Available online at: https://journal.pencerah.org/index.php/jspi

Journal of Social and Policy Issues

E-ISSN: 2807-3843 I P-ISSN: 2829-8632

Islamic Communication in Aceh's Digital Public Sphere: Authority, Trust, and Policy Challenges in the Age of AI

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: June 17, 2026
Revised: July 09, 2026
Accepted: September 22, 2026
Available online: September 30, 2026

KEYWORDS

Islamic communication; digital religion; religious authority; public trust; artificial intelligence

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines how digital transformation reconfigures Islamic communication, religious authority, and public trust in Aceh's digital public sphere. It employs a qualitative interpretive design focusing on how religious messages are produced, mediated, circulated, interpreted, and trusted. Primary data consists of publicly accessible digital Islamic communication materials, while secondary data includes scholarly literature, institutional documents, policy materials, and reports on digital communication, religious misinformation, and artificial intelligence (AI). These data were synthesized by the authors into four analytical dimensions: digital mediation of Islamic communication; moral judgment and digital social pressure; religious information circulation and verification; and AI-mediated religious authority, trust, and policy implications. The data were analyzed thematically through coding, categorization, interpretation, and synthesis, guided by mediatization of religion, digital religious authority, digital trust, and digital governance. The findings show that digital platforms reshape how Islamic messages gain visibility and legitimacy, while creating new forms of moral pressure, verification challenges, and AI-mediated religious authority. The study is context-specific and limited by the rapidly changing nature of digital platforms and AI. Its practical and social implications emphasize religious digital literacy, verification practices, and responsible digital governance. Its originality lies in developing algorithmic religious authority to explain how religious legitimacy is increasingly negotiated through scholarly authority, communication, platform visibility, algorithms, AI, and audience engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the digital space has fundamentally changed the way people obtain, produce, and trust information, including religious messages. This condition becomes even more crucial as digital access has reached a very large scale; by the end of 2025, Indonesia will have approximately 230 million internet users , with a penetration rate of 80.5%, while the number of social media user identities will reach 180 million or 62.9% of the Indonesian population. (Reportal, 2025). This significant penetration demonstrates that social media is no longer merely an alternative communication channel, but has become a crucial part of the public sphere where knowledge, values, identity, and authority are produced and negotiated. In the context of Islamic communication, this shift shifts the pattern of da'wah from a previously relatively structured relationship between scholars, communicators, and congregations to an ecosystem involving digital platforms, algorithms, influencers, and artificial intelligence (AI) (Lailatussaadah et al., 2025). As a result, access to religious messages has become increasingly open, but at the same time, the process of establishing credibility and authority has become increasingly complex because visibility, popularity, *engagement*, and algorithmic recommendations can influence the messages received by audiences.

This issue becomes increasingly important in the context of Aceh, where the authority of ulama and Islamic values have a significant position in social life, so that changes in the mechanisms of religious communication in the digital space have the potential to influence not only the practice of da'wah, but also public trust, moral judgment, social relations, and the need for digital communication governance (Hasbi et al., 2025; Mujiburrahman et al., 2024; Rahmah et al., 2024). Thus, digital transformation needs to be studied not merely as a development in communication technology, but as a social change that is reconfiguring the relationship between Islamic communication, religious authority, audiences, technology, and policy.

These changes simultaneously raise questions about how religious authority is formed and negotiated in the digital space. From a *digital religion perspective* , media is not simply a channel for conveying messages, but an environment in which religious identity, practices, social relations, and authority are constructed (Fuad et al., 2022). Authority that previously relied on scholarship, sanad (chain of transmission), institutions, and proximity to the community now interacts with authority based on popularity, algorithmic visibility, content production capacity, and audience response (Muzakkir, 2022). Recent research on digital Muslim communities in Indonesia suggests that algorithms and engagement can influence religious legitimacy, while other studies have found that interpretation of the Quran in digital media is increasingly negotiated through visibility, performativity, and audience engagement (Lim & Zhang, 2025). These conditions suggest that the primary issue in digital Islamic communication is not simply expanding the reach of da'wah (Islamic outreach), but rather shifting structures of authority: who is deemed trustworthy, how messages are judged to be true, and how audiences determine the legitimacy of a religious source.

