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Original Article

Digital Authority and Islamic Legal Reasoning: A Comparative Study of AI-Generated and Human-Issued *Fatāwā*

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ABSTRACT

In today's digital world, artificial intelligence is becoming more common in every area of modern life, even religion. Increasingly, Muslims globally have been looking to AI chatbots for religious guidance about questions once reserved for qualified Islamic scholars. This paper compares the *fatāwā* produced by ChatGPT [model version GPT-4o], the most wide-ranging and deployed generative AI language model in human history to date with those of traditional Islamic institutions and contemporary Islamic scholars on a controversial contemporary topic yoga to identify whether or not the output of AI could ever be said in good faith to represent Islam. ChatGPT was chosen for its preeminence: with over 100 million active users, it's the most likely A.I. tool Muslim laypeople turn to for answers to religious questions. However, AI is an evolving subject, and the results of this study pertain only to GPT-4o. Future models will not behave in the same way, and this should be regarded as a time-locked contribution. This study uses a comparative qualitative approach in examining fourteen human-authored *fatāwā* related to yoga obtained from publicly available online archives only, and therefore mirrors content that ChatGPT could have reasonably acquired. Each *fatwā* was presented to ChatGPT as a question, and then its response was evaluated according to factual correctness, citations of Islamic literature (if any), use of legal reasoning (*Uṣūl al-Fiqh*), and whether or not the original ruling remained intact. The results indicate that ChatGPT answered correctly six out of fourteen times, while it failed eight times. This failure reflects a systematic bias toward permissiveness: ChatGPT tends to rely on secondary sources rather than consulting authoritative collections of *fatāwā*, or at least in criticizing schools of thought where *fatāwā* have arisen. The rest of the paper seeks to argue that AI programs like ChatGPT can never achieve the status of an Islamic judge (*fatwā*). This assumes an important basis of digital literacies from Muslim users, integrating Islamic principles into replicable design systems for AIs with credentials such as scholars working alongside tech designers, and a broader rethinking of what ethical AI means and how to best be ethical about it in ways that speak to the life-worlds of the relevant Muslim religious contexts.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; ChatGPT; *Fatāwā*; Islamic Law, *uṣūl al-Fiqh*, Digital Islam.

Introduction

The ongoing digital transformations of modern life have radically changed the processes involved in all facets of knowledge production, distribution, and consumption. From health care to education to personal finance, decision systems using AI have now become embedded in processes once performed only by trained human experts. Even religion, one of the most tradition-bound, sacred-authority-driven systems ever invented by humankind, has been swept up in this change. Muslims across the globe are now on their smartphones listening to Qur'anic recitation, attending online lectures delivered by scholars in distant regions, or using digital *fatwā* portals billed as "official" that are maintained by Islamic institutions. In this respect, the question is not, as it used to be, whether digital technology edges into Islamic religious practice but what happens when that technology goes beyond delivering human scholarship and starts finding its own answers to questions of religion.

The proliferation of AI chatbots makes the question timely. With help from platforms like ChatGPT, anyone anywhere in the world can type a query about religion and receive an immediate, articulate, confident answer. For many users, especially those with minimal access to qualified professors or who like the privacy and speed of a digital interface, these answers have the sheen of authoritative knowledge. But in Islamic tradition, a *fatwā* or religious legal opinion is more than an answer. It stems from deep scholarly training, knowledge of the Qur'an and Hadith by heart in Arabic, learned application of *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (the principles behind Islamic jurisprudence), and sensitivity to the circumstances of the individual who poses a question. The scholar who issues it (*Muftī*) has a moral and religious duty for the *fatwā* they provide. An AI system is under none of that obligation and has none of those qualifications.

This paper investigates the significance of that gap by presenting the first systematic empirical comparison between AI-generated *fatāwā* and human ones on a well-defined subject. The chosen subject is yoga as a modern exercise with practitioners across the globe, about which debate has raged over its Islamic status through several scholarly traditions, legal schools, and Muslim communities around the world. Yoga was selected not because the study aims to solve that debate, but because it provides an ideal empirical test case: it is a genuinely contested modern issue; it has generated a large corpus of publicly available online *fatāwā* issued by institutions and scholars across multiple jurisprudential traditions and global geographic regions; and ChatGPT will have, in theory, sufficient data on which to provide good answers. Coming to the main inquiry of this paper, it is simple but monumental: when an average Muslim inquiry about yoga using ChatGPT, does he receive accurate and dependable answers?

The study's results suggest that the answer is mostly no: In six out of 14 cases, ChatGPT was right; in eight, it was wrong. The errors were not random. The approach was consistent: ChatGPT methodically played down authoritative judgments, fabricated permissive positions from inside the sources, and defaulted to secondary- and unofficial material as it avoided verified collections of *fatāwā*. These patterns cast a long shadow on larger questions, about the role of artificial intelligence in Islamic life and how developers, as well as Muslim people who use those tools, should think about how they measure and traverse this new uncertain terrain.

