcasts and generative artificial intelligence has fundamentally altered how the digital generation acquires, verifies, and internalizes religious knowledge. This phenomenon gives rise to a crisis of religious authority among students, characterized by the erosion of recognition for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers as legitimate primary sources of religious knowledge. This study aims to analyze the shift in religious authority within the digital generation, identify its contributing factors, examine its implications for PAI learning in schools, and formulate a model for reconstructing the role of PAI teachers responsive to the digital era. Employing a library research method with a qualitative approach and content analysis technique, this study reviews recent scholarly sources from 2020 to 2026. Findings indicate that a shift in religious authority has occurred from authority-based to algorithm-based learning; the religious authority crisis is not caused by a scarcity of religious information, but rather by an epistemologically unvalidated information flood; this crisis produces dual effects: expanding access to religious knowledge while undermining the quality of critical religious understanding; and reconstructing the role of PAI teachers from knowledge transmitters to digital religious literacy curators is an imperative. This article proposes the Digital Religious Literacy-Based Islamic Education (DRLIBIE) conceptual model as an operational framework for strengthening PAI in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital Religious Literacy, Religious Authority, Islamic Religious Education, Digital Generation, Generative Artificial Intelligence

Abstrak: Kemunculan platform digital mulai dari mesin pencari, media sosial, podcast keagamaan, hingga kecerdasan buatan generative telah mengubah secara fundamental cara generasi digital memperoleh, memverifikasi, dan menginternalisasi pengetahuan agama. Fenomena ini memunculkan krisis otoritas keagamaan di kalangan peserta didik, yakni melemahnya pengakuan terhadap guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) sebagai sumber utama pengetahuan agama yang legitimate. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis pergeseran otoritas keagamaan pada generasi digital, mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor penyebabnya, menjelaskan implikasinya terhadap pembelajaran PAI di sekolah, serta merumuskan model rekonstruksi peran guru PAI yang responsif terhadap tantangan era digital. Menggunakan metode library research dengan pendekatan kualitatif dan teknik analisis konten (content analysis), penelitian ini mengkaji sumber-sumber ilmiah terkini dari tahun 2020 hingga 2026. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa pergeseran otoritas keagamaan berlangsung dari authority-based learning menuju algorithm-based learning, krisis otoritas keagamaan bukan disebabkan oleh kurangnya informasi agama, melainkan oleh banjir informasi yang tidak tervalidasi secara epistemologis, krisis ini berdampak ganda yaitu memperluas akses pengetahuan agama sekaligus memperlemah kualitas pemahaman keagamaan yang kritis dan rekonstruksi peran guru PAI dari transmitter pengetahuan menjadi kurator literasi keagamaan digital merupakan keniscayaan. Artikel ini menawarkan model konseptual Digital Religious Literacy-Based Islamic Education (DRLIBIE) sebagai kerangka operasional penguatan PAI di era digital.

Kata Kunci: Digital Religious Literacy, Religious Authority, Pendidikan Agama Islam, Generasi Digital, Kecerdasan Buatan Generative

INTRODUCTION

The exponential development of digital technology in the past decade has fundamentally changed the religious epistemological landscape of Muslim communities, especially the younger generation. If in the pre-digital era, religious authority was traditionally attached to the figure of religious scholars, *kiai*, or teachers who were legitimized through scientific *sanad* and community recognition, then in the digital era the authority experienced radical decentralization. Students can now access thousands of religious content through YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, podcasts, and generative artificial intelligence platforms such as ChatGPT and Gemini in just a matter of seconds (Bunt, 2018; Eickelman & Anderson, 1999)

This phenomenon creates a complex paradox in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in formal schools. On the one hand, digital technology expands students' access to sources of religious knowledge. On the other hand, it gives rise to what researchers call a "religious authority crisis", which is a condition in which the legitimacy of PAI teachers as a reliable source of religious knowledge is increasingly questioned, even reduced, by the presence of digital content that is not epistemologically verified (Mandaville, 2003; Widari & Mujiono, 2025).