https://doi.org/10.58835/jspi.v6i3.780
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The issue of authority is closely related to the issue of trust and the social consequences of digital communication. Religious information circulating through WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and other platforms can be accepted and shared based on social proximity, religious identity, the communicator's popularity, or emotional appeal, without always verifying its source and substance (Crossley et al., 2021; Muntasir et al., 2025). At the same time, recommendation and personalization systems have the potential to amplify exposure to views that align with user preferences, thus creating *echo chambers* , narrowing perspective diversity, and reinforcing polarization (Blanco-González et al., 2021; Hastuti et al., 2025). Under these conditions, religious communication can develop into an arena *for moral judgment* , *public shaming* , digital surveillance, and social pressure as users judge the behavior or views of others based on religious standards and specific social norms (Braun & Busuioc, 2020; Gemar, 2023). Thus, the problem of digital communication does not stop at message accuracy, but extends to issues of public trust, social relations, moral legitimacy, and the public's ability to distinguish religious authority from digital popularity.

The development of generative artificial intelligence furthers this complexity. AI is now used not only to assist in the production of text, images, sound, and video, but also increasingly has the potential to become a mediator in the search, compilation, and delivery of religious knowledge (Choe, 2025). This shifts technology from being a mere communication instrument to a mediating actor that helps determine how knowledge is discovered, formulated, and understood (Almahendra et al., 2024; Coelho et al., 2025). The development of studies on religion and AI indicates the emergence of new questions regarding legitimacy, trustworthiness, accuracy, bias, and the boundaries between human authority and AI systems in religious communication. Moreover, the development of AI in the digital environment demonstrates the tension between easy access to information and the risk of dependence on systems that are not always transparent about the source, process, and basis of their answers (Neumann, 2025). Thus, AI can be understood as a further development of communication platformization, further complicating the relationship between technology, communication, authority, and trust, while also presenting new needs for digital-religious governance and literacy.

In the Acehnese context, this issue has even stronger social significance because religious communication interacts with social structures formed by ulama, religious institutions, customs, families, village communities, and Islamic values, which hold a significant position in people's lives (Kujala et al., 2022). As religious communication moves and evolves into the digital space, a confluence of traditional authorities with digital communicators, influencers, platforms, algorithms, and now AI occurs (Grewe & GIE, 2023; Zuhdiyah et al., 2023). Consequently, people receive messages not only from institutionally recognized religious sources but also from sources that gain legitimacy through their number of followers, virality, algorithmic recommendations, or the ability to build emotional connection with their audiences (Bitektine & Song, 2023). This situation has the potential to generate new negotiations regarding who has the authority to speak on behalf of religion, how religious truth is verified, and how society responds to differing interpretations in the digital public sphere. Aceh is therefore an important context for understanding how the transformation of Islamic communication takes place when community-based religious authorities confront the logic of AI platforms and technologies.

Although studies on digital religion, religious authority, algorithms, and social media da'wah in Indonesia have flourished, research integrating the relationships between the transformation of Islamic communication, changes in authority, trust formation, social consequences, and policy implications in the Acehnese context remains limited. Previous studies tend to position algorithms as content distribution mechanisms, authority as a matter of religious legitimacy, or social media as a means of da'wah, while the relationship between these three with issues of *trust* , *moral judgment* , disinformation, and the need for digital governance has not been widely analyzed in an integrated manner (Bayer, 2024; Parvaze et al., 2023; Qi & Lin, 2025). This study fills this gap by analyzing how Islamic communication in Aceh is being reconfigured through interactions between ulama, communicators, platforms, algorithms, AI, and audiences, and how these changes shape authority, trust, and new social issues.

Theoretically, this research uses a perspective mediatization of religion to explain that the media is no longer just a channel for conveying religious messages, but also helps shape the way religion is communicated, understood and practiced. (Hjarvard, 2008). This perspective is then sharpened through the concept of digital religious authority, which explains that religious authority in the digital space is not only derived from scientific competence, sanad, and institutional legitimacy, but is also negotiated through popularity, visibility, engagement, communicative performance, and interaction with the platform's algorithmic logic (Lövheim, 2011; Müller & Friemel, 2024).

Furthermore, the digital trust perspective is used to understand how audiences determine the credibility of religious messages through the communicator's reputation, socio-religious identity, interpersonal closeness, digital experience, and repeated exposure to algorithmically recommended content. The development of artificial intelligence expands this process as AI increasingly plays a role as a mediator in the production and access to knowledge, including religious knowledge, thus raising new issues regarding the accuracy, legitimacy, and authority of sources. (Pietrzak & Takala, 2021). Based on the integration of these perspectives, this study develops the concept of algorithmic religious authority , namely a form of religious authority formed through the interaction of scientific authority, communication capabilities, platform visibility, algorithmic recommendations, AI, and audience response. This framework is used to explain how the transformation of Islamic communication in Aceh not only changes the pattern of da'wah dissemination but also reconfigures authority, trust, social relations, and policy needs in the digital public sphere.

