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Islamic Digital Literacy: An Analysis of Generation Z Students' Tabayyun Behavior in Facing Disinformation in State Universities

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the deconstruction of the meaning and practice of tabayyun among Generation Z students at State Universities (PTN) amidst the onslaught of religious disinformation. In the post-truth era , students are often trapped in a behavioral paradox; possessing high academic intelligence but being vulnerable to digital virality. Using qualitative methods with a phenomenological approach, this study collected data through in-depth interviews and digital participant observation on a number of Gen Z student informants. The results show a shift in the authority of truth from traditional religious authority to mass authority (social proof) and digital popularity. The failure of tabayyun practices is identified as originating from three main obstacles: the psychological dimension (confirmation bias), the social dimension (spiral of silence and FOMO), and the technical dimension (algorithm traps and echo chambers). As a solution, this study offers a reconstruction of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning model based on "Critical-Prophetic Reasoning" that integrates the methodology of hadith criticism with digital media literacy. This study concludes that tabayyun must be redefined not merely as a theological doctrine, but as a crucial digital survival skill for maintaining social harmony and the purity of religious understanding in the cyber public space.

Keywords: Islamic Digital Literacy, Tabayyun, Generation Z, Disinformation, Critical-Prophetic Reasoning.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's information age, the digital world has become the primary platform for people to consume information, including religious content. (Andriyana & Adrian, 2024) However, this convenience is accompanied by the threat of disinformation and *post-truth* , which are increasingly sophisticated due to the assistance of AI. In Indonesia, as the country with the largest Muslim population, the spread of hoaxes is often packaged in religious narratives to provoke public emotions, which, if left unchecked, can undermine social harmony and the purity of religious understanding itself. (Rifka Alkhilyatul Ma'rifat, I Made Suraharta, 2024a)

Generation Z students at state universities (PTN) are a *digital native group* with access to advanced technology and are prime targets for information flows. Ironically, despite their strong academic credentials, they often find themselves trapped in a culture *of virality* and *the fear of missing out* (FOMO) in the digital space. (Rachmi et al., 2024) In the heterogeneous campus environment of state universities, the speed of sharing content often outpaces the maturity of critical thinking, resulting in academic values sometimes fading when faced with emotional content. (Widyatama, 2007)

Although the concept of Tabayyun (verification) has been taught normatively in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) courses from elementary school to university, there is a wide gap between textual understanding and contextual practice. (Taufiq & Hasnida, 2026) Previous research has focused more on the effectiveness of the PAI curriculum in general, but very little has examined the psychological mechanisms and technical obstacles faced by Gen Z students when having to apply the ethics *of tabayyun* amidst the onslaught of personalized social media algorithms. (Rifka Alkhilyatul Ma'rifat, I Made Suraharta, 2024) The technical barriers faced by Gen Z students are closely related to the shift in Digital Religious Authority, where the truth of information is no longer based on a single authority but on digital popularity, which often triggers a state of automaticity, or the processing of information without critical awareness. (Rahmawati, 2021)

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to collide the classical ethical concept of Tabayyun with the dynamics of contemporary digital psychology, particularly the phenomena of *confirmation bias* and *echo chambers* that are characteristic of Generation Z interactions. In contrast to previous studies that tend to position Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as static textual material, this research offers a new perspective by dissecting the mechanism of students' cognitive "resistance" to the pull of social media algorithms. (Aslam, 2025) The novelty aspect is further emphasized by the use of a phenomenological approach to explore the reasons behind

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the paradox of student behavior, why individuals with high academic literacy in State Universities remain vulnerable to becoming agents of religious disinformation. (Rahmah, 2025) Thus, this research positions *tabayyun* not merely as a theological doctrine, but as a crucial *digital survival skill in the post-truth era* .

Specifically, this study aims to explore the depth of the meaning of the concept of *tabayyun* for Generation Z students and how this value is internalized in their digital information consumption patterns. This research also seeks to map various inhibiting factors, both internally such as emotional drives and *the Fear of Missing Out* (FOMO), and externally such as pressure from the campus social environment and algorithm manipulation, which often distort news verification practices. Through this analysis, the ultimate goal is to formulate a reconstruction of a more adaptive Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning model, namely shifting the teaching paradigm from merely conveying the laws of information fiqh to developing critical-prophetic reasoning capable of addressing the challenges of disinformation in the university environment.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore students' subjective experiences and behaviors related to *tabayyun practices* in digital spaces. The researchers positioned themselves as key instruments in capturing the meaning behind informants' actions in addressing the flow of disinformation.