A study conducted by Sudirman Anwar and Muhammad Faisal (2026) shows that the digital space has become a major arena for young Muslims to negotiate their religious identity, where they are increasingly exposed to narratives produced by digital religious actors rather than conventional religious educational institutions. This transformation has been facilitated by the democratization of access to religious knowledge through social media, which has altered the ways in which religious information is encountered, evaluated, and consumed (S. Anwar & Faisal. Muhammad, 2026). Research by Rachman, Saumantri, and Hidayatulloh (2025) further demonstrates that the digitalization of religious discourse has contributed to a transformation of religious authority in Indonesia, as social media enables new religious actors to gain visibility and influence beyond traditional institutional structures (Rachman et al., 2025). Andok (2024) similarly argues that online media facilitate the emergence of new forms of religious authority through networked communication, digital visibility, and audience interaction(Andok, 2024).

The challenges faced by PAI in this context are structural rather than merely technical. Previous studies have addressed several related dimensions of religious learning in the digital era, but these studies remain fragmented across different research strands. The first strand focuses on the use of social media in Islamic Religious Education. Rachmawati et al. (2025), for example, examine the influence of social media on PAI learning and students' religious lifestyles, highlighting the potential of digital platforms to shape students' religious practices and learning experiences. However, this line of research primarily emphasizes the pedagogical and behavioral functions of social media and does not examine how digital platforms may transform the epistemological position of teachers as sources of religious authority. The second strand concerns students' digital literacy (Rachmawati et al., 2025). Anwar et al. (2024) demonstrate that Muslim students' engagement with digital media is associated with changing patterns of religious understanding and digital practices. Nevertheless, studies in this strand tend to emphasize students' digital competencies rather than the relationship between digital literacy and the changing structure of religious authority. The third strand examines the growing role of artificial intelligence in education and religious learning (K. Anwar et al., 2024). Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) identify the expanding applications of artificial intelligence in education, while Arsyam and Zakirah (2026) show that AI has increasingly become an alternative source of information in Islamic Religious Education.

Although these studies demonstrate the educational potential and challenges of AI, they do not sufficiently explain how algorithmic systems and AI-mediated information environments reshape the legitimacy of religious knowledge and the epistemological position of PAI teachers (Arsyam & Zakirah, 2026; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Taken together, these strands indicate that existing research has examined digital media as learning tools, students' digital competencies, and AI as an emerging educational resource, but has rarely brought these dimensions together to analyze the transformation of religious authority itself. In particular, the relationship between the increasing accessibility of algorithmically mediated religious information, students' changing patterns of authority recognition, and the changing epistemological role of PAI teachers remains insufficiently conceptualized. This study addresses this gap by positioning the crisis of religious authority as an epistemological and pedagogical problem rather than merely a technological challenge. Accordingly, this article analyzes the factors underlying the transformation of religious authority among the digital generation, examines its implications for PAI learning in schools, and reconstructs the role of PAI teachers through the proposed Digital Religious Literacy-Based Islamic Education (DRLIBIE) model.

METHOD

This research employs qualitative library research with a conceptual content analysis approach. Library research was selected because the study aims to develop a conceptual synthesis and theoretical framework through an in-depth analysis of existing scholarly literature rather than direct empirical data collection (Snyder, 2019; Zed, 2014). The qualitative approach is appropriate for interpreting the meaning, context, and relationships among concepts concerning the transformation of religious authority in the digital era and its implications for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) (Creswell, 2017).

The literature search was conducted through, Google, Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, MDPI, and SINTA-indexed journals, focusing primarily on publications from 2020 to 2026. The search used combinations of keywords including "religious authority," "digital religious authority," "digital generation," "social media," "digital religious literacy," "Islamic Religious Education," "artificial intelligence," and "religious education." Relevant literature was selected based on the following inclusion criteria: publication within the specified period, relevance to religious authority, digital religion, digital literacy, artificial intelligence, or PAI, availability of full text, and publication as a peer-reviewed journal article, scholarly book, book chapter, or authoritative academic report. Sources were excluded when they were irrelevant to the research focus, duplicated, unavailable in full text, or consisted of non-academic materials such as news reports and opinion articles. Seminal works published before 2020 were retained when they were considered theoretically essential to the conceptual framework. The selection process involved screening titles and abstracts, examining full texts, and assessing the relevance and scholarly credibility of the sources.

