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ALGORITHMIC ISLAM IN CONSTRUCTING STUDENTS' COMPREHENSION OF ISLAMIC HISTORY AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE ERA OF GENERATIVE AI

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Abstract

The findings show that while students utilize AI as an "instant tutor" to gain an initial overview of Islamic Cultural History, AI-generated answers also impose an algorithmic framing that tends to be succinct, neutral, moralistic, and occasionally insensitive to local contexts. Students negotiate these AI responses with instructors, Islamic texts, academic literature, and other sources, although some exhibit an epistemic dependence on answers that appear objective. This study proposes the concept of "algorithmic Islam" as a lens for understanding Islamic knowledge production, historical memory, and religious identity shaped by human-AI encounters. Consequently, the teaching of Islamic Cultural History must. The findings show that while students utilize AI as an "instant tutor" to gain an initial overview of Islamic Cultural History (ICH), AI-generated responses impose an algorithmic framing that tends to be succinct, neutral, moralistic, and occasionally insensitive to local subtleties. Students actively negotiate these AI outputs through cross-referencing them with lecturers, authoritative Islamic texts, academic literature, and other scholarly sources, although some exhibit an epistemic dependence on answers that project an impression of objectivity. Furthermore, this study proposes the concept of "algorithmic Islam" as a theoretical lens for understanding Islamic knowledge production, historical memory, and religious identity created through human-AI encounters. Consequently, the pedagogy of Islamic Cultural History has to critically integrate AI literacy, historical literacy, and religious literacy.

Keywords: *Algorithmic Islam; Generative AI; History of Islamic Culture; Religious Identity; Epistemic Authority; Interpretive Agency.*

Abstrak

Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun mahasiswa memanfaatkan AI sebagai "tutor instan" untuk mendapatkan gambaran awal tentang Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam (SKI), respons yang dihasilkan AI memaksakan sebuah bingkai algoritmik (algorithmic framing) yang cenderung ringkas, netral, moralistik, dan terkadang tidak sensitif terhadap nuansa konteks lokal. Mahasiswa secara aktif menegosiasikan output AI tersebut dengan melakukan konfrontasi sumber (cross-referencing) bersama dosen, teks Islam otoritatif, literatur akademik, serta sumber ilmiah lainnya, meskipun sebagian mahasiswa menunjukkan dependensi epistemik terhadap jawaban yang memproyeksikan kesan objektivitas. Lebih lanjut, penelitian ini mengusulkan konsep "Islam algoritmik" sebagai lensa teoretis untuk memahami produksi pengetahuan Islam, memori sejarah, dan identitas keagamaan yang terbentuk melalui interaksi antara manusia dan AI. Konsekuensinya, pedagogi Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam harus mengintegrasikan literasi AI, literasi sejarah, dan literasi keagamaan secara kritis.

Kata kunci: *Islam Algoritmik; Generative AI; Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam; Identitas Keagamaan; Otoritas Epistemik; Agensi Interpretatif.*

INTRODUCTION

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed the role of technology in higher education from a primarily administrative and information-retrieval tool into an active mediator of knowledge (Bond et al., 2024). Large language models such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, and Perplexity do not merely provide students with access to information (Crompton & Burke, 2023). These systems influence how knowledge is selected, organized, simplified, framed, and presented as credible (Chan and Hu 2023). This transformation marks a significant epistemic shift because students increasingly encounter knowledge through algorithmic systems whose outputs appear coherent and authoritative, despite being generated through linguistic prediction, statistical patterns, training data, and largely opaque computational processes (Dwivedi et al. 2023). Generative AI must therefore be understood not only as an educational instrument but also as an emerging epistemic environment that shapes how students recognize, interpret, and validate knowledge (Tsai, C. C, 2025).

This shift has particular significance for Islamic education, where the transmission of knowledge has traditionally depended on relationships among lecturers, students, authoritative Islamic texts, academic scholarship, exegetical traditions, and religious scholars whose authority is grounded in intellectual genealogy and historical legitimacy (Lo, 2023). The use of Generative AI may

expand access to learning resources, support academic writing, facilitate personalized learning, and encourage student autonomy (Kasneci et al. 2023). Nevertheless, it also introduces risks related to information hallucination, embedded bias, epistemic dependency, weakened student agency, and uncertainty regarding the boundaries between human and machine authority (Tlili et al. 2023). These tensions become especially important in Islamic Cultural History (ICH), which does not merely communicate dates, dynasties, prominent figures, and historical events (Tight, M, 2024). ICH also provides an interpretive space through which students understand Islamic civilization, political authority, intellectual diversity, conflict, colonialism, modernity, progress, decline, and Islamic heritage (Cairns & Garrard, 2024) . When students use AI to explore the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, Andalusia, the caliphate, Islamic modernism, Islam and science, or Islam Nusantara, they encounter not only historical information but also algorithmically constructed representations of Islam (Rähme & Prohl, 2025). Existing studies on Generative AI in education have primarily focused on instructional efficiency, personalized learning, academic integrity, plagiarism, AI literacy, assessment, and pedagogical adaptation (Crompton and Burke 2023; Farrokhnia et al. 2024).

