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Construction of Generation Z's Monotheism on Social Media: A Phenomenological Study of UIN Palu Students

Nursyam[1*], Kamridah[2], Rusli Takunas[3] Naimah[4] Makmur Harun[5]

[1] Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, UIN Datokarama Palu, Indonesia
[2] Faculty of Ushuluddin and Adab, UIN Datokarama Palu, Indonesia
[3] Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, UIN Datokarama Palu, Indonesia
[4] Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, UIN Datokarama Palu, Indonesia
[5] Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation fundamentally altered how Generation Z constructs aqidah (theology), making social media the primary religious information source and challenging traditional authorities. This study is vital because theological fragmentation risks superficiality and cognitive dissonance among future religious educators. Prior research neglected the specific phenomenological process of tauhid (monotheism) construction by Gen Z.

Utilizing Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, this qualitative study explored the "lived experience" of 18 Islamic Religious Education (PAI) students at UIN Datokarama Palu. Active social media users, selected via purposive sampling, were analyzed using Moustakas's method following in-depth interviews and digital document analysis.

The key finding is "Digital Epistemological Bricolage," characterized by five themes: liquid faith, algorithmic authority, micro-content theology, emotional resonance, and dialogical construction. The study concludes that religious authority has shifted from scholarly capacity to digital metrics. This urgently requires transformative pedagogy in Islamic higher education that integrates critical digital religious literacy to preserve theological depth.

KEYWORDS
Construction of Aqidah; Generation Z; Social Media; Phenomenology; Tauhid; Digital Religion.

Introduction

*Corresponding author: Nursyam ✉(nursyam@uindatokarama.ac.id), **Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training,UIN Datokarama Palu, Indonesia**

The digital transformation that has swept across the global world in the last two decades has broken down traditional barriers to knowledge transmission, fundamentally changing how humans interact, communicate, and build their religious understanding (Campbell, H. A., & Evolvi, G., 2020). Generation Z, defined by Dimock (2019) as the demographic cohort born between 1997 and 2012, is at the forefront of this transformation as digital natives who view device screens as an extension of their self-awareness. The latest data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2024) confirms that internet penetration among Indonesian youth is massive, with online and offline lives merging into a single continuum of experience. The sociological and theological implications of this fact are profound because platforms such as TikTok and YouTube have effectively replaced, or at least rivaled, the role of formal educational institutions, families, and traditional religious authorities as primary sources of religious reference (Campbell, 2020; Pandya, 2018). This shift in authority creates a new landscape where social media algorithms control the type of religious content consumed, often without adequate validity filters. In fact, it deviates from the principles of Ahlusunnah wa Jamaah creed (Ridwan, A., & Rustandi, R. (2025)

However, there is a significant gap in the academic literature regarding the impact of this digitalization on the fundamental dimensions of Islamic faith or theology. Most previous studies on religion and media, as mapped in the Digital Religion study (Campbell & Vitullo, 2016), tend to focus on sociological aspects such as the formation of online communities, digital ritual practices, or the negotiation of social identity alone. For example, the study of hijabers on Instagram by Baulch and Pramiyanti (2018) explores how piety is expressed visually and commodified as a middle-class lifestyle, rather than examining how theological beliefs are constructed. Similarly, Al-Rawi's (2017) analysis of Islam on YouTube highlights political debates, extremism, and the fragmentation of authority in the context of global conflict. The existing literature is still very limited in touching on the internalization of the understanding of tawhid at the cognitive and spiritual levels, leaving a big question about how the core doctrines of religion survive or change in cyberspace.

An evaluation of the above literature shows the urgency to go beyond analyzing surface phenomena to deeper structures of consciousness, given that faith is an essential foundation that determines a Muslim's worldview. Menchik's (2016) study on tolerance and democracy in Indonesia does provide valuable insights into the public values of Islamic organizations, but it does not explore the cognitive mechanisms of individuals in validating theological truths in an era of information overload. Meanwhile, Hoover's (2006) work on “religion in the media age” has laid the foundation that the

media is an environment where religion is reshaped, but it has not specifically dissected its impact on Islamic theology. This study positions itself to fill this gap by arguing that Generation Z's understanding of tawhid is no longer static or doctrinal as in textbooks, but has become liquid and is constantly negotiated through intense algorithmic interactions (Sunstein, 2017). This approach is important for understanding the shift from a single-authority-based religiosity to a fragmented religiosity.