Data were analyzed using conceptual content analysis following Krippendorff (2019). The analysis consisted of five iterative stages: (1) literature collection and screening; (2) critical reading and thematic coding; (3) categorization of recurring themes; (4) cross-source comparison and synthesis; and (5) development of the conceptual framework. The analysis focused on identifying patterns concerning the transformation of religious authority, democratization of religious information, social media algorithms, artificial intelligence as a religious reference, digital religious

literacy, and their implications for PAI. The findings from these themes were synthesized to formulate the Digital Religious Literacy-Based Islamic Education (DRLIBIE) conceptual model (Krippendorff, 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Shift in Religious Authority in the Digital Generation

The understanding of religious authority cannot be separated from Max Weber's theoretical framework of three types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal (Weber et al., 1978). In the context of Islam, religious authority for centuries has relied on a combination of traditional authority (manifested through scientific sanad connected to the Prophet Muhammad) and charismatic authority (attached to scholarly figures who are recognized for their scientific and moral virtues). PAI teachers, in their position as the institutional representation of this authority, derive their legitimacy from the state certification system (rational-legal) as well as from the Islamic scientific tradition (traditional-charismatic).

Eickelman and Anderson (1999) argue that the digital communication revolution has contributed to the emergence of a "new Muslim public sphere," in which the boundaries between religious scholars and lay audiences become increasingly fluid (Eickelman & Anderson, 1999). This insight remains relevant to the contemporary digital environment, where social media and generative AI further expand access to religious information. This phenomenon gave birth to what Mandaville (2003) calls the "de-institutionalization of Islamic religious authority", the process of deinstitutionalization of Islamic religious authority that takes place simultaneously throughout the Muslim world (Mandaville, 2003).

In the Indonesian context, this shift has unique characteristics. Rachmawati et al. (2025) show that the fragmentation of religious authority among young Indonesian Muslims is exacerbated by the highly competitive market conditions of digital religious content, where diverse ideological groups ranging from moderate Islam, Salafism, to radical groups compete for the attention of the younger generation through attractive digital content. In this competitive environment, the visibility and influence of religious actors may increasingly be shaped not only by scholarly credentials but also by indicators such as subscribers, views, and audience engagement (Rachmawati et al., 2025). In this competitive environment, the visibility and influence of religious actors may increasingly be shaped not only by scholarly credentials but also by indicators such as subscribers, views, and audience engagement.

A very significant phenomenon in recent years has been the emergence of generative artificial intelligence as a source of religious reference for the digital generation. A significant development in recent years has been the emergence of generative artificial intelligence as an increasingly accessible source of information for learners. Research on artificial intelligence in education has documented the growing role of AI-based systems in supporting learning and information access (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). In the context of religious education, this development raises important epistemological questions because AI-generated responses are produced through computational processes rather than through established structures of Islamic scholarly authority.

In this study, "algorithm-based learning" does not mean that algorithms themselves become religious authorities. Rather, the term refers to a learning condition in which the discovery, visibility, sequencing, and repeated exposure of religious information are increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems embedded in social media platforms, search engines, and generative AI.

Algorithms function as mechanisms of mediation and distribution that prioritize content based on users' behavioral data, preferences, and patterns of engagement. Consequently, they can indirectly influence which religious actors, interpretations, and sources become more visible and accessible to learners. This mechanism should be distinguished from digital religious authority, which refers to the human actors, institutions, or knowledge sources that claim or receive legitimacy in religious matters. Thus, algorithmic recommendation constitutes the mechanism, platform-mediated learning describes the learning environment, digital religious authority concerns the actors or sources recognized as legitimate, while algorithm-based learning refers to the resulting learning condition in which algorithmic mediation increasingly shapes learners' encounters with and evaluation of religious knowledge.

Departing from the above analysis, this study conceptualizes the transformation of religious learning as a movement from what Zaman (2002) describes as "authority-based learning," in which religious knowledge derives its legitimacy primarily from traditionally recognized religious figures, toward what this study terms "algorithm-based learning" (Zaman, 2002). The latter does not imply that algorithms replace religious authorities; rather, it describes a learning condition in which algorithmic systems increasingly mediate the discovery, visibility, and circulation of religious knowledge. Through personalized recommendations, search rankings, and engagement-driven content distribution, algorithms can influence which religious actors and interpretations are repeatedly encountered by learners. The resulting shift is therefore not a direct transfer of authority from teachers to algorithms, but a transformation in the mechanisms through which religious authority becomes visible, accessible, and potentially recognized by learners.

