Negotiating Religious Knowledge with Generative AI: Epistemic Authority and Tabayyun Practices among Islamic Education Postgraduate Students

Siti Chumaerotur Rofiatur Risqoh
Universitas Islam Negeri K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, Indonesia
Email: siti.chumaerotur.rofiatur25033@mhs.uingusdur.ac.id

Abstract

The growing use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education has transformed how students access, interpret, and validate knowledge, including religious knowledge. This transformation raises an epistemological concern in Islamic education because fluent AI-generated responses do not necessarily possess scholarly or religious authority. This study investigates how postgraduate students in Islamic education negotiate the epistemic authority of generative AI when accessing religious knowledge and how their verification practices reflect the Islamic principle of tabayyun. Employing a qualitative exploratory design, data were collected through semi-structured written interviews with six postgraduate students in Islamic education who had experience using generative AI for academic purposes. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of AI use, verification, and trust in religious sources. The findings reveal three interrelated patterns. First, participants primarily position AI as an initial informational and academic assistant rather than a final source of religious authority. Second, AI-generated religious information is subjected to verification through books, Islamic texts, lecturers, kiai, religiously knowledgeable individuals, and other relevant sources. Third, when AI-generated information conflicts with established religious sources or human scholarly authority, participants tend to prioritize scholars and authoritative texts. These findings indicate that tabayyun operates as an epistemic practice through which students negotiate technological convenience without transferring religious authority entirely to algorithms. The study concludes that Islamic higher education should cultivate critical AI literacy that integrates technological competence with verification, scholarly authority, and epistemic responsibility.

Keywords: generative AI, epistemic authority, tabayyun, Islamic education, postgraduate students

Introduction

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has transformed how university students access, produce, and evaluate information. Tools such as ChatGPT support explanation, summarization, idea generation, and preliminary information seeking, while also raising concerns about misinformation, academic integrity, overreliance, and critical evaluation (Lo, 2023; Fütterer et al., 2023; Cotton et al., 2024; Albadarin et al., 2024; Baig & Yadegaridehkordi, 2024; Bhullar et al., 2024). UNESCO therefore recommends a

human-centred approach in which educational uses of GenAI remain subject to human agency, ethical consideration, and appropriate validation (Miao & Holmes, 2023).

These developments make AI literacy increasingly important. AI literacy involves not only the ability to use AI systems but also understanding, evaluation, creation, and ethical awareness (Ng et al., 2021). Recent reviews likewise emphasize critical evaluation and ethical navigation as central competencies (Almatrafi et al., 2024; Lintner, 2024). The educational issue is therefore not simply whether students can use AI, but whether they can judge the reliability and limitations of its outputs.

This concern becomes more significant when GenAI is used to access religious knowledge. Religious knowledge involves textual authority, interpretation, scholarly competence, and moral responsibility. AI can produce fluent and persuasive responses without necessarily providing epistemically reliable or religiously legitimate knowledge. Generative systems may produce inaccurate information even when responses appear coherent (Farrokhnia et al., 2024), and large language models may reproduce social and religious biases, including anti-Muslim associations (Abid et al., 2021). From an Islamic ethical perspective, AI should therefore be assessed not only by technical capability but also by normative responsibility (Elmahjub, 2023).

Recent Islamic education scholarship has begun to address these issues. Suyono et al. (2026) position AI as an epistemic mediator rather than an autonomous epistemic authority, while Wahid et al. (2026) highlight the challenge of algorithmic authority to established processes of knowledge validation. Mustopa et al. (2026) similarly argue that ChatGPT-generated knowledge remains derivative and probabilistic and should be subject to scholarly curation. Within this debate, tabayyun provides a relevant Islamic epistemic framework because it emphasizes verification before information is accepted or acted upon. Fepriani and Ratnasari (2026) connect Qur'anic tabayyun with algorithmic ethics and responsible evaluation of AI-generated knowledge.