This research offers a basis for strengthening digital-religious literacy, information verification mechanisms, religious content governance, and a digital policy model that respects scientific authority, freedom of communication, and the socio-religious character of Acehnese society. Based on these arguments, this research aims to explain how the transformation of digital space reconfigures Islamic communication, religious authority, and public trust in Aceh and to identify its implications for the development of digital communication policy. The main research question is: How does the digital transformation of Islamic communication reconfigure religious authority and public trust in Aceh, and what are its implications for social and digital policy?

https://doi.org/10.58835/jspi.v6i3.780

METHOD

Qualitative methods

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research design to examine how Islamic communication is reconfigured within Aceh's digital public sphere. The study focuses on the processes through which religious messages are produced, mediated, circulated, interpreted, and trusted rather than measuring the frequency or intensity of social media. A qualitative design is appropriate because religious communication in digital spaces represents a socially constructed reality shaped by interactions among ulama, communicators, platform users, algorithms, and emerging AI-mediated technologies (Strazzullo, 2024). The analysis therefore focuses on four interconnected dimensions: (1) the transformation of Islamic communication from religious authority to platform-mediated communication; (2) the negotiation of religious authority through visibility, engagement, and algorithmic mediation; (3) the formation of public trust and the emergence of moral judgment, public shaming, and digital surveillance; and (4) the broader social and policy implications of these transformations in Aceh . Rather than treating these dimensions as measurable variables, the study examines how meanings, legitimacy, and authority are constructed and negotiated within particular social and technological contexts.

The primary and secondary data were subsequently synthesized by the authors into four analytical illustrations presented in the study. These illustrations are author-developed representations rather than directly reproduced empirical figures from digital platforms .

The first illustration depicts the communication flow from ulama → communicator → platform → algorithm → audience , representing the transformation of Islamic communication through digital mediation.

The second illustrates the sequence of moral judgment → public shaming → digital surveillance → social pressure , capturing the social consequences of digitally mediated religious discourse.

The third represents the circulation of religious information through WhatsApp → Facebook → TikTok → Instagram and the problem of information dissemination without adequate verification.

The fourth illustrates the relationship between AI → communication → authority → trust → policy implications , representing the emerging role of artificial intelligence in the reconstruction of religious communication and authority. These illustrations were developed by the authors based on the synthesis and interpretation of the collected digital materials, scholarly literature, institutional documents, and policy-related sources, and therefore function as analytical representations of the empirical phenomenon , rather than as independent sources of data.

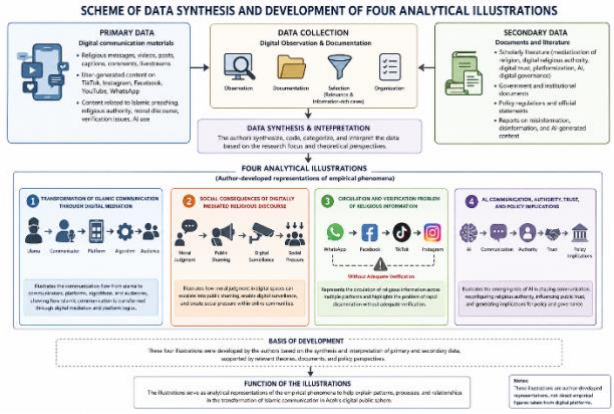


Figure 1. Scheme of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis through an iterative process of data familiarization, initial coding, category development, thematic interpretation, and synthesis (Hakim et al., 2025). The analysis begins by identifying recurring meanings and practices related to religious authority, platform mediation, algorithmic visibility, trust, misinformation, moral judgment, digital surveillance, AI mediation, and policy responses . These codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories corresponding to the study's theoretical framework. Data from interviews, digital observations, and documents were compared through source triangulation to identify convergences, contradictions, and contextual differences.