The first conceptual finding of this study is therefore that the transformation of religious authority is not merely a shift in the medium of religious learning, but a change in the epistemic conditions through which learners encounter, evaluate, and recognize the legitimacy of religious knowledge.

Factors Causing the Crisis of Religious Authority

An analysis of the literature identified at least four main factors that synergistically create a crisis of religious authority among the digital generation of learners. These factors do not stand alone, but rather reinforce each other in the dynamics of a complex digital ecosystem.

Democratization of Religious Information and the Paradox of Abundance

Revolusi digital telah menciptakan apa yang dalam kajian komunikasi dikenal sebagai "information abundance" (kelimpahan informasi). Jika dahulu akses terhadap literatur Islam klasik memerlukan investasi waktu, biaya, dan relasi sosial yang signifikan, kini ribuan kitab, tafsir, hadis, dan fatwa tersedia secara gratis dan instan melalui platform digital. Fenomena ini pada satu sisi merupakan demokratisasi pengetahuan yang positif; namun pada sisi lain, ia menciptakan apa yang oleh Barzilai-Nahon (2008) disebut sebagai "paradox of abundance", paradoks di mana melimpahnya informasi justru mempersulit individu dalam membedakan informasi yang valid dari yang tidak valid (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

In a religious context, this paradox is very dangerous. Anyone can now produce and distribute religious content without having to go through a verification process by recognized Islamic authorities. The phenomenon of "digital ustaz" or "Muslim influencers" who have millions of followers without an adequate religious education background is a tangible manifestation of the democratization of information that loses epistemological quality control (Farid, 2022). Students

who are exposed to this reality naturally experience epistemological confusion: who should be trusted as the source of authoritative religion?

Social Media Algorithms as Gatekeepers of Religious Content Visibility

The second significant factor concerns the role of social media algorithms in shaping the visibility and distribution of religious content. Rather than functioning as religious authorities themselves, these algorithms operate as gatekeeping mechanisms that determine which content is more likely to be recommended, repeatedly displayed, and encountered by users. By prioritizing content based on behavioral patterns and engagement, algorithmic systems can indirectly shape the religious information environment in which students learn. Sunstein (2017) in his study on “echo chambers” explains that social media algorithms tend to reinforce existing views of users, rather than exposing them to diverse perspectives (Sunstein, 2017).

The implications for the religious understanding of the digital generation are very serious. Students who show interest in certain religious content will be consistently treated to similar content by algorithms, creating what Pariser (2012) calls a “filter bubble”, an information bubble that separates a person from different religious perspectives (Pariser, 2012). Zabieno et al., (2025) Filter bubbles may contribute to the shaping of adolescents’ religious information environments by repeatedly exposing them to similar types of religious content (Zabieno et al., 2025).

More problematically, as explained by Humaida et al., (2025), viral content in the social media ecosystem does not always correlate with its accuracy or depth of knowledge. A religious video that simplifies complex fiqh issues into an entertaining instant answer has far greater viral potential than an in-depth and nuanced explanation from an experienced PAI teacher. In the logic of the digital content market, simplicity trumps complexity, and entertainment trumps depth of knowledge (Humaida et al., 2025).

Generative Artificial Intelligence as an Emerging Religious Reference

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) represents a further development in the transformation of religious learning. Unlike conventional social media algorithms that primarily mediate the visibility and distribution of existing content, generative AI can directly produce responses to users’ religious questions. This capacity may position AI as an emerging religious reference for learners, particularly when its responses are perceived as convenient, immediate, and authoritative. However, such perceived authority should be distinguished from religious authority grounded in scholarly competence, institutional legitimacy, or established Islamic scholarly traditions. This phenomenon indicates a shift in patterns of knowledge access and authority in educational settings, findings by Arsyam and Zakirah (2026) indicate that AI has emerged as an alternative source of information that may reduce students’ reliance on educators for certain types of religious information, with students using it to obtain instant answers to religious questions and summaries of worship materials. This practice creates a dilemma between the efficiency of digital learning and the risk of a shallower understanding of spiritual values of spiritual values due to reliance on technical, algorithmic answers (Arsyam & Zakirah, 2026).