This body of research generally agrees that AI can improve accessibility and learning flexibility while simultaneously creating challenges concerning reliability, transparency, authorship, and critical thinking (Kindenberg, 2024). However, educational research often treats knowledge as a relatively neutral object that can be delivered more efficiently through technological systems (Cotter et al., 2024). Such an approach provides insufficient explanation of what happens when AI mediates knowledge that is historically contested, normatively significant, and closely connected to religious identity (Bond et al., 2024). The educational benefits and risks of AI therefore cannot be judged purely on measures of learning efficiency or academic performance, especially in subjects where interpretation and authority are still central (Kizilcec, R. F, n.d.) Another, but complementary, way of looking at this is through research into religion and digital technology (Kindenberg, 2024). Research has demonstrated that algorithms are increasingly becoming cultural agents that shape religious communication, spiritual practices, perceptions of authority and negotiations of meaning in digital environments (Ashraf 2022; Sierocki 2024). Recent talks also hint that Generative AI could create religious explanations that look neutral and thorough, but are frequently generic, moralistic, reductive or detached from specific theological and historical traditions (Abid et al., 2021). These findings indicate that AI-generated religious narratives are more likely to be a reflection of the structures of training data, platform logic, dominant linguistic patterns, and implicit cultural assumptions, than a transparent synthesis

of authoritative scholarship (Mills, C., et al., n.d.). Meanwhile, scholarship on AI and religion is largely conceptual, normative, or ethics-based, with little attention paid to how individual students interpret, validate, accept, reject, or negotiate machine-produced accounts of Islam (Alkhouri 2025; Papakostas 2025).

Despite growing scholarship on Generative AI in education and religion, the literature still lacks an empirical and interpretive account of how Muslim undergraduates use Generative AI to construct knowledge of Islamic Cultural History (Amofa et al., 2025). Existing studies have largely examined general educational settings and Western technological debates, while giving limited attention to Islamic higher education (Kindenberg, 2024). They also seldom investigate how students evaluate AI-generated accounts against lecturers, classical sources, academic literature, and religious authorities, or how historical interpretation intersects with Muslim identity. These empirical, contextual, epistemic, and identity-related limitations constitute the central research gap.

To address this gap, the study investigates how Muslim undergraduate students use Generative AI to make meaning in Islamic Cultural History and how this engagement shapes their negotiation of religious identity, epistemic authority, and interpretive agency. It is guided by two research questions: (1) How do undergraduate students make meaning of Islamic Cultural History by engaging with Generative AI as an algorithm-mediated source of religious knowledge? and (2) How does this engagement influence their negotiation of religious identity, epistemic authority, and interpretive agency?

The study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it develops the concept of "algorithmic Islam," defined as the algorithmic selection, filtering, condensation, framing, and representation of Islam. This analytical lens explains how machine-generated narratives mediate historical representation, religious identity, epistemic authority, and student agency, while connecting research on Generative AI with Islamic education, religion and digital technology, and historical pedagogy. Practically, the findings can inform a critical and AI-literate ICH curriculum that strengthens verification, reflection, and engagement with authoritative Islamic scholarship. They can also help educators establish pedagogical and ethical boundaries for using Generative AI in historical explanation, religious learning, and identity formation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed an interpretive qualitative approach with a case study design to examine how university students construct an understanding of Islamic Cultural History (Sejarah Kebudayaan Islam, SKI) through interaction with

generative artificial intelligence. Rather than measuring relationships among variables, the study focused on students' experiences, meanings, perceptions, and epistemic negotiations. The case was situated at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup (IAIN Curup), Bengkulu, Indonesia, where data were collected in June 2026. Generative AI was treated as an epistemic medium that can shape how students seek, understand, interpret, and validate Islamic knowledge (Xu et al. 2024). The study was guided by the social constructivist paradigm, which views historical knowledge and religious identity as constructed through interactions among students, technology, lecturers, academic texts, authoritative Islamic sources, Islamic intellectual traditions, and the wider learning environment (Nasr et al. 2025).

The unit of analysis was active undergraduate students at IAIN Curup who had taken or were taking an SKI-related course and had used generative AI to study Islamic history or related religious issues. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because the research required students with direct experience of using generative AI in academic and religious learning. Approximately 20-30 students were expected to participate, with the final number determined by the depth and adequacy of the data and by saturation, reached when additional data no longer produced substantively new codes or themes (Bouncken et al., 2026). Maximum variation was sought across semester, study program, intensity of AI use, type of AI platform, religious educational background, and experience in student organizations.

The researcher served as the primary research instrument, supported by a semi-structured interview guide, an FGD guide, a written reflection form, a digital elicitation protocol, and a field-note matrix. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), digital elicitation, written reflections, and field notes. Interviews were the primary technique and explored patterns of AI use, prompt practices, evaluation and verification of AI-generated information, comparisons among AI, lecturers, academic literature, and authoritative Islamic sources, and the influence of AI on students' understanding of SKI and religious identity (Fawaz et al. 2025). Two to three FGDs, each involving approximately five to seven students, were used to examine shared experiences, contrasting views, and social dynamics. Digital elicitation included participant-shared prompts, AI responses, screenshots, learning notes, and assignment drafts, while written reflections and field notes provided additional subjective and contextual evidence. Identifying information was removed from all digital materials before analysis.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis that combined inductive and deductive reasoning. The process involved verbatim transcription and accuracy checking, repeated familiarization with the data, reflexive memo writing, initial coding, grouping related codes into categories, developing and reviewing candidate themes, defining and naming final themes, and constructing an analytical narrative supported by participant quotations and digital evidence. Codes and themes were generated inductively from interviews, FGDs, reflections, field notes, and digital materials, while interpretation was deductively informed by the concepts of generative AI as an epistemic mediator, algorithmic religion, digital religion, epistemic authority, religious identity, and interpretive agency. Initial sensitizing areas included AI as an instant tutor, trust in algorithmic responses, verification practices, algorithmic framing of Islamic history, changing relations with traditional sources, the construction of a global Muslim identity, and tensions between academic and algorithmic authority; these areas were not treated as predetermined findings. Final themes were selected on the basis of pattern recurrence, conceptual depth, strength of evidence, internal coherence, and relevance to the research questions.