The same concern appears in emerging models of Islamic AI literacy. Syamsudduha et al. (2026) integrate adab, amanah, 'adl, maslahah, and tabayyun into responsible AI use in Islamic higher education, while Ibrohim et al. (2026) show how Islamic Religious Education teachers incorporate verification and responsibility into their pedagogical responses to AI. Shobri and Alfurqan (2026) further demonstrate that verification of GenAI content depends on religious texts, scholarly networks, and knowledgeable human authorities, indicating that evaluation is socially and epistemically distributed. At the institutional level, Faridah et al. (2026) emphasize learner literacy, educator competence, pedagogical design, and governance safeguards in AI-related transformation.

Recent studies also show increasingly diverse negotiations between AI and Islamic knowledge. Isti'ana (2026) discusses digital tabayyun and academic integrity; Afzainizam and Rahman (2026) examine digital religious agency; Komalasari (2026) shows students comparing AI-generated interpretations of Islamic history with teachers, texts, and academic literature; and Syukur et al. (2026) describe ChatGPT as an initial access point for hadith learning whose accuracy and authority remain contested. Lestari et al. (2026) specifically examine the negotiation of fiqh epistemology among 45 Islamic Religious Education students. These studies establish that AI use increasingly involves verification and religious authority, yet more focused evidence is still needed on how postgraduate students practically decide which sources deserve trust across broader religious questions.

This study therefore investigates how postgraduate students in Islamic education negotiate the epistemic authority of generative AI when accessing and verifying religious knowledge, and how their verification practices reflect tabayyun. It asks: How do postgraduate students in Islamic education negotiate the epistemic authority of generative AI when accessing and verifying religious knowledge? By focusing on the practical hierarchy of trust among algorithmic, textual, and human sources, the study contributes empirical evidence to discussions of Islamic AI literacy, tabayyun, and responsible AI use in Islamic higher education.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how postgraduate students in Islamic education negotiate the epistemic authority of generative AI when accessing and verifying religious knowledge. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused on participants' experiences, judgments, verification practices, and preferences regarding sources of religious knowledge rather than statistical measurement or causal relationships. The design also allowed the study to retain differences among participants instead of treating AI use as a uniform experience.

Participants

The participants were six postgraduate students in Islamic education who had experience using generative AI for academic purposes. They were selected purposively because their academic background and experience with AI were directly relevant to the research focus. The sample was intentionally specific rather than statistically representative. Given the narrow research aim and the specificity of the participant group, the small sample was considered in light of information power, which emphasizes the relevance and specificity of qualitative information rather than participant numbers alone (Malterud et al., 2016). Participants were anonymized as P1-P6 in the analysis and reporting.

Research Procedures

The study began by identifying postgraduate students in Islamic education who had used generative AI. Participants were invited to provide written responses to semi-structured questions about their use of AI in academic activities and religious information seeking. The questions explored how they used AI, whether they had used it to understand religious issues, whether they directly trusted AI-generated religious information, how they verified it, and which sources they preferred when AI differed from lecturers, kiai, kitab, or other sources. Follow-up clarification was used where necessary to understand the source or reasoning mentioned in a response.

Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through semi-structured written interviews via WhatsApp. Five main questions addressed: (1) purposes of AI use in study activities, (2) experiences of using AI for religious information, (3) trust in AI-generated religious answers, (4) sources used for verification, and (5) preferences when AI conflicted with established religious or scholarly sources. The written format allowed participants to respond in their own words while keeping the same core questions across all six participants.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed thematically through repeated reading, initial coding, comparison across participants, and development of broader themes, drawing on established guidance for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis first identified meaning units related to AI use, trust, verification, source selection, and responses to conflicting information. Similar codes were then compared across participants and grouped into broader themes. Three analytical themes were retained: AI as an initial information source, verification practices associated with tabayyun, and preferences regarding epistemic authority. Differences and conditional responses were retained so that the findings would not imply that all participants used or evaluated generative AI in the same way.