Literature Review

Discussion of AI in academia is evolving rapidly, it began long before the state-of-the-art large language models used today but has exploded over the last few years. Brynjolfsson and McAfee were some of the first to map out the scale of artificial intelligence's economic and

social effects, making the case that its ability to take over work formerly performed by skilled human beings represented a historic divide between technology (digital economy) and human effort.¹ Pasquale qualified this optimism with an important caveat: The mechanics of A.I. systems today work as a black box for most human beings; they have no meaningful audit, or way to see the things they are fighting and thus, no real path for contesting or regulating them.² Crawford was addressing this worry, on the level of AI's physical and political infrastructure that making visible how these systems were built with the interests and values of the people who build them.³

These foundational critiques are relevant to the current study because they address identified shared concerns: what might look like neutral and helpful AI systems can codify hidden presumptions and amplify biases from their training environment. When those systems enter the realm of religion, the stakes for such latent bias grow much larger. The corpus of past text contains everything from blog posts and message boards to books, news articles, and academic papers.

This section examines how ChatGPT performs against Islamic *fatāwā*, but to do so, we need to understand, at least in essence, how large language models (LLMs) work. ChatGPT uses transformer-based architecture trained on vast amounts of text from the internet, books, and other digital resources. It does not access stored facts like a database. Instead, it produces its output by predicting one word at a time, the most statistically likely continuation to any input, depending on patterns in its training data. Brown et al.'s seminal paper on GPT-3, the earlier architecture, the authors refer to this approach as “few-shot learning” and showed how very large models trained on heterogeneous text could achieve impressive performance across a variety of tasks without being explicitly programmed for any of the tasks.⁴

OpenAI's own technical report on GPT-4 noted that it showed marked improvement in reasoning and factual accuracy compared to past iterations but also found that the model still “hallucinate[s] facts,” producing plausible-sounding but wrong or completely made-up information with confidence.⁵ Bender et al.'s influential critique sometimes dubbed the “Stochastic Parrots” paper went further, claiming that LLMs do not have an understanding of language or meaning; they merely juggle statistical patterns in text, generating outputs that seem sensible but are detached from any real-world knowledge they may resemble.⁶

Ji et al.'s systematic survey of hallucination in natural language generation concluded that this problem is structural, not incidental, and is especially severe in domains where precise

¹Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 11–12.

²Frank Pasquale, *New Laws of Robotics: Defending Human Expertise in the Age of AI* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 119–28.

³Kate Crawford, *The Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 55–59.

⁴Tom Brown et al., “Language Models Are Few-Shot Learners,” in *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems* 33, ed. H. Larochelle et al. (Red Hook, NY: Curran Associates, 2020), 1877–1901, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2005.14165>.

⁵OpenAI, “GPT-4 Technical Report,” March 2023, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2303.08774>.

⁶Emily M. Bender et al., “On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?” in *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency* (New York: ACM, 2021), 610–23, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3442188.3445922>.

factual knowledge is key to success, such as medicine and law in religious jurisprudence.⁷ These technical realities matter directly to the findings of this paper. When ChatGPT has said that a scholar hasn't issued a *fatwā* on yoga or cited a media article rather than an official opinion, or inferred permissiveness from the strict prohibition in question, it is not lying or making a willful decision. It is producing statistically likely text based upon patterns from data that may be incomplete, biased toward popular or broadly circulated content, or just incorrect. Therefore, knowing this mechanism underlying errors is crucial in interpreting the types of errors presented herein and preventing the misunderstanding that AI could someday be made reliable in these areas merely with more information.⁸

Well before ChatGPT, Islam (and other faiths) had begun to experience transformation in the circulation of knowledge and construction of religious authority through the internet. Gary Bunt's groundbreaking work on cyber-Islamic environments depicted the internet as generating new zones of Islamic discussion that echoed and paralleled established scholarly structures, yet making a wider range of opinions available to ordinary Muslims, who could now sidestep traditional hierarchies of faith.⁹ Jon Anderson reported that the internet had created a new class of Islamic interpreters as savvy Muslims who lack formal religious training but use digital media to discuss and disseminate religious material, which in turn disrupted traditional *Ulamā* gatekeeping.¹⁰ Eickelman and Piscatori's analysis of Muslim politics showed that this democratization of access to religious content didn't eliminate the demand for authority; it simply atomized it, producing a landscape in which multiple aspirant voices lay claim to legitimacy simultaneously.¹¹

Gräf's study of Shaykh Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī and the digital world focused on how established authorities are navigating their new environment, utilizing online *fatwā* platforms to broaden their reach globally, which subsequently positively affected or confirmed their traditional scholarly capital.¹² The available studies provide the narrative background against which AI-generated *fatāwā* will need to be contextualized. The problem of content online that presents misleading information about religion isn't new; it's just that A.I. makes it faster, more confident in tone, more personalized, and far more difficult for ordinary users to critically assess. AI did not arrive in a realm of established, verifiable knowledge; it is sweeping into an already-challenged and wedge-shaped information environment and adding another layer of mechanized, authoritative-sounding content to it.

To understand why AI-generated *fatāwā* are problematic, we need to understand what a *fatwā* is and how it regenerates its authority. The jointly authored volume by Masud, Messick, and Powers offers what might be considered the canonical scholarly account: a *fatwā* is not

⁷Ziwei Ji et al., "Survey of Hallucination in Natural Language Generation," *ACM Computing Surveys* 55, no. 12 (2023): 1–38, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3571730>.