The epistemological concern, therefore, lies not simply in the use of generative AI, but in the way its outputs are produced and interpreted by users. Bender et al. (2021) critically highlight that large language models generate linguistic outputs through learned patterns in large-scale textual data and caution against equating fluent language generation with human-like understanding. Although contemporary generative AI systems have developed substantially beyond the models discussed in earlier critiques, this concern remains relevant when AI-generated responses are treated

as inherently authoritative. In religious contexts, the central issue is therefore not simply whether AI can “understand” a question, but whether its responses are sufficiently grounded in authoritative sources, contextual reasoning, and accountable scholarly interpretation. AI may generate coherent and persuasive answers, yet fluency and apparent confidence should not be treated as equivalent to religious expertise or epistemic legitimacy. However, such responses do not inherently carry a scholarly sanad, institutional accountability, or the contextual and moral responsibility traditionally associated with qualified religious guidance (Bender et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the use of AI as a religious reference raises concerns about the delegation of epistemic responsibility. Vallor (2016) discusses the broader ethical problem of relying on technological systems in ways that may allow individuals to distance themselves from responsibility for their own judgments. In the context of PAI, excessive reliance on AI-generated answers may reduce opportunities for students to exercise independent critical religious reasoning, particularly when AI outputs are accepted without verification, contextual evaluation, or consultation with qualified teachers. The issue, therefore, is not that AI inevitably weakens students’ critical thinking, but that uncritical dependence on AI may limit the development of the reflective and evaluative capacities required to assess religious information responsibly (Vallor, 2016).

Low Digital Religious Literacy of Students

The fourth factor is the low level of digital religious literacy among students. This concept refers to the ability of individuals to critically access, evaluate, and utilize the religious information available in a digital environment (Hidayat et al., 2025). Digital religious literacy is not just a technical ability to use digital tools, but also includes the epistemological ability to assess the credibility of sources, identify biases, and connect digital information with verified Islamic scientific traditions.

A study by Anwar et al., (2024) on high school students in Yogyakarta found that although students have high digital technical skills (using smartphones, social media, and applications), their level of digital religious literacy is relatively low (K. Anwar et al., 2024). They tend to be unable to distinguish between authoritative and non-authoritative religious sources, are not accustomed to examining the scientific background of religious content providers, and do not have an epistemological framework to assess the validity of the religious claims they find on the internet.

The second conceptual finding of this study: the crisis of religious authority is not caused by the lack of religious information in the digital age, but rather by the abundance of religious information that is not epistemologically selected, combined with the low capacity of students to make such selection independently. This is a quality crisis amid an abundance of quantity.

Implications for Islamic Religious Education in Schools

The crisis of religious authority analyzed above has multi-layered implications for PAI in schools, encompassing the dimensions of the curriculum, pedagogy, teacher-student relationship, and overall educational goals.

Implications for the Epistemological Position of PAI Teachers

The most basic implication is for the epistemological position of PAI teachers in the ecosystem of religious knowledge of students. In the traditional educational paradigm, teachers are the center of knowledge authority, which is the center of knowledge authority that is the main reference for students in building their religious understanding. This paradigm, although it has been widely criticized by education experts such as Freire (2018) as the “banking concept of education”,

at least has a clear epistemological structure: the teacher as a legitimate source, the student as the recipient who then develops an understanding (Freire et al., 2018).

In the digital era, this epistemological structure is increasingly disrupted. Research by Rosyad and Maarif (2020) shows that PAI teachers who are unable to respond to religious questions brought by students from digital environments face a serious risk of losing legitimacy in the eyes of their students. Students who encounter religious answers through YouTube, social media, or AI-based platforms may perceive less need to verify such information with their teachers (Rosyad & Maarif, 2020). To conceptualize this shift, this study proposes the term “epistemic displacement,” referring to the gradual shift of the teacher’s epistemological position from the primary center toward the periphery of students’ religious knowledge ecosystem. The concept does not imply that teachers lose their educational authority entirely; rather, it describes a transformation in the basis of religious knowledge authority, in which teachers increasingly compete with multiple digital sources that students can access independently.

Implications for PAI Curriculum Design

The crisis of religious authority reveals a need to strengthen the existing PAI curriculum design in responding to the challenges of the digital era. The PAI curriculum, which has traditionally emphasized the transmission and internalization of religious knowledge, needs to be complemented by competencies that enable students to critically engage with religious information in digital environments. Ramayulis (2008) emphasizes that PAI should be designed to develop students’ cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions through an integrated educational process. In the context of the digital era, this perspective can be extended by incorporating competencies such as source verification, religious critical thinking, and religious media literacy (Ramayulis, 2008).