Responding to these dynamics, this study focuses on students majoring in Islamic Education (PAI) at UIN Datokarama Palu who, according to the characteristics of their generation, are exposed to fragmented information flows while pursuing higher education (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The main question asked is: How does the phenomenological process occur in students' consciousness when they "encounter" theological content on social media, evaluate its truth, and integrate it into their belief system? Through a transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994), this study aims to reveal the "structure of experience" (lived experience) of subjects in constructing their theology. This study proposes the thesis that there is a phenomenon of Digital Epistemological Bricolage—a process of assembling eclectic theological knowledge from various pieces of digital content—which requires a reformulation of pedagogical approaches in Islamic education to remain relevant to the challenges of the times.

Literature Review

Digital Religion and the Shift in Religious Authority

Studies on Digital Religion have rapidly evolved from simply viewing the internet as a tool for disseminating religious information (online religion) to a fundamental understanding that the internet is an ontological space where religious practices are created and lived (online religion). Campbell and Vitullo (2016), in their comprehensive review, define the evolution of this study as a paradigm shift that highlights how media technology is no longer neutral, but actively shapes theology, authority structures, and the identity of faith communities. This definition affirms that media and religion have a mutually constitutive relationship, in which the logic of digital media permeates the very structure of religious understanding. This perspective is reinforced by Hoover's (2006) thinking, which states that in the media age, religion can no longer be understood separately from its mediatic context, making the digital space not just a channel, but the primary environment where contemporary religious meaning is constructed and renegotiated by its adherents.

An evaluation of the dynamics of Digital Religion reveals a shift in legitimacy from traditional hierarchies based on scientific sanad to a phenomenon categorized as "Algorithmic Authority." In this new mechanism, the validity of religious figures is often determined by search engine logic and social media metrics such as virality, number of followers, and engagement levels, rather than solely by moral integrity or depth of argument (Campbell, 2020). Pandya (2018) analyzes that this shift has flattened the religious hierarchy, giving a dominant stage to new actors—such as da'wah influencers—who have strong digital skills (content creativity) even without formal theological qualifications. This condition creates what Evolvi (2018) calls "hypermediated religious spaces," a fluid hybrid space where theological truth is validated through digital crowd consensus, which ultimately fragments the authority of established religious institutions.

Digital Epistemology and Religious Bricolage

The construction of faith is fundamentally an epistemological process, namely a person's cognitive and spiritual mechanism in validating binding theological truths. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, Al-Attas (2001) emphasizes that knowledge has a strict hierarchical structure and etiquette, specifically designed to prevent "epistemological confusion" in seekers of knowledge. However, this established order clashes sharply with the architecture of social media, which prioritizes the speed of data flow and the fragmentation of content (micro-content). This poses a serious challenge for Generation Z, who, according to their learning characteristics, are described by Seemiller and Grace (2016) as a highly pragmatic and visual group. Although they have unlimited access to information, the habit of consuming material in small pieces (snackable content) makes them prone to shallow understanding, where the process of acquiring knowledge, which should be reflective, turns into instant consumption of information that deconstructs the sanctity of knowledge transmission.

This phenomenon of fragmentation has given rise to a methodological practice categorized as Digital Religious Bricolage, a process of assembling a personal belief system by taking fragments of teachings from the online "religious marketplace" without being bound to a single, complete tradition or school of thought (Al-Rawi, A., 2019). In practical terms, a student might eclectically adopt theological views from Salafi figures on YouTube, social ethics from progressive influencers, and ritual practices from visual guides on Instagram. This process is further complicated by the echo chamber mechanism described by Sunstein (2017), in which algorithms isolate users in information bubbles that only reinforce their cognitive biases and hinder dialectical discourse. Furthermore, the validation of truth in this space is often not based on

intellectual rigor, but rather driven by what Abdel-Fadil (2019) describes as the politics of affect. Emotional resonance becomes the main determinant of doctrinal acceptance, which risks rendering the understanding of tawhid as a collection of incoherent and fragile fragments.

Method

This study chooses the issue of theological construction in the digital space as its main focus due to the epistemological urgency in which traditional religious authority is experiencing erosion due to the fragmentation of online information. To dissect this complex and personal phenomenon, the study uses a qualitative approach with a transcendental phenomenological design as formulated by Moustakas (1994). The reason for choosing this method is based on the need to reach the "essence" of the subject's experience (eidos) without being trapped in preconceptions or initial sociological theories. This approach allows researchers to delve into the deepest structures of students' consciousness—not just describing "what" content they consume, but "how" the cognitive and spiritual processes occur as they navigate the clash between formal campus doctrine and popular social media narratives. Thus, the resulting data is not statistical figures, but rich textual and structural descriptions of lived experience in theology in the age of algorithms.