⁸ Gary R. Bunt, *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 1–12.

⁹ Gary R. Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 45–60.

¹⁰ Jon W. Anderson, "The Internet and Islam's New Interpreters," in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 45–60.

¹¹ Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 37–55.

¹² Bettina Gräf, "Sheikh Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī in Cyberspace," *Die Welt des Islams* 47, no. 3–4 (2007): 403–21.

merely a response to a question, but rather the product of a complex process of *ijtihād* in which a qualified scholar applies the sources and principles of Islamic law to a particular situation, taking into consideration the circumstances of the questioner, relevant legal precedents, and the objectives of the Shari'a.¹³ Messick's study of the calligraphic state showed how the authority of a written religious text was historically inseparable from the identity and reputation of its author, a dynamic that digital and AI-generated content completely disrupts by decoupling text from identifiable human authorship.¹⁴

Hallaq's work on the origins of Islamic law and on the *Shari'a* more broadly demonstrated that the legal system of Islam is not a static code to be looked up but a living tradition of interpretive practice, in which the methodology of reasoning is as important as the conclusion reached.¹⁵ Skovgaard-Petersen's study of *Dār al-Iftā'* Egypt showed in detail how a significant *fatwā*-issuing institution negotiates tradition, context, and public need, an exercise in institutional wisdom that no algorithm can replace.¹⁶ These intellectual frameworks explain why the process of creating a *fatwā* is just as important as its outcome. A *fatwā* based on solid legal reasoning and issued by a qualified scholar, even if another scholar comes to a different conclusion, is thus religiously valid. A *fatwā* generated by the statistical text production has no such legitimacy, even if its conclusion accidentally matches that of a real scholar.

Islamic studies scholars have begun to weigh in with different opinions on the expanding role of A.I. Note that Chaudhary makes the most extreme theological critique so far, claiming that AI is, in fact, a Western secular system projected over Islamic sacred knowledge. Algorithmic systems, limited by data, risk generating religious guidance that is deeply un-Islamic.¹⁷ Malik has a more nuanced perspective; he also sees risks but asserts that A.I. could if carefully regulated in many ways enliven Islamic intellectual life by making it easier to access knowledge, and complement rather than replace scholarly enterprises.¹⁸ Khalili addresses this question from a Sufi perspective, contending that to respond with fear is incorrect: operate from a stance of love and humility, and moral *metanoia*; in none of which can machines partake, so this is how you fight them.¹⁹ Celik's philosophical inquiry into the distinctive features of both AI and human being in Islamic theology turns out for him to be a way to some bleak conclusions about the disqualified nature of, even bona fide (synthetic) religious reasoning by artificial

¹³Muhammad Khalid Masud, Brinkley Messick, and David S. Powers, eds., *Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftīs and Their Fatwās* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3–32.

¹⁴Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 140–60.

¹⁵Wael B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 102–4., Wael B. Hallaq, *Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 159–235.

¹⁶Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftīs and Fatwās of the Dār al-Iftā'* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 5–20.

¹⁷Mohammad Yaqub Chaudhary, "Augmented Reality, Artificial Intelligence, and the Re-Enchantment of the World," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 54, no. 2 (June 2019): 454–478.

¹⁸Shoaib A. Malik, "Artificial Intelligence and Islamic Thought: Two Distinctive Challenges," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 8, no. 2 (2024): 108–15, <https://doi.org/10.2979/JIMS.00020>.

¹⁹A. Khalili, *Artificial Intelligence: A Kalam and Sufi Perspective*, June 14, 2023. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378741835_Artificial_Intelligence_A_Kalam_and_Sufi_Perspective

systems the soul, moral agency and spiritual aspiration all centrally defining features of the *al-insān-al-kāmil*, unique or different being in Islam.²⁰

Ramadan's larger project on Islamic ethics and reform is relevant here too. He has consistently argued that doing proper *ijtihād*, in the sense of performing authentic Islamic jurisprudence with respect to modernity while remaining true to its principles, requires scholars who are well-acquainted with both the Islamic tradition and the contemporary world — scholars capable of genuine *ijtihād*.²¹ What's lacking among all this literature and what this paper seeks to do is any empirical investigation into how well AI does at attempting to represent the specifics of Islamic rulings. That dispute is largely theoretical at this point. Instead, this study brings the debate back to what's on record and truer territory: not whether A.I. should, in theory, issue *fatāwā* at all but rather whether it does so accurately in practice. The answer has immediate implications for millions of Muslims already using these tools.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative qualitative research design. Our unit of analysis is the individual *fatwā* pair: a human-generated *fatwā* about yoga and ChatGPT's response to a version of the same question. Each pair is systematically compared across four dimensions: (1) legal ruling correctness, (2) sources quality and verifiability, (3) application of Islamic legal reasoning to the answer given, and (4) tone & presentation. We then perform thematic analysis across all fourteen pairs to identify common themes in ChatGPT's behavior. Such an exploratory study is suitable for fields of Islamic studies where formal and standard measurement instruments are not yet available, thus following qualitative research convention in the vocabulary of Islamic studies.