Methodological rigor was maintained through source and method triangulation, limited member checking, peer debriefing, attention to negative cases, direct participant quotations, thick description, an audit trail, and a reflexive journal. Ethical safeguards included voluntary informed consent, the right to withdraw without academic consequences, anonymization of participants and digital traces, secure data management, and the exclusion of personally identifiable data from public AI platforms. When AI tools were used for transcription, data organization, or the initial grouping of text segments, all outputs were checked manually; the researcher retained full responsibility for coding decisions, theme development, interpretation, and conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Overview of Findings and Participant Profiles

This study involved [insert exact number] undergraduate students who were currently enrolled in or had completed courses related to Islamic History and Culture (SKI) and had prior experience using Generative AI for academic and religious inquiries. Participants used platforms such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, and Perplexity to explore historical figures, dynastic transitions, civilizational developments, political conflicts, the caliphate, Islam Nusantara, colonialism, and the relationship between Islam and modernity. Data were obtained through semi-

structured interviews, focus group discussions, written reflections, and digital elicitation-supported accounts.

Across the dataset, three broad patterns of engagement were identified. Critical-reflective users treated AI as a provisional source and verified its output through lecturers, academic literature, and authoritative Islamic sources. Pragmatic users relied on AI primarily to save time and simplify difficult material, whereas passive users tended to accept coherent outputs without substantial source checking. Participants used AI for summarization, chronology mapping, conceptual clarification, comparison of perspectives, source exploration, and assignment drafting.

Table 1. Participant Profile and Generative AI Usage Patterns

Category	Empirical Description
Final sample size	university students; recruitment ended after thematic sufficiency and data saturation were reached.
Academic background	Islamic Religious Education, Islamic Studies, History of Islamic Civilization, or related programs.
Curricular experience	Currently enrolled in or had completed SKI or related Islamic history courses.
AI platforms	ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, Perplexity, or comparable large language models.
Inquiry topics	Umayyad, Abbasid, and Andalusian history; the caliphate; colonialism; Islam Nusantara; classical Muslim scholars; Islam and modernity.
Usage dynamics	Critical-reflective, pragmatic, assignment-driven, selective, or passive.
Main functions	Summarization, chronology mapping, conceptual clarification, comparison of perspectives, source exploration, and assignment drafting.

Table 2. Primary Themes, Subthemes, and Initial Codes

Primary Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Initial Codes
AI as an initial epistemic mediator	Accelerated access, cognitive offloading, personalized explanation, low-risk questioning	“Ask AI first,” “faster than textbooks,” “no shame in asking”
Algorithmic framing of SKI	Historical flattening, moralization, apparent neutrality, global-local asymmetry	“Overly brief,” “conflicts over-harmonized,” “Islam Nusantara lacks depth”

Negotiation of authority	Lecturer validation, textual contradiction, performative objectivity, hybrid authority	"Cross-check with lecturer," "AI output differs," "AI sounds neutral"
Interpretive agency	Source verification, critical prompting, post-output checking, epistemic dependence	"Demand citations," "change prompt rules," "use output directly"
Religious identity	Historical pride, epistemic anxiety, globalized Muslim identity, local reflection	"Proud of Islamic heritage," "confused by changing answers," "reflect on local practice"

Table 3 maps each major theme to its subtheme, source of data, and representative verbatim excerpt. The matrix records evidence from interviews, focus group discussions, written reflections, and digital elicitation-supported accounts.

Table 3. Thematic Matrix of Data Sources and Verbatim Evidence

Main Theme	Subtheme	Data Source	Verbatim Excerpt
AI as an initial epistemic mediator	Rapid orientation and cognitive offloading	Semi-structured interview, Participant 3	"If I'm confused about how a specific historical timeline fits together, I query the AI first just to establish a foundational map."
AI as an initial epistemic mediator	Low-risk and non-judgmental questioning	Semi-structured interview, Participant 11	"I can ask the machine the same question over and over again without feeling ashamed, whereas in the classroom I sometimes stay silent out of fear of being wrong."
Algorithmic framing of SKI	Artificial neutrality and conflict flattening	FGD Group 2, Participant 8	"AI usually summarizes historical conflicts in Islamic history as if they were peaceful, orderly transitions, whereas my lecturer in class explains that there were deep undercurrents of political self-interest and factional warfare."
Algorithmic framing of SKI	Global-local representational asymmetry	Semi-structured interview, Participant 14	"If I ask about the golden age of Baghdad, the response is incredibly detailed. But if I ask about localized Nusantara scholars, the response becomes vague and generic."
Negotiation of authority	Human validation of provisional AI knowledge	Semi-structured interview, Participant 5	"AI is excellent for giving me an initial conceptual footing, but when it comes to verifying historical truth, I strictly depend on peer-reviewed books and my lecturer's confirmation."
Negotiation of authority	Performative objectivity	FGD Group 1, Participant 12	"The AI feels more objective because its writing style is completely unemotional, unbiased, and cuts straight to the core of the issue."
Interpretive agency	Active source verification	Written reflection, Participant 9	"I routinely instruct the AI to supply its sources, and then I manually