The final stage of analysis connected empirical themes to the concepts of *mediatization of religion* , *digital religious authority* , *digital trust* , and *digital governance* , enabling the study to develop the concept of algorithmic religious authority as an interpretive explanation of how religious legitimacy is increasingly negotiated through the interaction of scholarly authority, communicative performance, platform visibility, algorithmic recommendation, AI, and audience engagement. The analysis ultimately links these processes to their wider implications for social relations and the development of digital communication policy in Aceh.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the transformation of Islamic communication in Aceh's digital public sphere occurs through four interconnected processes rather than through technological change alone. Based on the synthesis and interpretation of primary digital communication materials and secondary scholarly, institutional, and policy sources, the study identifies a sequential relationship between changes in communication mediation, emerging forms of social control, challenges in verifying religious information, and the reconfiguration of religious authority in the age of AI. According to the results are organized into four analytical dimensions: (1) digital mediation and the transformation of Islamic communication; (2) moral judgment and the emergence of digital social pressure; (3) religious information circulation and the challenge of digital verification; and (4) AI, religious authority, public trust, and policy implications.

Digital Mediation and the Transformation of Islamic Communication

The first finding demonstrates that Islamic communication in Aceh is undergoing a shift from a relatively direct relationship between religious authorities and audiences toward a digitally

mediated communication structure. The transformation therefore concerns not only the expansion of communication channels but also a change in the conditions under which religious messages become visible, accessible, and meaningful to audiences. This finding positions digital platforms as active environments in the reconstruction of contemporary Islamic communication rather than as neutral channels of message transmission.

Figure 2. Digital Mediation and the Transformation of Islamic Communication in Aceh



Source : Author's analytical illustration based on primary digital communication data and secondary literature on the mediatization of Islamic communication.

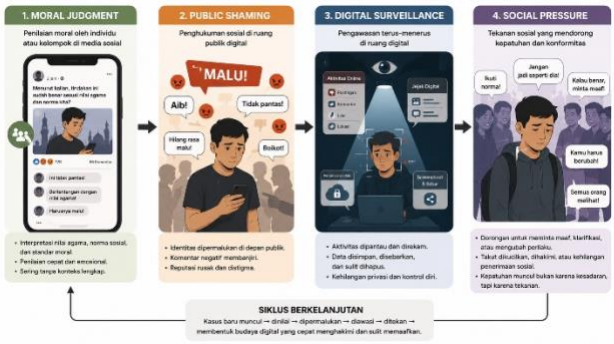
Figure 2 illustrates this transformation through the sequence ulama → communicator → platform → algorithm → audience. Three major tendencies can be identified from this process. First, communication becomes increasingly platform-mediated, as religious messages must adapt to the technical formats and communicative conventions of different platforms. Second, visibility becomes increasingly algorithmically organized, meaning that audience exposure is influenced not only by the authority of the communicator but also by recommendation systems, engagement, and platform logic. Third, audience participation becomes more active and reciprocal, because users do not merely receive religious messages but also comment, share, react, reinterpret, and redistribute them. The figure therefore represents a transition from a linear model of religious communication toward a networked and algorithmically mediated communication ecology.

This finding is consistent with Hjarvard's (2011) theory of the mediatization of religion, which argues that media increasingly shape the conditions under which religious information and experiences are produced and circulated rather than merely functioning as communication channels. More recent studies of Indonesian Muslim communities similarly show that social media contributes to the fragmentation and redistribution of religious authority, with digital actors increasingly participating in the production and circulation of religious knowledge (Clark, 2011). Recent research on platformized religious authority further suggests that legitimacy is increasingly negotiated through the interaction between traditional religious authority and social-media influencers (Sariningsih, 2025). The present findings extend these studies by emphasizing the complete communicative chain, demonstrating that the transformation is not simply a movement from ulama to influencers but a process in which communicators, platforms, algorithms, and audiences collectively participate in determining the visibility and meaning of Islamic messages.

Moral Judgment and the Emergence of Digital Social Pressure

The second finding indicates that the digitalization of Islamic communication produces consequences beyond the dissemination of religious knowledge. Digital platforms have become spaces in which users interpret, evaluate, and respond to the perceived moral conformity or deviation of others. Religious communication can consequently function as a mechanism of social evaluation, particularly when religious norms are expressed through highly visible and interactive digital environments. In this context, communication becomes closely connected with processes of social control, where individual behavior can rapidly become a subject of collective evaluation.

Figure 3. Moral Judgment and the Emergence of Digital Social Pressure



Source : Author's analytical illustration based on primary digital communication data and secondary literature on digital moral communication and social control.