1) Research Subjects (Informants)

   Informants were selected using *purposive sampling* , selecting Generation Z students at state universities who actively use social media (at least 5-8 hours per day) and come from various organizational backgrounds. This aimed to obtain varied data related to their information filtering patterns.

2) Data collection technique

   The main data in this study were collected through two main techniques:

   1. In *-depth Interviews* : Interviews were conducted semi-structured using a flexible interview guide. Researchers explored cognitive aspects (understanding *tabayyun*), affective aspects (feelings when receiving viral news), and confrontational aspects (what to do when encountering a hoax). Interviews were conducted both offline and online to create a relaxed yet in-depth discussion atmosphere.
   2. Digital Participatory Observation: Researchers observed informants' activities on campus, particularly interactions in digital discussion groups (such as year-long

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WhatsApp groups or campus community forums). Observations focused on how informants responded to provocative or uncertain information; whether they reacted immediately, verified it, or tended to be passive (silent).

3) Data analysis

The data obtained was then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes: (Ash-shiddiqi et al., 2025)

a) Data Reduction: Simplifying interview results and observation notes relevant to the focus *of tabayyun* .
b) Data Display *:* Compiling a narrative from student interview excerpts to show their behavioral patterns.
c) Conclusion Drawing: Connecting field findings with digital literacy theory and PAI values to answer research problems.

4) Data Validity (Triangulation)

To ensure data validity, researchers used technical triangulation, comparing what informants said during interviews with what they actually did when observed in digital groups. This was crucial to assess the consistency between students' theoretical understanding of *tabayyun* and their actual practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Deconstructing the Meaning of Tabayyun: Gen Z Students' Perceptions of Digital Truth Authority

Early in this research, an interesting paradox emerged regarding how Generation Z students at state universities (PTN) interpret the concept of tabayyun. Normatively, all informants understood tabayyun as a religious commandment that must be followed before disseminating information. However, when integrated into the digital realm, the meaning of tabayyun undergoes deconstruction or a shift in values.

Based on interviews, the majority of students no longer refer to traditional authorities (such as yellow books or official websites of religious institutions) as the first step in verification. They tend to use "mass authority" as an indicator of truth.

Informant (4th Semester Student):

"Honestly, Sis, when a preaching video appears on FYP, I don't immediately check the book or ask the ustadz. I look at the comments section first. If the comments are mostly 'Masya Allah' or 'Aamiin,' I assume it's true. But if there are a lot of people arguing or calling it a hoax, then I have doubts."

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Informant (Semester 2 Student):

> *"For me, accounts with a blue checkmark or millions of followers already have 'authority.' We're Gen Z, after all, and we rarely have time for in-depth research. So, I often use account popularity as a shortcut to determine whether information is trustworthy or not* ."

The above field findings can be analyzed through the theory of Digital Religious Authority developed by Heidi Campbell. Campbell explains that in the digital era, religious authority no longer relies solely on *kinship* (lineage) or *pedagogy* (certificate/sanad), but rather shifts towards "Performance" and "Popularity". (Panigoro, 2025) In the context of state university students, the finding that they place more trust in "blue tick accounts" or "number of likes" indicates that *tabayyun* is no longer understood as a process of verifying essential truth, but rather a verification of digital popularity.

Psychologically, students' behavior of relying on the comment section as an indicator of truth aligns with the concept of "Social Proof" in cognitive theory. (Rachman et al., 2026) Gen Z students tend to feel intellectually secure when following the majority (mass) opinion, even though in Islamic law, truth is not determined by majority vote, but by the validity of the source (sanad). (Mutmainah, 2023)

Furthermore, when viewed from the perspective of Media Literacy Theory (James W. Potter), students are currently in the *Automaticity stage* . They process information automatically without full awareness due to excessive information overload. *(* Sulistya et al., 2024) It is at this point that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) values of reflective and careful *tabayyun (reflection) clash with the nature of social media, which demands speed.*

In the perspective of interpretation, the behavior of "Selective Tabayyun" found in informants is a form of ignoring the spirit of QS. Al-Hujurat: 6. The verse uses the word *"Fatabayyanu"* (so seek clarity), which according to M. Quraish Shihab contains the meaning of sincerity and deep thoroughness. (Fauzi, 2024) However, students decompose the meaning of "sincerity" to simply "see netizen reactions". As a result, *tabayyun* which should be a tool for liberation from ignorance (*antajhalu*) is actually trapped in an echo chamber *that* strengthens prejudice.