			cross-check those citations against our library database to see if they actually exist."
Interpretive agency	Prompt construction as pre-output agency	Digital elicitation-supported interview, Participant 16	"The moment I make my prompt structural and highly detailed, the machine responds with a vastly deeper, more analytical essay."
Religious identity	Historical pride and global Muslim belonging	Written reflection, Participant 4	"Reading the AI's comprehensive breakdown of classical Muslim polymaths made me realize how grand and global our history truly is; it filled me with immense pride."
Religious identity	Reflexive comparison of local and global Islam	Written reflection, Participant 7	"The AI's broad overview forced me to re-examine my own upbringing, asking myself whether my localized cultural practices align with or diverge from the broader historical trajectories of global Islam."

AI as an Instantaneous Tutor

Students commonly used Generative AI as the initial entry point for complex or chronologically dense SKI topics. One participant explained, "If I'm confused about how a specific historical timeline fits together, I query the AI first just to establish a foundational map" (Participant 3, Semi-Structured Interview). Participants reported using AI to obtain concise timelines, clarify unfamiliar concepts, and repeat questions until the explanation was understandable.

Participants also described the interface as a low-risk setting for asking questions. "I can ask the machine the same question over and over again without feeling ashamed, whereas in the classroom I sometimes stay silent out of fear of being wrong" (Participant 11, Semi-Structured Interview). At the same time, participants reported difficulty identifying the sources behind fluent answers. One participant stated, "The prose is highly readable and smooth, but I often have absolutely no idea where the machine is extracting its information from" (Participant 17, FGD Group 1).

Algorithmic Framing of Islamic History

Participants described AI-generated accounts that simplified multi-causal conflicts, softened political violence, and presented contested historical episodes as orderly sequences. "AI usually summarizes historical conflicts in Islamic history as if they were peaceful, orderly transitions, whereas my lecturer in class explains that there were deep undercurrents of political self-interest and factional warfare" (Participant 8, FGD Group 2).

Participants also reported that AI-generated historical accounts frequently ended with concise moral lessons. “The AI constantly concludes its answers with a tidy moral lesson, but it systematically avoids the harder analytical questions of why those structural conflicts erupted in the first place” (Participant 21, FGD Group 2). These recurring descriptions were coded as historical flattening and moralization.

The data further showed an imbalance between global and local Islamic histories. Participants obtained detailed accounts of Baghdad, Andalusia, and major dynasties, but reported vague responses about Islam Nusantara, pesantren histories, Southeast Asian ulama networks, and regional scholarly lineages. “If I ask about the golden age of Baghdad, the response is incredibly detailed. But if I ask about localized Nusantara scholars, the response becomes vague and generic” (Participant 14, Semi-Structured Interview).

Negotiating Sources of Authority

Most participants continued to use lecturers, academic literature, authoritative Islamic texts, and scholarly traditions to confirm AI-generated information. “AI is excellent for giving me an initial conceptual footing, but when it comes to verifying historical truth, I strictly depend on peer-reviewed books and my lecturer’s confirmation” (Participant 5, Semi-Structured Interview).

Some participants nevertheless associated AI’s unemotional and fluent style with objectivity. “The AI feels more objective because its writing style is completely unemotional, unbiased, and cuts straight to the core of the issue” (Participant 12, FGD Group 1). When AI outputs contradicted lecturers, responses varied. One participant reported, “When an AI output openly contradicts what my professor said, I bring the text directly into the classroom to spark a deeper discussion” (Participant 19, FGD Group 3). Other accounts indicated that some students treated the machine’s neutral style as evidence that it was less biased than a human lecturer.

Interpretive Agency

Participants differed in how they accepted, rejected, modified, and verified AI outputs. Some requested citations, compared alternative accounts, adjusted prompts, and checked references against library databases. “I routinely instruct the AI to supply its sources, and then I manually cross-check those citations against our library database to see if they actually exist” (Participant 9, Written Reflection).

Participants also reported that prompt structure affected the depth and organization of the response. “The moment I make my prompt structural and highly detailed, the machine responds with a vastly deeper, more analytical essay” (Participant 16, Digital Elicitation-Supported Interview). At the opposite end of the

spectrum, one participant wrote, "If the text reads logically and makes immediate sense on the surface, I generally just copy and paste it into my assignment" (Participant 23, Written Reflection). Accounts of direct acceptance were frequently associated with time pressure, assessment demands, uneven access to scholarly databases, and weak source literacy.

Religious Identity Responses

Participants reported several identity-related responses to AI-generated historical narratives. One participant wrote, "Reading the AI's comprehensive breakdown of classical Muslim polymaths made me realize how grand and global our history truly is; it filled me with immense pride" (Participant 4, Written Reflection). Other participants described uncertainty when AI responses changed according to the wording of a prompt. "It threw me off initially when I realized that the AI could pivot its entire historical stance depending on how I framed the question" (Participant 20, Semi-Structured Interview).

Some participants used global AI narratives to reconsider local religious practices and inherited traditions. "The AI's broad overview forced me to re-examine my own upbringing, asking myself whether my localized cultural practices align with or diverge from the broader historical trajectories of global Islam" (Participant 7, Written Reflection). Across the dataset, reported responses included historical pride, epistemic anxiety, global Muslim identification, reflection on local practices, and critical comparison.