An analysis of the official learning-outcome document issued by the Indonesian Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education through BSKAP Decree No. 046/H/KR/2025 indicates that several competencies relevant to digital contexts have already been incorporated into PAI. In Phase F, for example, the PAI and Islamic Character Education curriculum includes learning about Qur’anic verses and hadith concerning the importance of critical thinking, science, and technology, as well as the understanding of digital ethics in Islam. The curriculum also emphasizes critical reasoning in analyzing differences of opinion and developing moderate attitudes (*wasatiyyah*). These provisions demonstrate that the curriculum has begun to respond to the intellectual, technological, and ethical dimensions of contemporary religious learning (Menengah, 2025).

However, the analysis also indicates that these elements have not yet been explicitly formulated as an integrated and systematically sequenced framework of digital religious literacy. The curriculum does not explicitly establish competencies for evaluating the credibility of online religious sources, verifying religious information, applying *tabayyun* to digital content, or critically assessing and communicating religious messages in digital environments. Moreover, the digital-related elements identified in PAI are concentrated primarily in Phase F rather than being developed progressively across the earlier phases. Thus, the curricular gap does not lie in the complete absence of digital or critical competencies, but in the absence of their systematic integration with the specific epistemological and ethical challenges of contemporary digital religious learning. This condition provides a curricular basis for developing a more integrated framework of digital religious literacy within PAI, particularly one grounded in Qur’anic principles of verification, critical reflection, and ethical communication.

Implications for the Fragmentation of Religious Understanding

The most worrying social implication is the potential fragmentation of religious understanding among learners due to unstructured access to diverse and often conflicting digital religious sources. The study by Maulana (2025) and Fealy & Bush (2019) documents how exposure to unfiltered digital religious content has contributed to the polarization of religious understanding among young Indonesian Muslims, including the increasing attraction to rigid, exclusive, and even radical religious narratives (Fealy & Ricci, 2019; Maulana, 2025).

In the context of PAI, this fragmentation makes it difficult for teachers to build a cohesive and moderate understanding of religion in the classroom. Students who come to class with a background of very diverse religious understanding, are partly influenced by moderate religious content, partly by more rigid content that creates complex pedagogical challenges (Muhtar, 2017). PAI teachers must be able to manage this diversity of understanding without sacrificing the depth of the material and without exacerbating the existing polarization.

Positive Implications: Opportunities to Optimize

In the midst of the various negative implications above, this study also identifies positive implications that need to be optimized. The digital era provides unprecedented opportunities to enrich and deepen PAI learning. Access to classical Islamic books in digital format, the availability of lectures by leading scholars from around the world through streaming platforms, and the possibility of cross-border religious discussions are very valuable resources if managed well by PAI teachers (Nuratika & Saputra, 2025).

A number of studies show that students who have an intrinsic motivation to understand religion use digital technology more productively (Nata, 2020; Husni, 2022). These findings suggest that the real problem is not in the presence of technology itself, but in the absence of pedagogical guidance that helps students to use technology responsibly and epistemologically in their journey. Third conceptual finding: the main challenge of PAI in the digital age is no longer limited access to religious knowledge, but the ability of students to verify, criticize, and integrate abundant religious information in an epistemologically responsible manner.

Reconstructing the Role of PAI Teachers: Towards a Digital Model of Religious Literacy-Based Islamic Education

Based on the analysis of the three themes above, this study argues that the reconstruction of the role of PAI teachers is not just a technical-operational need, but an urgent epistemological and pedagogical imperative. This reconstruction hints at a fundamental paradigmatic shift in the way PAI teachers understand their mission, position themselves in relationships with students, and design religious learning experiences.

Paradigm Shift: From Transmitter to Curator of Knowledge

The most fundamental paradigm shift is from teachers as transmitters of religious knowledge to teachers as curators, epistemic guides, and ethical mentors within the digital religious knowledge ecosystem. In this curatorial paradigm, PAI teachers no longer claim to be the only legitimate source of religious knowledge; instead, they position themselves as experienced epistemic guides who help learners navigate, evaluate, verify, and contextualize the complex and often conflicting ecosystem of digital religious information. Thus, curation in PAI should not be understood merely as the selection of appropriate digital content, but as a broader pedagogical, epistemological, and moral process through which teachers help students develop responsible ways of knowing and engaging with religious information.