ChatGPT was chosen for this study based on various criteria. First, it is the most popular AI chatbot around the world. OpenAI publicly released it in November 2022, attracted hundreds of millions of users globally and has become the dominant platform for AI-generated text across languages, cultures, and contexts. If any AI tool is being consulted by Muslims for religious guidance and the evidence strongly suggests that this is happening ChatGPT is by far the most likely platform involved. Second, ChatGPT's interface is designed to produce confident, fluent, authoritative-sounding answers to any question, including religious ones, with no built-in warning that it lacks religious training or legal authority. This design characteristic makes it uniquely important to evaluate in a religious context. Third, its accessibility across devices and languages, without requiring technical expertise or institutional affiliation, means that it reaches the population precisely most in need of accurate guidance: ordinary Muslims who may not have easy access to qualified scholars.

All data were collected using ChatGPT (GPT-4o), the model version in use during the study period, June 2025. This specification matters because AI models get updated and replaced quite often; asking the same question to another version of ChatGPT might yield different results. The results discussed herein are thus specific to GPT-4o and should not be assumed to generalize to other versions or different AI platforms. It is also important to consider how other AI tools such as Google's Gemini, Microsoft's Copilot, and up-and-coming Islamic-oriented AI programs that might respond differently to the same questions. Some of those tools may be

²⁰Yusuf Çelik, "Answering Divine Love: Human Distinctiveness in the Light of Islam and Artificial Superintelligence," *Sophia* 62 (2023): 679–96.

²¹Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–30.

better or worse than ChatGPT at portraying the legal knowledge of Islam. Whether purpose-built Islamic AI systems would be better than general-purpose tools like ChatGPT is a significant question and warrants focused future research. So, the current study is not attempting to assess the performance of AI overall and in general; it assesses the performance of one model on one type of question, and its conclusions only apply within that domain.

Fourteen human-issued *fatāwā* on yoga were chosen for analysis. These *fatāwā* were selected from the total population of substantive, publicly available online *fatāwā* on yoga from well-known Islamic institutions and scholars that were in existence at the time of data collection. The choice to restrict the sample to online sources was intentional and methodologically significant: This study seeks to assess ChatGPT on fairgrounds, assessing it only against material that it could reasonably have accessed in its training and via its browsing capabilities. *Fatāwā* from classical works, or institutionally owned texts kept in private collections, were ruled out not because they are less important, but it would be unfair to make ChatGPT compete against sources it cannot access. The fourteen selected *fatāwā* represent a geographically and jurisprudentially diverse set of institutions and scholars, including bodies from Egypt, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and Malaysia, as well as South Africa and Zambia, to Pakistan and Qatar, and representing jurisprudential orientations that include Shafi'i to Hanbali to Hanafi, among others. This diversity means that the analysis captures every kind of scholarly position on the issue, rather than testing ChatGPT only against opinions it is best positioned to hold.

For clarity and consistency in evaluation, each response generated by ChatGPT for one of our human *fatāwā* was evaluated against the original human *fatwā* and classified into one of two categories: accurate or inaccurate. A response was considered accurate if ChatGPT's stated conclusion about whether yoga was permissible matched the conclusion of the official *fatwā*, however well-supported or detailed that reasoning may have been. A response was deemed incorrect if the conclusion reached by ChatGPT contradicted an official *fatwā*, if it invented a ruling that could not be found in any documented source, if it denied the existence of a *fatwā* that is publicly available, or if it misattributed a given ruling to an incorrect scholar or institution such that this reversed its meaning.

Because this binary classification either accurate or inaccurate was more straightforward than a complicated multi-tiered system, it was also easy to apply universally; it also directly confronts the principal question this study aims to answer: will ChatGPT provide users with whatever they'll need to reach the correct determination or not? Aside from that major categorization, we also made notes of some secondary traits (e.g., source: did ChatGPT reference official [*fatwā*] portals? secondary sources? or no verifiable source?), protectionism (cautionary versus neutral versus permissively framed), and fabrication versus inference. These extra results bolster some of the thematic narratives detailed in section Comparative Analysis and Discussion, but do not affect the overall accuracy classification.

Data Collection Procedure

Each of the fourteen *fatāwā* was converted into a simple, neutral question and submitted individually to ChatGPT (GPT-4o). Questions were phrased in plain language without technical Islamic terminology and without leading language that might suggest a preferred answer. For instance: "What's MUI's *fatwā* on yoga?" or "What does Dr. Zakir Naik say on yoga in Islam"? All questions were asked in one session to minimize the potential of carryover effects from previous questions. No follow-up questions, corrections, or clarifications were made after that first prompt. The first technique imitates the way an average user would ask for religious

advice on ChatGPT. The responses were all logged in real time for transparency and replicability, along with links to the sessions themselves.