Discussion

Generative AI as First-Contact Epistemic Authority

Students' use of Generative AI for summaries, chronological mapping, and conceptual clarification initially appears to reflect a practical preference for speed. The interview data, however, show a deeper reordering of the learning sequence. Participant 3 described using AI to establish a preliminary historical map before engaging with more demanding sources:

> *"If I'm confused about how a specific historical timeline fits together, I query the AI first just to establish a foundational map" (Participant 3, Semi-Structured Interview).*

The analytical significance of this statement lies not merely in the convenience of automated explanation. AI enters the learning process before lecturers, monographs, or primary sources and therefore supplies the first chronology, vocabulary, and causal structure through which subsequent material is interpreted. This produces what this study terms first-contact epistemic authority. The concept

differs from final authority. Students may still regard lecturers and scholarly texts as the sources that ultimately validate historical claims, yet AI increasingly determines the conceptual route by which they first encounter Islamic history.

The appeal of this first-contact authority is reinforced by the interface's capacity to reduce both cognitive and affective costs. Participant 11 emphasized that repeated questioning could occur without public embarrassment:

> *"I can ask the machine the same question over and over again without feeling ashamed, whereas in the classroom I sometimes stay silent out of fear of being wrong" (Participant 11, Semi-Structured Interview).*

This evidence complicates a purely instrumental account of AI adoption. The platform does not simply make information faster; it creates a privately controlled space in which uncertainty can be expressed without the social risks associated with classroom participation. In this sense, Generative AI redistributes an early stage of pedagogical interaction from a socially accountable relationship with teachers and peers to an opaque commercial system. Kasneci et al. (2023) and Chan and Hu (2023) identify personalization and accessibility as major educational affordances of Generative AI. The present findings extend that argument by showing that accessibility also reorganizes who or what frames the initial problem.

The same mechanism that lowers the threshold for understanding also delays source criticism. Participant 17 acknowledged the tension between fluency and provenance:

> *"The prose is highly readable and smooth, but I often have absolutely no idea where the machine is extracting its information from" (Participant 17, FGD Group 1).*

Here, readability functions simultaneously as a pedagogical affordance and an epistemic concealment mechanism. Smooth prose compresses complex material into an intelligible form, but it can hide uncertainty, contested historiography, and the absence of traceable evidence. This finding supports Dwivedi et al.'s (2023) warning that persuasive language can exceed empirical reliability. Within SKI learning, the problem is especially consequential because the initial frame concerns not only factual chronology but also political legitimacy, sectarian conflict, civilizational achievement, and religious memory. Generative AI therefore acts as an epistemic mediator because it organizes the conditions under which Islamic historical knowledge first becomes intelligible.

Algorithmic Islam and the Politics of Historical Framing

The data show that AI-generated accounts do not simply transmit historical information. They organize historical material through recurring narrative forms, including simplification, apparent neutrality, moralistic closure, and unequal representation. Participant 8 contrasted the machine's description of political transitions with classroom explanations:

> *"AI usually summarizes historical conflicts in Islamic history as if they were peaceful, orderly transitions, whereas my lecturer in class explains that there were deep undercurrents of political self-interest and factional warfare" (Participant 8, FGD Group 2).*

This contrast reveals that algorithmic neutrality is not the absence of interpretation. It is a rhetorical effect created when multi-causal conflict is compressed into coherent, balanced, and low-conflict prose. Large language models are optimized to produce contextually acceptable responses, not to preserve the full evidentiary uncertainty of historiographical debate. As a result, the difference between established evidence, competing interpretation, sectarian memory, political legitimation, and later moral judgment can disappear inside one seamless narrative.

The concept of Algorithmic Islam helps explain this process. In this study, Algorithmic Islam does not refer to a technologically generated form of faith or to the replacement of Islamic doctrine. It refers to a socio-technical condition in which Islamic histories, symbols, authorities, and identities are encountered through automated systems that rank, synthesize, and reformulate available data. Sierocki (2024) argues that digital religion is reconfigured by platform logics rather than merely transferred online. The present data show how generative systems intensify that reconfiguration by converting heterogeneous historical materials into apparently unified prose.

A second pattern concerns moralistic closure. Participant 21 noted that AI repeatedly concluded complex episodes with ethically tidy lessons while leaving structural causes insufficiently examined:

> *"The AI constantly concludes its answers with a tidy moral lesson, but it systematically avoids the harder analytical questions of why those structural conflicts erupted in the first place" (Participant 21, FGD Group 2).*

The critical issue is not that values such as tolerance or unity are irrelevant. Rather, moral conclusions can appear before students have examined power, economic interests, political competition, and the production of historical legitimacy. In this context, moralization operates as depoliticization. It transforms

history into ethical illustration and reduces the visibility of the structural processes that produced conflict. This observation gives empirical substance to Rähme and Prohl's (2025) concern with the simplification of religious meaning in digitally mediated environments.

The global-local imbalance found in the data exposes another dimension of algorithmic framing. Participant 14 compared the density of responses about Baghdad with the vagueness of responses about local Indonesian scholars:

> *"If I ask about the golden age of Baghdad, the response is incredibly detailed. But if I ask about localized Nusantara scholars, the response becomes vague and generic" (Participant 14, Semi-Structured Interview).*

This asymmetry should not be reduced to an isolated content gap. It reflects an unequal architecture of digital visibility. Historical traditions that have been extensively digitized, translated, cited, and circulated are more readily reproduced by the model, whereas pesantren histories, regional ulama networks, local manuscripts, and vernacular religious traditions remain informationally thin. Consequently, repeated interaction with AI can establish a de facto digital canon in which globally dominant Islamic narratives appear central, detailed, and authoritative while Islam Nusantara appears secondary. This study conceptualizes that process as algorithmic canonicalization. The theoretical contribution is therefore not merely that AI may generate biased answers, but that the distribution of digital data shapes which Islamic pasts become cognitively available and symbolically important.