Anatomy of Tabayyun Barriers: Ego, Algorithms, and FOMO Culture

Analysis of field data shows that the tabayyun behavior of Generation Z students in state universities does not occur in a vacuum, but rather collides with various systemic barriers. This failure to verify information can be categorized into three main dimensions: psychological-

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personal, socio-cultural, and technical-structural. (Tarore, 2025)

Psychological-Personal Dimension: Hegemony *of Confirmation Bias*

This research finding indicates a tendency toward "Selective Tabayyun." Psychologically, students often fall into confirmation *bias* , where the urge to confirm existing beliefs is stronger than the desire to seek objective truth. In this context, information that aligns with a particular political or religious group's views is readily accepted without critical filtering.

Theologically, this phenomenon reflects the dominance *of lust* in the cognitive process, which hinders the actualization of the value of justice (*al-'adl*) in evaluating news. This aligns with Raymond Nickerson's view of the human tendency to ignore contrary evidence in order to maintain intellectual comfort. (Zakiyyah, 2024)

Socio-Cultural Dimension: Conformity Pressure and *the Spiral of Silence*

The second barrier arises from the dynamics of interactions within the heterogeneous yet fragmented digital environment of state universities. A Spiral *of Silence phenomenon has been identified* , where students who doubt the validity of information tend to remain silent to avoid social isolation or conflict with peers. (Mareta et al., 2026)

The culture of FOMO (*Fear of Missing Out*) also exacerbates the situation. The speed with which viral content is shared is often seen as a higher form of social presence than its accuracy. As a result, the Islamic value of *Al-Anah* (accuracy) is eclipsed by the drive to be at the forefront of digital information flows, even at the expense of truth (*ash-shihhah*). (Rakhimullah, 2025)

Technical-Structural Dimension: Algorithmic Meshes and *Echo Chambers*

Structurally, student behavior is conditioned by the design of social media algorithms that create *echo chambers* . Data reduction shows that students at state universities are often trapped in a uniform flow of information, thus losing their comparative perspective. (Binus, 2025)

The existence of this algorithm technically limits the effectiveness of *tabayyun (verification*), as students feel they have verified information simply because they see the same information repeated by multiple accounts (which is actually the result of the algorithm's personalization). (Muslim & Dorien, 2021) In Islamic digital literacy, this condition is referred to as "critical death" due to technological manipulation, which requires a high level of technical awareness (digital literacy) to escape the filter bubble trap. (Fatah et al., 2025)

Overall, the analysis of Generation Z student behavior in state universities (PTN) indicates that the failure to practice *tabayyun* is not caused by a deficit in religious knowledge, but rather

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the result of a complex interaction between internal and external factors. The synthesis of these findings reveals a multi-layered state of "critical paralysis," starting from a cognitive failure to separate personal emotions from the objectivity of data (*confirmation bias*), which is then exacerbated by the social burden of group conformity pressure that kills the moral courage to be critical (*spiral of silence*). This condition is increasingly locked systemically by the trap of social media algorithms that imprison students in a digital echo chamber, so that the process of verifying information is often only pseudo and circular within a homogeneous filter bubble.

The implications of this synthesis emphasize that Islamic digital literacy can no longer be taught solely as a static doctrine of Islamic jurisprudence. A transformation toward critical-prophetic reasoning is needed, capable of balancing the speed of information flow with precision (*al-anah*) and spiritual resilience to conquer personal ego for the sake of universal truth. Without synchronization between technical intelligence in detecting algorithmic manipulation and the strength of *the shaja'ah character* in penetrating social pressures, the concept *of tabayyun* will remain trapped as a normative theory that fails to respond to the realities of the times. Therefore, strengthening digital literacy in higher education must be directed at establishing an ecosystem that supports students' cognitive resilience so they can become responsible information navigators amidst an ocean of disinformation.