The concept of curation in education has been theoretically discussed by Dabbagh and Fake (2017), who explain that in an information-abundant environment, curation competence involves the ability to select, assess, organize, and contextualize information and constitutes an important pedagogical competency (Dabbagh & Fake, 2017). Building on this perspective, this study extends the notion of curation into the specific context of PAI by positioning teachers as epistemic guides, critical facilitators, verifiers, ethical mentors, and role models. As epistemic guides, teachers help students understand how religious knowledge should be sourced, interpreted, and evaluated. As critical facilitators, they encourage students to question, compare, and critically assess competing religious claims rather than passively accepting digital content. As verifiers, teachers guide students in examining the credibility, contextual validity, and religious basis of digital information. As ethical mentors, they cultivate responsible and respectful practices in consuming, discussing, and disseminating religious content online. Finally, as role models, teachers demonstrate through their own digital practices how religious knowledge can be sought, evaluated, and communicated with intellectual integrity and ethical responsibility. Accordingly, religious curation in PAI encompasses not only content management but also the formation of students' epistemological judgment, critical capacity, and moral responsibility in digital religious environments.

Table 1. Paradigm Shifts in the Role of PAI Teachers

Dimensions	Traditional Transmitter	Digital Curator and Epistemic Guide
Epistemological Position	The sole authoritative source of religious knowledge	Epistemic guide who helps students navigate and evaluate diverse sources of religious knowledge
Pedagogical Role	Transmitter of religious content	Critical facilitator of inquiry, comparison, interpretation, and reflection
Religious Information	Content to be delivered	Information to be critically assessed and verified
Verification Role	Primarily validates knowledge through teacher authority	Guides students in verifying the credibility and religious basis of digital information
Ethical Role	Transmits religious norms	Ethical mentor who cultivates responsible digital religious practices
Role Modeling	Models religious behavior primarily in offline settings	Models intellectually responsible and ethical engagement with digital religious information
Relationship with Students	Hierarchical: source and receiver	Collaborative: epistemic partner and critical learning facilitator
Key Competencies	Mastery of religious content	Religious knowledge + digital religious literacy + critical facilitation + verification + ethical mentoring
Final Destination	Transmission of religious knowledge	Formation of digitally religiously literate and ethically responsible Muslims

Model DRLIBIE: Digital Religious Literacy-Based Islamic Education

As the main conceptual contribution of this research, a model called Digital Religious Literacy-Based Islamic Education (DRLIBIE) was developed. This model is a synthesis of various relevant theoretical frameworks: Buckingham's (2019) theory of digital literacy (Buckingham, 2019), Erricker and Erricker's (2000) critical religious thinking model (Erricker & Erricker, 2000), Hanfa

(2018) Islamic pedagogy framework (Hanifah, 2018), and Farid's (2022) concept of digital religious authority (Farid, 2022).

The DRLIBIE model is built on five components that interact with each other and support each other. The first is Critical Religious Thinking (CRT), the development of critical thinking skills in the religious domain, which includes the ability to identify assumptions, evaluate arguments, and build religious positions based on verified evidence. This is not just training students to be skeptical of digital information, but equipping them with a solid Islamic epistemological tool to assess such information.

The second is Digital Religious Literacy (DRL), a specific ability to access, evaluate, and utilize digital religious resources responsibly. This includes an understanding of how algorithms work, the ability to identify the credibility of digital religious sources, and an awareness of bubble filters and religious echo chambers. In its implementation, PAI teachers need to explicitly teach students how to distinguish between scholars with verified scientific credentials and religious influencers without an adequate scientific background.

The third is Verification Skills (VS), technical and epistemological skills for verifying religious information, including the ability to refer to primary Islamic sources (the Qur'an, Sunnah, the books of trusted scholars), consult with legitimate religious authorities, and use verified digital sources such as academic Islamic encyclopedias and fatwa databases of official Islamic institutions.