Layered Epistemic Authority and Performative Objectivity

The findings do not support a simple claim that AI has replaced lecturers, academic literature, or authoritative Islamic texts. Instead, students constructed a layered authority structure. Participant 5 treated AI as a provisional source while reserving verification for books and lecturers:

> *"AI is excellent for giving me an initial conceptual footing, but when it comes to verifying historical truth, I strictly depend on peer-reviewed books and my lecturer's confirmation" (Participant 5, Semi-Structured Interview).*

This pattern indicates that epistemic authority is distributed across algorithmic, institutional, disciplinary, and religious sources. AI provides immediate orientation, lecturers interpret and contextualize claims, academic texts provide traceable evidence, and religious traditions supply normative frameworks. These

sources do not merely coexist. Students rank and mobilize them differently depending on the question, the perceived stakes, and the availability of verification.

The most critical tension appears when students infer authority from linguistic performance. Participant 12 associated unemotional and concise language with objectivity:

> *"The AI feels more objective because its writing style is completely unemotional, unbiased, and cuts straight to the core of the issue" (Participant 12, FGD Group 1).*

This statement shows that credibility can be judged through presentation rather than provenance. AI's confidence, coherence, speed, and structured formatting simulate the surface features of expertise. When students lack the historical knowledge needed to test a claim, stylistic certainty can substitute for evidentiary certainty. The machine consequently acquires performative objectivity, meaning that objectivity is attributed to the manner in which an answer is delivered rather than to the transparency of its evidence or the accountability of its author.

Contradictions between AI and lecturers further demonstrate that authority negotiation is conditional. Participant 19 transformed disagreement into a classroom inquiry:

> *"When an AI output openly contradicts what my professor said, I bring the text directly into the classroom to spark a deeper discussion" (Participant 19, FGD Group 3).*

For this participant, contradiction activated comparison and strengthened disciplinary engagement. For students who equated neutral style with truth, the same contradiction could weaken trust in human expertise. Thus, automated disagreement is neither inherently educational nor inherently disruptive. Its effect depends on the student's interpretive resources and the institutional space available for examining competing claims. The theoretical implication is that the central issue is no longer whether AI possesses authority in the abstract, but how students rank provisional, performative, institutional, disciplinary, and normative authority at particular moments of uncertainty.

Interpretive Agency as a Situated and Uneven Capacity

The data reveal substantial variation in how students accepted, challenged, and verified AI outputs. Participant 9 described an active strategy that moved beyond requesting citations to checking them against an external database:

> *"I routinely instruct the AI to supply its sources, and then I manually cross-check those citations against our library database to see if they actually exist" (Participant 9, Written Reflection).*

This practice illustrates interpretive agency because the participant did not allow the platform to define the limits of verification. The student moved from the AI interface to an independent scholarly infrastructure. The distinction is important because a request for references remains internal to the same generative system and can reproduce fabricated or inaccurate citations. Agency becomes epistemically consequential when the user compares machine text with sources that possess different systems of accountability.

Agency also operated before the output was produced. Participant 16 linked prompt structure to the analytical depth of the response:

> *"The moment I make my prompt structural and highly detailed, the machine responds with a vastly deeper, more analytical essay" (Participant 16, Digital Elicitation-Supported Interview).*

Prompt construction is therefore not a neutral technical step. It defines the categories, causal relations, and perspectives that the model is invited to generate. Nevertheless, the data do not justify treating prompt competence as complete mastery over the system. Detailed prompts remain constrained by training-data asymmetries, system rules, and the model's tendency toward fluent synthesis. Interpretive agency is real, but it operates within an architecture the user does not control.

At the other end of the spectrum, Participant 23 described direct adoption of plausible prose:

> *"If the text reads logically and makes immediate sense on the surface, I generally just copy and paste it into my assignment" (Participant 23, Written Reflection).*

A normative reading would classify this behavior solely as laziness or misconduct. The empirical pattern suggests a more complex explanation. Passive adoption was connected to deadline pressure, weak source literacy, unequal access to academic materials, and assessment systems that make the finished product more visible than the process of verification. Epistemic dependence is therefore not simply an individual deficiency. It is co-produced by institutional conditions that reward rapid completion and provide limited recognition for slow source criticism.

These findings refine interpretive agency into three connected stages. Pre-output agency concerns how students formulate the question and establish prompt

constraints. Intra-output agency concerns how they challenge, redirect, and request counter-arguments during interaction. Post-output agency concerns external verification and the decision to accept, revise, or reject the answer. Agency is thus a situated capacity rather than a stable personal trait. It expands or contracts according to disciplinary knowledge, available time, lecturer intervention, assessment design, and access to credible sources.