Human-Issued *Fatāwā* on Yoga

This section refers to the *fatāwā* of fourteen well-known Islamic scholars and institutions concerning yoga. The *fatāwā* fall into two broad categories: complete prohibition and conditional permissibility. The summaries below are directly sourced from the official sources in footnotes. Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah (Egypt) ruled that if yoga is “physical movement,” it does not in itself violate Islam, but the use of the word “yoga” per se is forbidden due to its polytheistic origins. Each culture’s appropriation of yoga’s respective belief systems, like chakras and guru, was condemned as a violation of their prophetic imaginations.”²² Sheikh Assim al-Hakeem denounced yoga, insisting that it was an example of *tashabbuh* (imitation of the non-Muslims), and cited its teaching of religious pluralism, which is a central tenet despised by Islamic orthodoxy.²³

AMJA (Dr. Hatem al-Haj) acknowledged the religious origins of yoga but allowed it if treated as a physical exercise devoid of any mantras, spiritual postures or worship. Avoiding evocation of Hindu ritual, he added, meant tweaking poses.²⁴ All forms of yoga are *ḥarām*, Dr. Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid declared, because it is inextricably linked with *shirk* (ascribing partners to God), regardless of what intention those practicing it have.²⁵ Darul Iftaa Mahmudiyah (Zambia) declared yoga *ḥarām* on the grounds that even its general poses are borrowed from idol-worship and cannot be divorced from their Hindu religious background.²⁶ Muslim Judicial Council (South Africa) found that yoga is still forbidden even if its religious content is expunged, as the practice began as a spiritual discipline with the goal of attaining *moksha* and still carries that symbolic significance.²⁷

Yoga's basis in Hindu religious practice and the risk of *shirk* were explicitly referred by Dr. Zakir Naik in stating that it is not permissible.²⁸ Jamia Binoria Aalamia (Pakistan) claimed yoga is closely associated with Hinduism and advised complete abstinence from the practice.²⁹ According to MUIS (Singapore), yoga has been permitted for health benefits if all chants, meditations and spiritual symbols are removed. The *fatwā* said there was a clear distinction between physical exercise and religious rituals.³⁰ The Jamiatul ulamā South Africa (JUSA) has

²²Dar al-Ifta Egypt, *Fatwā* No. 932943, accessed June 23, 2025, <https://www.dar-alifta.org/en/fatwa/retrieve-answer>.

²³Sheikh Assim Al Hakeem, “Yoga and Its Dangers in Islam,” YouTube video, 5:09, January 3, 2020, <https://youtu.be/tRQGhvTJw48?si=8L1rIXA-vjmEN2fV>.

²⁴Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA), *Fatwā* ID: 81088, March 4, 2010, <https://www.amjaonline.org/fatwa/en/81088/is-yoga-haram>.

²⁵Islam Q&A, “Is Yoga *ḥarām*?” April 18, 2011, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/101591/is-yoga-haram>.

²⁶Darul Iftaa Zambia, *Fatwā* #146, October 26, 2023, <https://daruliftaazambia.com/fatwa/?id=146>.

²⁷Muslim Judicial Council South Africa, *Fatwā* by *Muftī* Taha Karaan, July 13, 2023, <https://fatwa.mjc.org.za/fatwa/ruling-on-yoga/>.

²⁸Zakir Naik, “Is Yoga *ḥarām* in Islam? Dr Zakir Naik,” YouTube video, 4:32, June 14, 2022, <https://youtu.be/myVd8gBcZGU?si=BjZk-t8psoHaBfZU>.

²⁹Darulifta Jamia Binoria Aalamia, *Fatwā* No. 2315, https://www.onlinefatawa.com/view_fatwa_english/2315/Islamic-Ruling-of-Yoga-

³⁰Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, “Religious Guidance on Yoga,” February 23, 2025, <https://www.muis.gov.sg/resources/khutbah-and-religious-advice/irsyad/advisory-on-yoga-practice--english>.

ruled that Yoga is *ḥarām* for Muslims as it involves aspects of Hindu religious philosophy and *shirk*, even if they were to physically benefit from performing the activity.³¹ MUI (Indonesia) made a comprehensive three-category ruling: yoga with Hindu rituals (*ḥarām*), yoga with meditation and mantras (*ḥarām*, based on *sadd al-dharī'ah*), and pure physical yoga without religious contents (*mubāḥ*, by caution).³² Hindus believe yoga is spiritual, but the Malaysian National Fatwā Council ruled Muslims should not practice yoga if it includes religious or spiritual elements drawn from Hinduism, mixing physical exercise with worship-like practices risks harming faith.³³

Darul Ifta Birmingham (UK) permitted yoga for purely physical health purposes while stressing that all meditative and spiritual components must be completely avoided and suggesting salah as a preferable alternative.³⁴ IslamWeb (Qatar/UAE) declared yoga *ḥarām* in its traditional form, due to elements such as sun salutations and Sanskrit chanting. Modified yoga stripped of all such elements may be generically permissible, but is not recommended.³⁵ In total, eight out of the fourteen *fatāwā* deemed yoga absolutely not permissible. Six *fatāwā* (legal opinions) allowed it on the condition that all spiritualness, ritualistic, and meditative aspects be eliminated from the practice, and only pure physical exercise remains. Concerns common to most *fatāwā* included yoga's roots in Hinduism, the danger of *tashabbuh*, and the risk of slowly eating away at the practitioner's faith. Even the most permissive decisions issued stern warnings and conditions.

ChatGPT's Responses on Yoga

This section presents ChatGPT's responses to the same fourteen questions, compared directly with the human-issued *fatāwā*. All responses were generated using ChatGPT (GPT-4o) in June 2025.