The primary data source in this study was students majoring in Islamic Education (PAI) at UIN Datokarama Palu. Subject selection was conducted using purposive sampling with specific criteria: active students who belong to Generation Z (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), have high intensity of religious social media use, and experience theological understanding dynamics or negotiations due to exposure to digital content. The context of Islamic higher education in Indonesia, as analyzed by Lukens-Bull (2013), is crucial because these students are at the crossroads between strict Islamic scientific tradition (continuity) and digital modernity (conflict). Data collection was conducted using two main techniques: first, semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the subjects' personal narratives; second, digital ethnography by observing their interactions on social media platforms to verify the consistency between their verbal statements and their real-time consumption of theological content.

The data analysis process was carried out following Moustakas' (1994) systematic phenomenological stages, beginning with the Epoche or bracketing stage, in which the researcher suspends all personal judgments and theoretical biases to allow the phenomena to speak for themselves. The collected data then underwent a process

of horizontalization, which involved cataloging every significant statement from the subjects and assigning them equal weight. These statements are then grouped into meaning units and theme clusters to compile a “Textural Description” (what was experienced) and a “Structural Description” (how it was experienced, including emotional and cognitive factors). The final stage of analysis is an intuitive synthesis that combines the two descriptions to find the universal essence of the phenomenon of Digital Epistemological Bricolage. Through this methodological rigor, the validity of the findings is ensured through intersubjective verification among participants to ensure that the structure of experience described truly represents the reality of their consciousness.

Results

An in-depth analysis of the narratives of 18 informants reveals the phenomenon of Digital Epistemological Bricolage, in which the construction of students' beliefs no longer proceeds linearly but rather consists of an eclectic and fragmented assembly of theological fragments. Formally, their understanding of monotheism manifests as a hybrid “mosaic of faith” that mixes classical scriptural narratives with short visual content regardless of sectarian affiliation, creating a fluid but often inconsistent theology. A critical determinant of this phenomenon is the workings of “algorithmic authority” (Campbell, 2020) that presents content not based on the validity of sanad, but rather on emotional preferences or the politics of affect (Abdel-Fadil, 2019), as well as filter bubble mechanisms (Sunstein, 2018) that isolate them in a comfortable cognitive echo chamber. The transformative implication of this finding is a fundamental shift from passive doctrinal obedience to fragile “theological autonomy”; students are now positioned as active consumers of religion who have the authority to choose, but on the other hand experience serious epistemological shallowness that challenges the structure of formal educational authority (Lukens-Bull, 2013).

Forms of Understanding: Liquid Faith and Fragmentation

The first and most fundamental finding is a phenomenon that can be referred to as Liquid Faith. The majority of informants (78%) reported that their understanding of certain theological issues, such as the concepts of bid'ah, tawassul, or the attributes of God, was unstable and constantly changing in line with the latest content they consumed. In contrast to the concept of istiqamah in traditional understanding, the informants' beliefs show high plasticity towards digital exposure.

Informant AR provides a clear illustration of this phenomenon:

"*At first, I believed that tahlilan was bid'ah because I often watched Ustadz F's videos on YouTube saying so. But then I found another ustadz on TikTok who explained that tahlilan is permissible with strong arguments. I became confused, and ultimately my understanding kept changing depending on who I watched last*" (AR, 21 years old).

This narrative shows the absence of a strong epistemological "anchor." Students do not have a methodological framework (such as established ushul fiqh or kalam science) to filter information, so they are swayed by algorithmic serendipity—random exposure to content presented by algorithms. This is exacerbated by the phenomenon of Micro-content Theology, in which complex theological concepts are summarized into 15-60 second videos. Table 1 illustrates how media formats shape the depth of understanding produced.

Table 1. Categorization of Digital Learning Methods and Theological Impact

Content Category	***Format & Duration***	***Comprehension Characteristics***	***Informant Narrative***
Micro-Lectures	*TikTok/Reels (15-60 seconds)*	*Fragmentary, sloganistic, decontextualized.*	*"I learned about the attributes of Allah from a 30-second TikTok video. It was very short, but practical. The problem is that sometimes I feel that my understanding is superficial, like I only know the surface, not the depth." (DW, 22)*
Visual Quotes	*Instagram Feed (Images)*	*Emotional, aesthetic, focused on aphorisms.*	*"Personally, I really like short videos (like on TikTok or Reels) that feature short but meaningful quotes from lectures. In addition, Islamic motivational quotes with aesthetic designs are also interesting." (RCA, 20)*
Debat Online	*Video Clip of the Debate*	*Polarization, black and white thinking, tends to trigger inner conflict.*	*I feel confused and tired when I see religious debates on social media where people blame each other. (HA, 21)*

Source: Analysis of Interview Data and Digital Observation (2025)

Determining Factors: Algorithmic Authority and Emotional Resonance

The second factor that shapes this belief system is the shift in the source of validity of truth. This study found that Algorithmic Authority dominates traditional scientific authority. Students tend to place more trust in religious figures who have high digital metrics (followers, likes, views).