Results

The thematic analysis identified three themes: (1) generative AI as an initial source of academic and religious information, (2) verification through multiple sources, and (3) prioritization of human and textual authority over algorithmic authority. Participants differed in how often they used AI for religious purposes and in how they verified its outputs, indicating that the patterns were shared but not identical.

Generative AI as an Initial Source of Information

Participants primarily used AI for academic support. P1 used it to assist with college assignments and as a medium for discussion. P2 used AI for assignments, translation, sentence organization, and finding references. P3 used it to search for references and relevant websites. P4 used AI when references from books were difficult to locate and then sought additional references to broaden her understanding. P5 reported using AI for papers, thesis-related work, and journal tasks, while P6 used it to obtain explanations for questions she did not fully understand. These responses show that academic convenience was the most common entry point for AI use.

Several participants also used AI for religious questions, although this practice was not universal. P2 mentioned using AI to search for information about the rights or proportion of amil. P4 used AI to explore a question concerning linguistic diversity and the use of Arabic in prayer. P6 used AI to obtain explanations of complicated fiqh issues. By contrast, P5 stated that she had not specifically used AI for religious matters. Thus, AI was mainly treated as a preliminary information source, and religious use depended on individual need and experience.

Verification Practices through Multiple Sources

Participants generally considered religious information from AI to require further checking. P1 stated that religious information should be verified because of the importance of accuracy and mentioned lecturers, kiai, and kitab as verification sources. P2 also rejected learning religion solely through AI; she consulted a friend with a pesantren background because she considered the friend's knowledge to be grounded in kitab. P3 emphasized that AI-generated information needed control and contextual checking. Technology-related information could be checked through Google, whereas aqidah and other important religious matters should be confirmed with knowledgeable experts. He explicitly referred to tabayyun when sources conflicted.

P4 likewise stated that AI could misinterpret information and therefore compared its responses with books, kitab, or other references she considered more reliable. P5 explained that, if she used AI for religious information, she would verify it through Google, knowledgeable friends, kiai, or ustadzah. P6 emphasized that AI is not a source of religious law and preferred confirmation from lecturers or knowledgeable individuals. Verification therefore involved a combination of textual, human, and digital sources, with the chosen source depending on the topic and the participant's judgment.

Prioritizing Human and Textual Authority

When AI-generated information differed from established sources, most participants assigned greater trust to human scholarly authority and authoritative texts. P1 prioritized kitab because it has a clear basis. P2 preferred a knowledgeable friend whose understanding was grounded in kitab. P6 trusted lecturers, kiai, and kitab because they represent scholarly competence and religious knowledge. P4 adopted a relatively integrative approach: different sources could be combined when appropriate, but kitab, books, lecturers, and kiai received greater weight when higher validity was required.

P5 trusted human sources more because AI is itself human-made and can be wrong. P3 took a more conditional position, preferring additional filtering and tabayyun rather than automatically choosing one source. Overall, participants did not reject AI; instead, they limited its authority. AI was useful for initial access, while stronger religious claims were more likely to be referred to sources perceived as textually grounded or scholarly competent.

Discussion

The findings show that postgraduate students do not simply accept or reject generative AI as a source of religious knowledge. They negotiate its epistemic position through use, verification, comparison, and judgment. The central distinction is between informational utility and epistemic legitimacy: AI is valued for speed and accessibility, but usefulness does not automatically confer religious authority.

First, the participants' use of AI as a preliminary information source supports the distinction between AI as an epistemic mediator and as an epistemic authority (Suyono et al., 2026). AI can help organize, explain, or locate information, while legitimacy remains connected to established scholarly structures. This distinction matters in Islamic education because religious knowledge is associated not only with information but also with textual grounding, interpretation, scholarly competence, and responsibility. The finding therefore does not indicate technological rejection; rather, it shows that students assign AI a limited and functional epistemic role.