The fourth is the Ethical Use of AI (EUA), awareness and the ability to use artificial intelligence ethically in a religious context. This includes an understanding of the limitations of AI as a religious source, the importance of not treating AI output as a fatwa or binding Islamic legal ruling, and how to use AI as an initial search tool that must then be verified through authoritative sources.

The fifth is Teacher Mentoring and Role Modeling (TMRM), an emphasis on the function of PAI teachers as mentors and role models in responsible digital religious practices. This component recognizes that in an anonymous and impersonal digital ecosystem, concrete and personal teacher figures have an irreplaceable role as guides in the moral and epistemological navigation of the digital world. PAI teachers who openly demonstrate critical ways of evaluating digital religious content have a very strong modeling effect on the formation of students' epistemological habitus.

The DRLIBIE model places teacher mentoring as an umbrella that encompasses the other four components, emphasizing that in an era where religious authority is experiencing radical decentralization, the personal presence of teachers who are scientifically, ethically, and pedagogically legitimized is increasingly important, not increasingly irrelevant. The paradox of the digital era in the context of PAI is: the more abundant digital religious information, the more vital the role of teachers as epistemological guides.

DRLIBIE Model Implementation Strategy

Operationally, the implementation of the DRLIBIE model requires transformation at three levels: the teacher level, the curriculum level, and the institutional level. At the teacher level, a continuous professional development program is needed that specifically equips PAI teachers with digital religious literacy competencies. OECD study (2023) emphasizes that teachers' professional development in the digital era must be ongoing, contextual, and collaborative not just technical training in the use of applications (OECD 2023, 2023).

At the curriculum level, the DRLIBIE model proposes the integration of explicit teaching of digital religious literacy into PAI subjects, not as an additional burden, but as a new dimension in the achievement of religious competence. This can be realized through a project-based learning

approach where students collaboratively investigate and evaluate digital religious content under the guidance of teachers (Nata, 2020; Rahmayana, 2024).

At the institutional level, schools need to develop coherent digital policies that support the responsible use of technology in a religious context. Collaboration between PAI teachers and Informatics teachers, school counselors, and parents of students is highly recommended to build a comprehensive support ecosystem for the development of students' digital religious literacy (Muhtar, 2017; Sulasno et al., 2026).

The fourth conceptual finding and main theoretical conclusion: the reconstruction of the role of PAI teachers in the digital era does not mean reducing the relevance of teachers; rather, it elevates the mission of PAI teachers to a higher level from mere transmitters of religious material to architects of religious epistemological literacy that equips generations of Muslims with the ability to become active agents in their own religious journeys amidst a sea of digital information.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the digital generation is experiencing a transformation in the conditions through which religious authority is encountered and recognized, from authority-based learning toward what this study conceptualizes as algorithm-based learning. The latter does not indicate that algorithms become religious authorities, but that algorithmic systems embedded in social media, search engines, and AI-mediated platforms increasingly shape the visibility, accessibility, and circulation of religious knowledge. The literature analyzed in this study indicates patterns suggesting that the resulting challenge to religious authority is driven not by a scarcity of religious information but by the overwhelming abundance of digitally mediated content that may be epistemologically unverified, compounded by algorithmic filter bubbles, the growing use of AI as a religious reference, and students' limited digital religious literacy. Rather than empirically demonstrating that PAI teachers have lost their religious authority, this study identifies indications in the literature that these developments may challenge and transform the epistemological position of PAI teachers and contribute to the fragmentation of students' religious understanding. These patterns point to the need for a reorientation of Islamic Religious Education toward critical engagement with digital religious knowledge. As its primary conceptual contribution, this study proposes the Digital Religious Literacy-Based Islamic Education (DRLIBIE) model, which integrates Critical Religious Thinking, Digital Religious Literacy, Verification Skills, Ethical Use of AI, and Teacher Mentoring into a coherent framework for strengthening PAI pedagogy in the digital era. The findings suggest that the central mission of contemporary PAI is no longer limited to transmitting religious knowledge but extends to cultivating students' capacity to critically evaluate, verify, and responsibly utilize religious information within an increasingly complex digital ecosystem. Nevertheless, because this study is based on library research, the proposed model remains conceptual and requires empirical validation across diverse educational contexts to assess its effectiveness, practical applicability, and potential contribution to strengthening the role of PAI teachers in the digital religious knowledge ecosystem.

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