Actualization of Islamic Digital Literacy in Islamic Religious Education towards Critical-Prophetic Reasoning

As a solution to the disparity between theological understanding and digital practice, this section formulates a new direction for the actualization of Islamic digital literacy in state universities. This actualization requires a paradigm shift in Islamic Religious Education learning from a legal-formal approach to a more functional-contextual one.

Curriculum Reorientation: Integration of Hadith Methodology in Digital Literacy

The first transformation began with reconstructing the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum content to make it more adaptive to the phenomenon of disinformation. Reducing student needs demonstrates that teaching *tabayyun* (reference text) is not sufficient merely to convey verse arguments but must be integrated with the "Criticism of Sanad and Matan" method adapted to the digital context. Students need to be trained to trace the original source of information (sanad verification) and logically analyze content (matan verification) as technical instruments for filtering information. Thus, Islamic digital literacy is transformed into a technical skill with a strong spiritual foundation. (Anwar,

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2026)

Internalizing *the Syaja'ah Character* as the Foundation of Digital Resilience

The solution to the *spiral of silence* lies in strengthening the character *of Syaja'ah* (moral courage) and *Izzah* (intellectual honor). Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at state universities must be able to develop students' mentality so they do not become blind followers (*imma'ah*) in the digital ecosystem. This character strengthening aims to provide students with the spiritual resilience to dare to correct misinformation in the digital public space, even when faced with the flow of majority opinion. (Busari et al., 2025) From this perspective, *tabayyun* is positioned as a form of intellectual jihad in maintaining the purity of information and social harmony within society.

Creating a Campus Ecosystem as *a Digital Sanctuary*

The actualization of Islamic digital literacy also demands the creation of a supportive campus ecosystem. State universities (PTN) must act as *Digital Sanctuaries* , or safe spaces for critical discourse. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lecturers no longer serve as the sole source of authority for truth, but rather as facilitators, encouraging students to methodologically question any provocative information. (Yudhiantara & Martitia, 2023) By building an academic culture that values openness and verification, *tabayyun* will become institutionalized as a collective student culture, not merely a sporadic individual task. (Busari et al., 2025)

The synthesis of all these discussions confirms that the future of Islamic digital literacy in higher education hinges on successfully developing Critical-Prophetic Reasoning. This reasoning combines cognitive intelligence to analyze the complexity of algorithms with spiritual intelligence to maintain moral integrity in cyberspace. Through this approach, Islamic Religious Education is no longer viewed as static memorization, but rather as a dynamic navigational compass for Gen Z students.

The conclusion of this reorientation suggests that *tabayyun* must be reduced to a crucial digital *survival skill in the post- truth era* . Ultimately, an adaptive Islamic education (PAI) transformation will produce state university graduates who are not only academically intelligent but also possess the character strength to become agents *of change* capable of breaking the chain of disinformation for the public good and the purity of religious teachings.

CLOSING

Based on the analysis and discussion presented, this study concludes that the practice of

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tabayyun among Generation Z students at state universities faces complex and multi-layered challenges. Theoretically, students understand *tabayyun* as a normative obligation, but in practice, this meaning is deconstructed by the logic of social media. Students tend to replace verification of substance with verification of popularity, where indicators of truth shift to the number of followers, blue checkmarks, and majority sentiment in the comments section.

The failure of *tabayyun (Islamic teaching)* is triggered by the interplay between personal *confirmation bias , social conformity pressures (the spiral of silence*), and the dominance of algorithms that confine students to *echo chambers* . These findings emphasize that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in higher education is no longer sufficient as mere textual memorization. A paradigm shift toward the development of "Critical-Prophetic Reasoning" is needed, an approach that synergizes digital technical intelligence with moral-spiritual integrity.

As a practical implication, the reconstruction of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum must begin to adopt the methodology of critical sanad and matan in the context of digital information verification and build a campus ecosystem as a *digital sanctuary* . By positioning *tabayyun* as a *digital survival skill* , students are expected to be able to transform from mere reactive consumers of information into agents of enlightenment (*agents of change*) capable of breaking the chain of disinformation and maintaining the clarity of public reasoning in the digital era **.**

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