1. **Dar al-Ifta Egypt.** ChatGPT stated that Dar al-Ifta permits yoga if it is purely physical. It cited a news article, a Reddit thread,³⁶ and Wikipedia, not the official fatwā website, which explicitly forbids yoga due to its polytheistic roots.³⁷
2. **Sheikh Assim al-Hakeem.** ChatGPT attributed a permissive position to Sheikh Assim that directly contradicts his documented stance. It falsely cited quotes belonging to Sayyid Muhammad Saeed al-Hakeem, a different scholar. More remarkably, ChatGPT linked to

³¹Jamiatul Ulamā South Africa, Asim Patel, "Is Yoga Permissible in Islam?" <https://jamiat.org.za/is-yoga-permissible-in-islam/>.

³²Majelis Ulamā Indonesia (MUI), *Fatwā* No. 55/2009: Keputusan Ijtima' Ulamā Komisi *Fatwā* Se-Indonesia III tentang Senam Yoga (Padangpanjang: MUI, January 26, 2009), [https://fatwamui.com/storage/550/KEPUTUSAN-KOMISI-B-SENAM-YOGA\[1\].pdf](https://fatwamui.com/storage/550/KEPUTUSAN-KOMISI-B-SENAM-YOGA[1].pdf).

³³Jabatan *Muftī* Negeri Selangor, *Fatwā Senaman Yoga Dikalangan Umat Islam*, Keputusan Mesyuarat Jawatankuasa *Fatwā* Negeri Selangor Bil. 6/2008, December 30, 2008, <https://www.muftiselangor.gov.my/2023/10/26/fatwa-senaman-yoga-dikalangan-umat-islam/>.

³⁴Maulana Mohammed Kamran Abid, "Is Yoga Permissible," Darul Ifta Birmingham, October 28, 2020, <https://daruliftabirmingham.co.uk/home/is-yoga-permissible/>.

³⁵IslamWeb, *Fatwā* No. 85297, December 11, 2002, <https://islamweb.net/en/fatwa/85297/why-yoga-is-unlawful>.

³⁶Reddit is a social media platform where users share, discuss, and vote on content across various interest-based communities called subreddits, <https://www.reddit.com/>.

³⁷ChatGPT, "Dar al-Ifta Egypt's Ruling on Yoga," accessed June 23, 2025, https://chatgpt.com/s/t_6858e625ace8819181911107750cb751.

the correct video in which Sheikh Assim rules yoga *ḥarām* yet simultaneously gave the opposite conclusion.³⁸

3. **AMJA / Dr. Hatem al-Haj** ChatGPT correctly summarized AMJA's position, noting that yoga is permitted for physical purposes if spiritual elements are removed.³⁹
4. **Dr. Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid** ChatGPT stated that al-Munajjid had not addressed yoga by name and inferred he would permit it if practiced secularly.⁴⁰ The actual fatwā on IslamQA which has over 345,000 views — explicitly forbids all forms of yoga.⁴¹
5. **Darul Iftaa Mahmudiyah Zambia** ChatGPT cited an unrelated fatwā about fire cupping for fertility treatment⁴² and concluded that yoga is permitted for medical conditions. The institution's actual fatwā (#146) declares yoga *ḥarām* due to its Hindu roots.⁴³⁴⁴
6. **Muslim Judicial Council South Africa** ChatGPT correctly stated that the MJC considers all forms of yoga impermissible regardless of intention or the removal of spiritual elements.⁴⁵
7. **Dr. Zakir Naik** ChatGPT accurately reported Dr. Naik's prohibition of yoga due to its Hindu origins and the risk of *shirk*.⁴⁶
8. **Jamia Binoria Aalamia Pakistan** ChatGPT claimed no fatwā existed and inferred a permissive stance based on other institutions.⁴⁷ A fatwā titled "Islamic Ruling of Yoga" is available on the institution's official website.⁴⁸⁴⁹
9. **MUIS Singapore** ChatGPT accurately summarized MUIS's position, correctly noting the conditional permissibility of physical yoga and the prohibition of spiritual elements.⁵⁰
10. **Jamiatul Ulamā South Africa** ChatGPT claimed no specific fatwā existed and inferred a permissive position by analogy with Malaysian and Indonesian rulings.⁵¹ The actual fatwā is available on the institution's website and rules yoga *ḥarām*.⁵²

³⁸ChatGPT, "Sheikh Assim al-Hakeem's Position on Yoga," accessed June 23, 2025, <https://chatgpt.com/s/t/6858ecfa4b648191b13ae55492188ad5>.

³⁹ChatGPT, "Fatwā of The Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA)," accessed June 23, 2025, <https://chatgpt.com/s/t/6858efa0f9248191839d99caa416b7d5>.

⁴⁰ChatGPT, "Dr. Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid," accessed June 23, 2025, <https://chatgpt.com/s/t/6858f17091d48191a1e814427efa55bd>.

⁴¹Islam Q&A, "Is Yoga *ḥarām*?" April 18, 2011, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/101591/is-yoga-haram>.

⁴²Darul Iftaa Mahmudiyah Zambia, *Fatwā* #172, April 22, 2024, <https://daruliftaazambia.com/fatwa/?id=721>.