Figure 3 represents this process through the sequence moral judgment → public shaming → digital surveillance → social pressure. Three tendencies are particularly visible. First, moral evaluation becomes accelerated and public, because users can immediately judge behavior through comments, reactions, reposts, and other forms of digital interaction. Second, judgment can develop into collective exposure and public shaming, whereby a person or group becomes the object of criticism beyond the original context of the communication. Third, repeated visibility generates social pressure and self-monitoring, encouraging individuals to adjust their behavior in response to anticipated criticism, reputational consequences, or community expectations. These tendencies demonstrate that digital Islamic communication can operate simultaneously as a medium of religious expression and as an informal mechanism of moral regulation.

This finding complements scholarship on digital religion that conceptualizes online spaces as environments where religious identity, communal norms, and social relationships are continuously negotiated. Campbell's (2012) work on digital religion emphasizes that online religious practices are intertwined with offline communities and broader social structures rather than existing as an entirely separate sphere. Recent research on social media and religious communities also indicates that digital environments can intensify experiences of stigma, conformity, fear, and misinformation in religiously sensitive interactions (Sito Rohmawati et al., 2025). In the Indonesian context, the fragmentation of religious authority through social media further creates conditions in which different actors compete to define appropriate religious behavior and interpretation (Malik, 2021). The present findings contribute to this literature by connecting religious evaluation with a sequential process of public shaming, digital surveillance, and social pressure, thereby showing how religious communication may become a form of digitally mediated social control.

https://doi.org/10.58835/jspi.v6i3.780

Religious Information Circulation and the Challenge of Digital Verification

The third finding concerns the rapid circulation of religious information across interconnected social media platforms and the difficulty of maintaining reliable verification within this environment. Religious messages can move rapidly between WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, often detached from their original sources or contextual explanations. The problem is therefore not simply the existence of inaccurate information but the transformation of verification itself into a more difficult communicative process. When religious information is circulated through socially trusted networks, the perceived credibility of the sender or community may become more influential than the credibility of the original source.

Figure 4. Religious Information Circulation and the Challenge of Digital Verification



Source : Author's analytical illustration based on primary digital communication data and secondary sources on religious disinformation and digital verification.

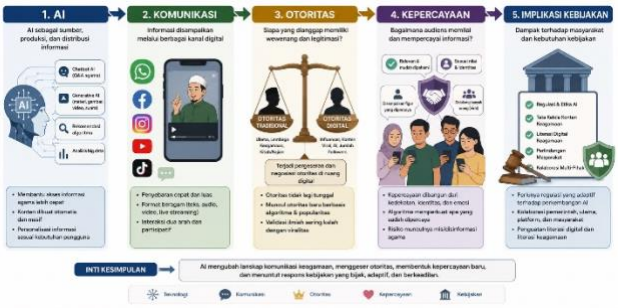
Figure 4. illustrates this process through the movement of religious information across WhatsApp → Facebook → TikTok → Instagram, accompanied by the problem of dissemination without adequate verification. Three tendencies can be identified. First, cross-platform circulation accelerates the reproduction of religious information, because the same message can be reformatted and redistributed across multiple communication environments. Second, source detachment increases during circulation, as quotations, videos, images, and religious claims may lose their original context or attribution when repeatedly shared. Third, social trust can substitute for verification, particularly when information comes from family members, religious communities, friends, or accounts perceived as trustworthy. These tendencies create a situation in which repetition and social proximity can strengthen the appearance of truth even when the original information has not been thoroughly verified.

The finding can be explained through the perspective of mediatization of religion, which emphasizes that digital media increasingly shapes not only the distribution of religion but also the conditions under which religious knowledge is produced, interpreted, and legitimized (Hjarvard, 2016, Hjavard 2020). The concept of digital trust further explains why repeated exposure, social proximity, and perceived credibility of the sender may encourage audiences to accept and redistribute religious information without independently verifying its original source (McDonnell, 2014). This finding is also consistent with research on religious disinformation, which demonstrates that misleading religious content can emerge through manipulated media, fabricated quotations, misleading attribution, and networked religious communities (McDonnell, 2014). Research on fabricated Islamic content similarly indicates that misinformation can circulate through interconnected religious accounts, while users who challenge misinformation are often connected to scholarly and academically oriented religious networks. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that religious misinformation should not be understood solely as an individual failure of media literacy (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022; Ding et al., 2025; Zaid et al., 2022). Rather, it represents a structural problem of digitally mediated religious communication, in which platform logic, social trust, source credibility, and the changing distribution of religious authority collectively shape how information is produced, circulated, and accepted.