"*I trust an ustadz who has millions of followers on Instagram more than my own lecturer. Because if he has a lot of followers, it means that many people have proven that*

he is indeed good and right. It's impossible for millions of people to be wrong" (Informant NS, 20 years old).

This statement reflects an epistemological shift from "truth based on arguments" to "truth based on mass consensus." Social media algorithms, designed for virality, have inadvertently become the determining factor in who is considered authoritative. In addition, the factor of Emotional Resonance has become the main filter in receiving theological information. Content packaged with touching background music, emotional voice intonation, or dramatic visuals is more easily accepted as doctrinal truth than rational-intellectual studies. Thirteen out of 18 informants (72%) admitted that they judge the truth of a sermon based on the "feeling" it evokes—whether it makes them cry, gives them goosebumps, or excites them—rather than its argument structure.

Implications: Dialogical Construction and Epistemic Bubbles

The third finding highlights how this understanding is consolidated. Belief construction in the digital age is dialogical in nature. Students rarely receive information passively; they validate their new understanding through interactions in comment sections or chat groups (WhatsApp Groups) with their peers.

Table 2. Interaction Patterns and Knowledge Validation

VALIDATION MECHANISM	***DESCRIPTION***	***AUTHORITY STATUS***	***REPRESENTATIVE QUOTATION***
SOCIAL PROOFING	*Checking comments and number of likes.*	*Height (Mass Validation)*	*"I don't immediately believe what I read or watch. I usually share it with my college group first or ask questions in the comments section." (AF, 20)*
PEER NEGOTIATION	*Discussion in my college friends' WhatsApp group.*	*Determinant (Horizontal Validation)*	*"From debates with friends or discussions in the comments section, I gained many perspectives and eventually formed my own understanding, which is a combination of various points of view." (AF, 20)*
CROSS-PLATFORM	*Searching for comparison videos on other platforms.*	*Medium (Confirmation Bias)*	*"When I encounter contradictory or extreme religious content, I don't immediately react or comment. I prefer to seek clarification from other sources or ask my religious teacher" (HA, 21).*

Source: Interviews and Thematic Analysis (2025)

This process creates "peer-mediated theology." The danger is that if the peer group is homogeneous, an echo chamber will form, isolating students from different

perspectives, reinforcing biases, and in extreme cases, facilitating radicalization of understanding without correction from higher authorities.

Discussions

Digital Epistemological Bricolage: A New Theoretical Framework

The findings of this study substantively converge on a theoretical proposition regarding Digital Epistemological Bricolage, a phenomenon in which Islamic Education students act like "craftsmen" who construct their beliefs from fragments of information scattered across the internet. The data shows that the subjects no longer adopt a single, linear theological system, but rather assemble a unique theological hybridity: they take the spirit of purification from Salafi accounts, absorb spirituality from Sufi quotations, and adopt social ethics from hijrah influencers without realizing the potential internal contradictions between them. This phenomenon of modular personalized religion confirms the thesis of Hoover (2006) and Campbell (2020) that digital media is not merely a passive channel, but an active environment that restructures the way religion is understood. As a result, the construction of tawhid becomes highly fluid, where elements that were previously separated by sectarian barriers now merge into a single timeline on students' social media, creating an eclectic yet methodologically fragile religious identity.

A deep reflection on this data shows that the fundamental cause of Liquid Faith is the hegemony of media logic over religious logic. Social media algorithms work strictly based on the principle of attention economics, where the most valued content is that which most quickly triggers sensational or emotional responses, not that which is most profound in terms of reasoning. In this ecosystem, nuanced theology that requires long reflection (slow thinking) is systematically drowned out by content that triggers instant responses (fast thinking). This is in line with the concept of Algorithmic Authority described by Campbell (2020) and Pandya (2018), in which students unconsciously internalize popularity as a proxy for truth: "what goes viral is true". This cognitive distortion occurs because algorithmic machines do not distinguish between theological validity and statistical virality, thereby reducing religious authority to mere engagement numbers.

Further interpretation reveals the serious consequences of algorithmic hegemony, namely the creation of dangerous epistemic isolation. As warned by Sunstein (2018) in #Republic, algorithmic personalization creates filter bubbles that narrow users' theological insights to only what they like, not what they need to know. Students who interact with one piece of radical content will continue to be bombarded with similar

narratives, creating the optical illusion that these extreme views are the only truth in Islam. This condition is exacerbated by the dominance of the politics of affect as described by Abdel-Fadil (2019), where emotions become the main glue of religious identity. As a result, students experience an erosion of critical thinking; truth is no longer tested through intellectual dialectics, but rather felt through emotional resonance, making them vulnerable to manipulation by pop-pious narratives that are shallow but aesthetically appealing.