⁴³Darul Iftaa Zambia, *Fatwā* #146, October 26, 2023, <https://daruliftaazambia.com/fatwa/?id=146>.

⁴⁴ChatGPT, "Darul Iftaa Mahmudiyah Zambia," accessed June 23, 2025, <https://chatgpt.com/s/t/6858f508044c819189e881640a8c235a>.

⁴⁵ChatGPT, "MJC *Fatwā* on Yoga," accessed June 23, 2025, <https://chatgpt.com/s/t/685910ed55248191acee382cd4d2d539>.

⁴⁶ChatGPT, "Naik's *Fatwā* on Yoga," accessed June 23, 2025, <https://chatgpt.com/s/t/68591305f5108191be769c63f17dcefb>.

⁴⁷ChatGPT, "*Fatwā* from Dar-ul-Ifta Jamia Binoria Aalamia," accessed June 23, 2025, <https://chatgpt.com/s/t/685925492d648191916b6e08344ad9e0>.

⁴⁸Jamia Binoria Aalamia, Official Website, <https://binoria.org/>.

⁴⁹Darulifta Jamia Binoria Aalamia, *Fatwā* No. 2315, https://www.onlinefatawa.com/view_fatwa_english/2315/Islamic-Ruling-of-Yoga-

⁵⁰ChatGPT, "MUIS's Official Position on Yoga," accessed June 23, 2025, <https://chatgpt.com/s/t/685926d65d7081918adb1ae82172bde6>.

11. **MUI Indonesia** ChatGPT correctly presented MUI's three-category classification and appropriately referenced the principle of *sadd al-dhari'ah*.⁵³
12. **Malaysian National Fatwā Council** ChatGPT applied the same permissive logic it used for MUI and concluded that secular yoga is allowed. The Malaysian Council's actual fatwā is broader in its prohibition. ChatGPT cited the correct fatwā but reversed the ruling.⁵⁴
13. **Darul Ifta Birmingham** ChatGPT correctly summarized the Birmingham position, noting conditional permissibility and the need to avoid spiritual elements.⁵⁵
14. **IslamWeb Qatar/UAE** ChatGPT stated that modified yoga free of spiritual elements is permissible. IslamWeb's official fatwā⁵⁶ takes a fully prohibitive position. ChatGPT cited the correct source and reversed its meaning.⁵⁷

Comparative Analysis

The findings presented above show a clear and consistent pattern. In six out of fourteen cases ChatGPT provided the correct answer, but it was wrong in eight other cases. The pattern of correct vs incorrect responses is not random; rather, it is a logic that sheds light on how ChatGPT understands religious information and gives insight into the reasons behind its failures in a religious context.

All six of the correct responses generated by ChatGPT pertained to *fatāwā* that had either adopted a permissive position under certain conditions (AMJA, MUIS, MUI, Darul Ifta Birmingham) or possessed an unequivocally prohibitive position also well-represented in widely circulated online content (Muslim Judicial Council, Dr. Zakir Naik). In these situations, ChatGPT's statistical pattern-matching gave the correct answer, either because there was something so permissive about the underlying logic that it was easy to reproduce (physical yoga is fine; spiritual yoga isn't) or because the prohibitive position was prominent enough in our training data that it made an accurate impression.

In contrast, all eight errors incorrectly omitted some part of this distinction, adding or suggesting that physical yoga is evidently licit where the official *fatāwā* were otherwise completely prohibitive. The most significant outcome of the paper is this unidirectional error pattern. ChatGPT did not split its mistakes evenly across the two possible ways: It was extremely biased in the direction of permissibility. This implies, perhaps, an institutionally lenient bias in ChatGPT's issuance of Islamic legal decisions.

⁵¹ChatGPT, "The Jamiatul Ulamā South Africa," accessed June 23, 2025, https://chatgpt.com/s/t_68592820abb881918b18e56055e03bea.

⁵²Jamiatul Ulamā South Africa, Asim Patel, "Is Yoga Permissible in Islam?" <https://jamiat.org.za/is-yoga-permissible-in-islam/>.

⁵³ChatGPT, "Summary of MUI's *Fatwā* on Yoga (2009)," accessed June 23, 2025, https://chatgpt.com/s/t_68592913023481918dee1f6a871bbd8e.

⁵⁴ChatGPT, "*Fatwā* Decision on Yoga (Malaysia, 2008)," accessed June 23, 2025, https://chatgpt.com/s/t_68592f3b7b68819191dd484a31babff5.

⁵⁵ChatGPT, "*Darul Ifta* Birmingham (UK)," accessed June 23, 2025, https://chatgpt.com/s/t_685933eb5ca08191afd05fe1807483aa.

⁵⁶ChatGPT, "Islamweb (the Qatar Ministry's Official Portal)," accessed June 23, 2025, https://chatgpt.com/s/t_6859354c1fe48191ad4512a7c670fe8f.

⁵⁷IslamWeb, *Fatwā* No. 85297, December 11, 2002, <https://islamweb.net/en/fatwa/85297/why-yoga-is-unlawful>.