Second, the participants' verification practices show tabayyun functioning as an operational form of critical AI literacy. They checked AI-generated religious information through lecturers, kiai, kitab, books, knowledgeable peers, and digital sources, with the choice of source depending on the topic. This pattern is consistent with Syamsudduha et al. (2026), who integrate tabayyun into Islamic AI literacy, and with Shobri and Alfurqan (2026), who describe verification as a distributed capacity supported by trusted texts and knowledgeable people. Verification in Islamic education is therefore not merely an individual technical skill. It is also a socially embedded knowledge practice in which credibility is assessed through communities, texts, and recognized expertise.

Third, the data reveal a practical hierarchy of epistemic trust. Participants generally gave greater weight to established textual and human authorities when AI conflicted with other sources, although P3 and P4 showed more negotiated strategies. This resonates with Lestari et al. (2026), who identify changing religious authority in students' engagement with generative AI. The present study extends that discussion to postgraduate students and broader religious questions. The pattern can be summarized in three stages: AI provides initial access, tabayyun mediates verification, and final judgments tend to rely on sources perceived as having stronger scholarly or textual legitimacy. This hierarchy is not absolute, because some participants combined sources or continued checking when disagreement remained, but the relative position of AI was consistently conditional.

This hierarchy also reflects human epistemic agency. Wu et al. (2025) argue that productive learning with GenAI requires learners to remain active in judging and constructing knowledge. Similarly, Tanchuk and Taylor (2025) emphasize epistemic trustworthiness rather than assuming that technological capability equals credibility. The participants demonstrated such agency by questioning AI responses, comparing sources, and deciding which sources deserved greater trust. Their practices illustrate that AI literacy is partly a capacity to know when not to accept a technologically fluent answer.

The implications for Islamic higher education are practical. AI literacy should not focus only on prompt use or technical efficiency. Students also need to recognize the limits of AI-generated information, evaluate sources, compare competing claims, and know when scholarly consultation is necessary. Such an approach is consistent with UNESCO's human-centred guidance (Miao & Holmes, 2023) and with Islamic ethical arguments that AI should be assessed through normative responsibility rather than technological performance alone (Elmahjub, 2023). Institutions can therefore position AI as a supporting academic tool while keeping final epistemic responsibility with human users. In postgraduate education, this may include explicit guidance on source verification, responsible citation, handling religious questions, and consultation with qualified scholars when interpretation is contested.

This study is limited by its six participants and by written interviews via WhatsApp. The findings are a focused qualitative account rather than a statistically generalizable representation, and written responses may provide less spontaneous elaboration than extended oral interviews. In addition, reported verification practices were not directly observed during real-time AI use. Future studies could involve multiple institutions, compare undergraduate and postgraduate students, or use task-based designs in which participants evaluate actual AI-generated answers in fiqh, aqidah, tafsir, or hadith. Such designs could clarify how tabayyun and epistemic trust operate at the moment of interaction rather than only in retrospective accounts.

Conclusion

This study examined how postgraduate students in Islamic education negotiate the epistemic authority of generative AI when accessing and verifying religious knowledge. Participants generally treated AI as a preliminary informational tool rather than a final religious authority. Their responses revealed three related patterns: AI as an initial gateway, verification through practices reflecting tabayyun, and greater trust in human scholarly authorities and authoritative texts when conflicts arose.

These findings suggest that generative AI does not simply replace established religious authority. Instead, it becomes a new source within an existing process of knowledge negotiation. The practical hierarchy identified in this study places AI at the point of initial access, tabayyun as the mechanism of verification, and stronger textual or scholarly legitimacy at the level of final judgment.

The study contributes to discussions of Islamic AI literacy by showing that responsible AI use requires critical evaluation, source verification, epistemic responsibility, and awareness of algorithmic limits in addition to technical competence. Islamic higher education should therefore develop guidance that integrates AI literacy with tabayyun, scholarly consultation, and human epistemic agency. Future research should test these patterns across institutions and specific fields of religious knowledge.

Conflict of interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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