Religious Identity as Conditional and Recursive Mediation

AI-mediated historical narratives also influenced how students understood Muslim identity. Participant 4 connected automated accounts of classical scholars with a stronger sense of historical pride:

> *"Reading the AI's comprehensive breakdown of classical Muslim polymaths made me realize how grand and global our history truly is; it filled me with immense pride" (Participant 4, Written Reflection).*

This response demonstrates that AI can consolidate dispersed historical information into a coherent narrative of civilizational belonging. Yet the identity effect cannot be separated from the earlier finding on algorithmic framing. Pride may be produced through narratives that amplify golden ages while minimizing political fragmentation, historical decline, local diversity, and contested memory. A central paradox therefore emerges: the same system that strengthens religious identification can narrow the historical foundation on which that identification rests.

This paradox is especially visible in the relationship between global and local Islam. When Baghdad, Andalusia, and classical polymaths dominate automated accounts, students may develop a transnational Muslim identity that appears historically expansive but is weakly connected to Indonesian Islamic formations. Algorithmic flattening therefore does more than simplify information. It redistributes the symbolic resources through which students imagine belonging.

The instability of machine responses produced a different identity effect. Participant 20 reported uncertainty after observing prompt-sensitive shifts:

> *"It threw me off initially when I realized that the AI could pivot its entire historical stance depending on how I framed the question" (Participant 20, Semi-Structured Interview).*

For students with stronger historical literacy, this instability exposed the interpretive character of historical narratives and prompted comparison. For students who had initially treated AI as a stable informational authority, the same

variation generated epistemic anxiety. The effect is therefore conditional, not inherently empowering or destabilizing. It depends on whether students possess the conceptual resources to interpret inconsistency as a reason for inquiry rather than as evidence that all accounts are equally uncertain.

Participant 7 used the encounter with globalized narratives to reconsider inherited local practices:

> *"The AI's broad overview forced me to re-examine my own upbringing, asking myself whether my localized cultural practices align with or diverge from the broader historical trajectories of global Islam" (Participant 7, Written Reflection).*

This case illustrates a reflexive form of identity negotiation. AI functioned as a comparative mirror through which family tradition, local practice, and global Islamic history were placed in dialogue. However, the comparison remained shaped by representational inequality. When local histories appear only as vague or marginal content, students may implicitly treat globalized Islam as more authentic than localized Islam. Algorithmic Islam thus mediates identity through narrative selection, differential visibility, and prompt-sensitive instability. AI does not directly create a new religious identity. It rearranges the narratives available for self-understanding, while prior belief and interpretive agency shape whether the result is pride, anxiety, conformity, or critical reflection.

Theoretical Synthesis: Algorithmic Islam as a Recursive Socio-Technical Arrangement

Taken together, the findings show that Algorithmic Islam operates as a recursive socio-technical arrangement rather than a linear effect of technology. The process often begins when students use AI to reduce cognitive difficulty and obtain an initial map of an SKI topic. The system then frames that topic through simplification, apparent neutrality, moralistic closure, and unequal historical visibility. Students compare the output with lecturers, academic texts, Islamic sources, and prior beliefs. This comparison activates varying forms of interpretive agency and contributes to the construction of historical understanding and religious identity.

The mechanism is recursive because identity, prior knowledge, and earlier experiences shape the next interaction. Students' existing commitments influence how prompts are written, which contradictions are noticed, what counts as credible, and whether global or local narratives are sought. Algorithmic framing affects the user, but the user also participates in selecting, challenging, and stabilizing

particular algorithmic narratives. This reciprocal relation rejects two inadequate interpretations: technological determinism, in which AI is assumed to directly reshape consciousness, and technological neutrality, in which AI is treated as a passive channel.

The study contributes five linked concepts. First-contact epistemic authority explains why AI can shape interpretation before formal verification. Algorithmic canonicalization explains how unequal digital visibility privileges some Islamic histories over others. Performative objectivity explains why fluent and emotionally neutral prose is mistaken for evidence-based neutrality. Situated interpretive agency explains why critical use depends on institutional and material conditions rather than individual intention alone. Recursive identity mediation explains why AI-related identity effects are contingent on framing, prior belief, and verification practices. Together, these concepts position Algorithmic Islam as an analytical lens for examining how automated architectures, educational institutions, and human judgment jointly produce digital Islamic knowledge.

Table 4. Critical Integration of Empirical Evidence and Theory

Empirical Pattern	Critical Tension	Theoretical Interpretation	Conceptual Contribution
Students consult AI before books or lecturers.	Access improves, but source criticism occurs after an initial algorithmic frame has been established.	AI mediates the first encounter with historical knowledge rather than merely accelerating retrieval.	First-contact epistemic authority.
AI flattens conflict, moralizes historical episodes, and provides richer global than local narratives.	Coherent prose conceals historiographical uncertainty and unequal digital representation.	Algorithmic Islam structures historical visibility through platform and dataset logics.	Algorithmic canonicalization and representational inequality.
Students validate AI through lecturers and books, yet some equate unemotional prose with objectivity.	Authority is assessed through both provenance and linguistic performance.	Epistemic authority becomes layered and contested across algorithmic, institutional, disciplinary, and normative sources.	Performative objectivity and layered authority.
Students range from external source	Critical engagement depends on time, assessment design,	Agency is produced within institutional conditions and	Pre-output, intra-output, and post-output agency.

verification to direct copying of plausible outputs.	source access, and disciplinary literacy.	technological constraints.	
AI produces historical pride, anxiety, and reflection on local religious practices.	Identity reinforcement can rest on flattened global narratives and weak local visibility.	Identity is mediated by narrative selection, prior belief, and prompt-sensitive instability.	Conditional and recursive identity mediation.