AI, Religious Authority, Public Trust, and Policy Implications

The fourth finding demonstrates that artificial intelligence introduces a new layer of mediation into Islamic communication by moving beyond the distribution of religious messages toward the production, interpretation, and presentation of religious knowledge. AI systems can generate explanations, summaries, images, audio, and other forms of religious content, thereby becoming an additional point of reference for audiences seeking religious information. This development complicates the conventional relationship between religious authority and communication because audiences may encounter religious knowledge through technological systems without directly interacting with qualified religious scholars. The emergence of AI therefore raises questions not only about technological efficiency but also about who or what is perceived as a credible source of religious knowledge.

Figure 5. AI, Religious Authority, Public Trust, and Policy Implications



Source : Author's analytical illustration based on primary and secondary data concerning AI-mediated communication, religious authority, public trust, and digital governance.

Figure 5 represents the relationship AI → communication → authority → trust → policy implications. Three tendencies emerge from this relationship. First, AI increasingly functions as a mediator of religious communication, assisting or generating content that previously depended primarily on human communicators. Second, religious authority becomes increasingly distributed, as legitimacy may be negotiated among ulama, digital communicators, influencers, platforms, algorithms, and AI systems. Third, trust becomes a central policy problem, because the convenience and apparent fluency of AI-generated religious information may coexist with problems of source transparency, accuracy, bias, and unverifiable claims. These tendencies indicate that AI does not simply add another communication technology to the existing ecosystem; it potentially changes the epistemic

conditions through which religious information is produced, evaluated, and trusted

Recent scholarship increasingly identifies AI as a new challenge to religious authority. A 2025 conceptual study describes AI as contributing to a potential crisis of religious authority by reshaping Islamic discourse, interpretive legitimacy, and patterns of religious engagement through machine-mediated systems (Raya, 2025). Emerging empirical work also raises concerns about the reliability and source fidelity of generative AI when responding to Qur'anic, Hadith, and fiqh-related questions, emphasizing the continued need for verification against authenticated sources and qualified scholarly expertise (Müller & Friemel, 2024). At a broader level, recent research on AI-mediated faith guidance has found systematic differences in how AI systems respond to religious questions, suggesting that apparently neutral technological systems may reproduce particular patterns of preference or asymmetry (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022; Zaid et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the present study's argument that AI should be understood not merely as a communication tool but as an emerging mediator of religious authority and trust. Accordingly, the policy response should move beyond technological regulation toward a broader framework of digital religious governance involving platforms, religious institutions, communicators, scholars, and users.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the transformation of Islamic communication in Aceh's digital public sphere is not simply a matter of expanding the channels through which religious messages are disseminated, but represents a broader reconfiguration of communication, authority, trust, and social relations. The findings reveal four interconnected processes: digital platforms mediate the relationship between ulama, communicators, algorithms, and audiences; religious communication can generate moral judgment, public shaming, digital surveillance, and social pressure; religious information circulates rapidly across interconnected platforms while creating persistent challenges of verification; and AI introduces a new layer of mediation that increasingly intersects with religious authority and public trust. Taken together, these findings indicate that religious legitimacy in the digital environment is increasingly negotiated through the interaction of scholarly authority, communicative performance, platform visibility, algorithmic recommendation, and audience engagement. Based on this synthesis, the study proposes the concept of algorithmic religious authority to explain this emerging configuration of authority.

The contribution of the study therefore extends beyond understanding digital da'wah toward recognizing the need for digital religious governance that strengthens verification mechanisms, religious and digital literacy, responsible platform practices, and collaboration between religious institutions, communicators, technology platforms, and policymakers. This is particularly important in Aceh, where digital transformations intersect with established religious and social structures and may vary influence public trust, moral discourse, and social cohesion.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the analysis relies primarily on publicly accessible digital communication materials and secondary documentary sources, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized statistically to all Muslim communities or digital users in Aceh. Second, because digital platforms are continuously changing their algorithms, policies, interfaces, and content-moderation mechanisms, the patterns identified in this study represent a particular phase of an evolving digital environment. Third, the study focuses on the communicative and interpretive dimensions of digital Islamic communication and therefore does not quantitatively measure the causal effects of algorithmic exposure, AI-generated religious content, or digital social pressure on individual users. Future research could address these limitations through comparative studies across Aceh and other regions, longitudinal observation of changing platform practices, mixed-method research combining qualitative interpretation with audience-based quantitative data, and empirical investigation of how users distinguish between human religious authority and AI-mediated religious information. Such research would further clarify how emerging technologies reshape religious communication and contribute to the development of socially responsive and ethically grounded digital policy.

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