When compared with previous literature, these findings show a sharp contrast with the ideal concept of scientific structure in Islam as formulated by Al-Attas (2001). Al-Attas emphasizes hierarchy and etiquette to prevent confusion of knowledge, but the digital reality has flattened this hierarchy, causing a loss of discipline in placing scientific authority above the authority of popularity. Furthermore, these findings also shift Menchik's (2016) thesis, which views the formation of tolerance as a product of social organizations. The data from this study indicates that in the era of networked individualism, tolerance or intolerance is constructed at the individual level through the consumption of privatized media. This signifies a shift in the locus of authority from institutions (such as NU/Muhammadiyah or campuses) to individuals controlled by algorithms, challenging the old assumption about the stability of religious value transmission in Indonesia.

Responding to this epistemological disruption, this study recommends integrating “Critical Religious Digital Literacy” into the Islamic education curriculum. This goes beyond mere technical skills to mastery of meta-competencies: the ability to deconstruct algorithmic bias, distinguish epistemic authority from popular authority, and perform cross-source verification (tabayyun). The learning model must transform from merely transmitting doctrinal knowledge to facilitating the navigation of complex knowledge. Islamic education lecturers need to reposition themselves not as the sole source of knowledge, but as authoritative curators and mentors who guide students in constructing their theological bricolage. The goal is to help students assemble these pieces of digital information into a coherent, moderate, and scientifically accountable structure of religious belief, mitigating the risk of weakening faith amid a flood of information.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the religious beliefs of Generation Z Islamic Education students have undergone a fundamental transformation from a linear-authoritative transmission pattern to a phenomenon known as Digital Epistemological Bricolage. The findings show that students actively assemble their theological understanding by piecing

together fragments of information from various fragmented digital sources, creating an eclectic "mosaic of faith" that is often methodologically incoherent. In this process, the logic of social media—which prioritizes speed, visuality, and emotional resonance—has replaced the role of scientific sanad and formal curriculum as the main validators of truth. As a result, religious authority is no longer seen as a static sacred hierarchy, but rather as a fluid commodity whose validity is determined by popularity algorithms. This marks a significant cognitive shift in which "truth" is felt through affect (politics of affect) rather than understood through intellectual dialectics, placing students in a vulnerable position to doctrinal dilution and algorithmic radicalization.

Theoretically and conceptually, this study makes a significant contribution by filling a gap in the literature on Digital Religion, which has thus far focused too much on sociological-external aspects (such as rituals, identity, and online communities). This study successfully delves into a deeper realm, namely the dimension of aqidah or internal theology, and proves that digital media is capable of restructuring the way fundamental beliefs are constructed. These findings challenge traditional assumptions in Islamic epistemology about the stability of knowledge transmission and offer a new perspective that in the era of networked individualism, religious tolerance and moderation are no longer solely the product of social organizations, but rather the result of individual negotiations with algorithms. Furthermore, the use of a transcendental phenomenological approach in this study proves its effectiveness in revealing the structure of lived experience, which is often overlooked by quantitative surveys, providing a detailed micro-sociological map of how "algorithmic authority" works to influence the theological consciousness of prospective religious educators in Indonesia.

However, this study has methodological limitations that need to be acknowledged as notes for future studies. The focus on a qualitative approach with a limited number of informants from one higher education institution (UIN Datokarama Palu) makes these findings contextual and cannot be statistically generalized to represent the entire Muslim Generation Z population in Indonesia. Furthermore, this study mainly captures the cognitive aspects and subjective perceptions of students, but has not yet quantitatively measured the specific correlation between certain types of social media platforms (e.g., TikTok versus YouTube) and the level of radicalization or moderation of religious understanding. Therefore, further research is recommended to apply mixed-methods with a broader demographic reach, as well as conducting comparative analyses between platforms to see how different algorithm architectures specifically influence patterns of theological bricolage, in order to formulate more precise and impactful digital literacy strategies.

Author Contribution Statement

Nursyam contributed as the main concept developer, phenomenological methodology designer, and initial draft writer. Kamridah, Rusli Takunas, Naimah, Makmur Harun contributed to in-depth data analysis, theoretical findings interpretation, and critical revision of the article's substance and literature enrichment. All authors have approved this final manuscript and are responsible for all aspects of the work.

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