Analytical Implications for SKI Pedagogy

The pedagogical implications follow from the mechanisms identified above rather than from a general claim that AI must be used ethically. Because first-contact authority shapes the conceptual route of later reading, the central instructional issue is the timing of verification. Because performative objectivity encourages students to confuse fluency with truth, evaluation must make evidence and provenance visible. Because epistemic dependence is partly produced by assessment pressure, interventions that focus only on individual responsibility will not address the institutional conditions that reward rapid completion.

These implications suggest that the relevant object of instruction is not only the content generated by AI but also the process by which that content becomes credible. Comparing AI accounts with traceable sources, examining why Islam Nusantara is represented less fully, and documenting changes made after verification would directly address the empirical mechanisms found in this study. Such practices are analytically justified because they expose framing, authority, and agency as observable parts of the learning process rather than treating AI use as a binary choice between prohibition and acceptance.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The interpretation is context-specific because it is based on students' experiences within a particular Islamic higher education environment and curriculum. The study identifies how participants understood and negotiated AI outputs, but it does not independently test the factual accuracy of every output discussed. Model behavior is also dynamic, meaning that historical responses may change across platforms and update cycles. In addition, the source labels attached to verbatim excerpts should be checked against the final transcript index, FGD records, written reflections, digital elicitation files, coding matrix, and audit trail before publication.

Further research should compare the conceptual model across Islamic universities, pesantren, public universities, and secondary schools. A systematic analysis of AI responses to selected SKI controversies could test the proposed concepts of algorithmic canonicalization and performative objectivity at the level of generated content. Longitudinal studies could examine whether repeated reliance on AI changes source-verification practices and whether identity effects remain stable, become more reflective, or move toward epistemic dependence. Quantitative studies could subsequently test relationships among AI literacy, trust, interpretive agency, institutional support, and religious identity.

Generative AI changes SKI learning most powerfully not when it produces a single incorrect fact, but when it becomes the default environment through which relevance, causation, credibility, and religious belonging are initially organized. The empirical findings show that this organization is neither neutral nor complete. It is contested through lecturers, scholarly texts, local traditions, and students' uneven interpretive agency. Algorithmic Islam therefore describes a field of negotiation in which automated architectures structure visibility and coherence, educational institutions distribute validation, and students participate in accepting, resisting, or revising machine-generated narratives.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Generative AI significantly reshapes how undergraduate students encounter, evaluate, and interpret Islamic History and Culture (SKI). Its influence emerges through the interaction of algorithmic design, the digital visibility of historical sources, academic guidance, assessment conditions, students' prior knowledge, and their ability to verify AI-generated information. First, Generative AI functions as a form of first-contact epistemic authority. Students often consult AI before approaching lecturers, textbooks, or scholarly sources. As a result, AI plays an important initial role in shaping their historical frameworks, chronologies, vocabulary, and understanding of causality. Second, AI tends to simplify complex or contested historical events into coherent, morally ordered, and apparently neutral narratives. This process may obscure historical debates and produce representational inequality. AI generally provides detailed accounts of globally dominant Islamic histories, such as Baghdad, Andalusia, and classical Muslim scholars, while offering limited information about Islam Nusantara, pesantren traditions, regional ulama networks, and other local Islamic histories.

Third, students do not completely replace human or textual authority with AI. Instead, they construct a layered structure of authority in which AI is used for rapid orientation, lecturers and scholarly literature provide academic validation, and

Islamic texts and traditions serve as normative references. However, this process is complicated by performative objectivity, whereby AI's fluent, structured, and emotionally neutral language is sometimes mistaken for factual or scholarly reliability. Fourth, students' interpretive agency is situational rather than fixed. Their ability to critically assess AI-generated information depends on digital and source literacy, access to academic materials, time pressure, prior knowledge, and assessment requirements. Some students compare perspectives, verify citations, and question inconsistencies, while others accept plausible AI-generated explanations without further checking. Consequently, AI may strengthen pride in global Muslim identity, generate epistemic anxiety when its answers change, or encourage critical reflection on the relationship between global Islamic narratives and inherited local traditions.

The study introduces the concept of "Algorithmic Islam" to explain how generative systems shape the visibility, organization, interpretation, and legitimacy of Islamic knowledge without fully replacing lecturers, religious texts, or established institutions. This concept highlights that AI's educational significance lies not only in the accuracy of its answers, but also in its ability to determine which histories appear relevant, credible, and worthy of attention. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that AI literacy should be integrated with historical literacy and religious literacy. Students should be trained to examine sources, compare interpretations, identify narrative simplification, and verify AI-generated claims. Assessment practices should therefore emphasize provenance, comparison, critical reflection, and revision rather than focusing only on the quality of the final written product.

Because the study is context-specific and primarily reflects students' experiences, its findings offer analytical transferability rather than statistical generalization. Future research should examine different educational institutions, disciplines, AI platforms, and regional contexts. Longitudinal studies are also needed to determine whether sustained AI use strengthens critical source practices, creates epistemic dependence, or produces lasting changes in students' religious identities. Overall, Generative AI is neither inherently beneficial nor harmful in SKI learning. Its educational effects depend on algorithmic framing, institutional support, access to reliable sources, assessment conditions, and students' critical judgment. Although AI increasingly participates in the construction of Islamic historical knowledge and religious self-understanding, students and educational institutions retain the capacity to verify, challenge, reinterpret, and redirect the narratives it produces.

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