There were a number of particular mechanisms that drove this pattern. First, when an official fatwā was poorly represented in ChatGPT's training data — or not discoverable via its browsing capabilities — the model speculated a likely stance rather than concede ignorance. In all three cases — the Jamia Binoria, Jamiatul Ulamā South Africa, and Dr. al-Munajjid's — the implication was that its stance was permissive rather than proscriptive. That is, in the absence of compelling information, ChatGPT, as a matter of course, assumes permission. Second, in some instances when ChatGPT did have the appropriate source at its disposal it cited the right video or referenced the correct fatwā portal or a legitimate institution its conclusion was still wrong. It is especially obvious in the cases of Sheikh Assim al-Hakeem and IslamWeb, where ChatGPT first generated an accurate report with citation-rich source material, only to later contradict the very same statement noted within that material. This is not merely an access to data problem; it reflects a deeper tendency to soften conservative conclusions even when the source material directly contradicts them.

Third, ChatGPT soon turned to secondary sources and tended again, often to privilege them over the actual fatwā texts. In many such cases, it drew from news articles, Wikipedia pages, Reddit threads or general Islamic websites as opposed to the institutions' own portals. It is not merely a question of citation quality in Islamic legal scholarship; that represents a failure of the isnād system — the chain of transmission that grants an opinion its scholarly legitimacy. And however well it may summarize what the first one said, it has no jurisprudential standing regarding a secondhand determination. ChatGPT appears to be basically incapable of differentiating between authoritative primary and secondary sources.

The concept of *ta'wīl* in classical Islamic scholarship refers to the re-reading of a text beyond what is manifestly indicated by its literal meaning, often for sound cause and within strictly contained boundaries. (This is exactly the kind of operation, structurally speaking, that ChatGPT does perform unconsciously and without intention but also outside any physical or rhetorical constraints whatsoever.) It takes strict prohibitive judgments and loosens them; it takes ignorance or uncertain knowledge and infects it with permissive inferences; it takes complex multi-condition judgments and reduces them to their least condemnatory element. The net effect is a systematically permissive distortion of Islamic legal opinion — one that is more misleading precisely because it sounds authoritative.

Critical Discussion

The actual importance of this paper goes far beyond whether ChatGPT can convincingly summarize *fatāwā* on yoga. They suggest some elusive but profound quality of what AI-generated religious knowledge is, and the potential threat it poses to Muslim communities as they enter a more digital age.

The crux of the matter is incoherence in ChatGPT's answers about religion, both what it is saying and how. It projects what some might describe as a confident, authoritative tone; it uses the appropriate registers of Islamic nomenclature and responds to questions in forms that echo Islamic scholarly colloquy. This content has a mythmaking patina of faux authoritative air and is insidiously persuasive to any run-of-the-mill user who isn't specifically versed in Islamic jurisprudence. But as this study has shown, the content beneath that surface is mostly misperceived and it's misperceived in one direction: toward permissiveness, toward moderation and compromise, toward the answers that seem safe rather than correct. And it's a problem that we cannot solve in good faith simply by telling ChatGPT to be less cavalier. It is an embodiment of the fact that this system has been constructed in this way — trained on data whose statistics lean toward what's well-known and easy to write about; engineered for

responses readers of all kinds would want to see, but without any scholarly judgment or moral authority or chain of verified transmission encircling Islamic legal authority.

This is particularly harmful to young Muslims and novice students, the demographic group that most intuitively would regard AI tools as sources of wisdom on religious issues. They're also the least likely to push back on information pruning that would allow them to correct mistakes. And part of the consequence of this being, if AI-generated responses were taken at face value it would draw practices and beliefs ever further away from what duly credentialed scholars might know about those same topics not through some dramatic rupture with tradition but rather a gradual, imperceptible drift from authoritative positions, enabled by the accumulation of small but consequential errors.

There's also a broader, structural problem that isn't just about one user. No Islamic scholarly consensus has yet emerged regarding the permissibility of AI in *fatwā* issuance — a gap that allows algorithmically produced opinions to fill a normative vacuum, reaching millions of Muslims who may not recognize their limitations. It's a kind of accidental religious evolution shaped by algorithmic design decisions not made by *Muftīs* or Islamic authorities but instead by engineers and product managers. That is a huge, little-discussed burden put on AI developers.

The current academic literature on these topics, covered in the literature section above, suggests that there is ongoing debate about those questions concerning theory that can AI have a soul? and whether it can perform *ijtihād*. This study shows that the practical questions are just as pressing and can be studied empirically. We need not engage with the philosophical question of whether AI can understand Islamic law in order to document its current, systematic, and predictable misrepresentations. Future studies should expand on this premise by exploring additional AI platforms and more types of Islamic law, as well as the downstream behavioral impacts of AI-enabled religious misinformation among Muslim users.

Conclusion

Therefore, in this study, we aimed to address a specific and impactful question that Muslims might face: for example, when asking ChatGPT about the Islamic decision on yoga, are they receiving correct answers? The answer, based on a systematic comparison of fourteen human-issued *fatāwā* with corresponding responses from ChatGPT, is that in six cases ChatGPT reached the right decision and in eight it did not. More important than the raw numbers are what direction the errors flowed: in each case where ChatGPT made a mistake, it mistakenly concluded that something should be allowed. It amended draconian judgments, concluded permissive stances where there were direct prohibitions, and dismissed the very existence of public *fatāwā*; it depended on secondary rather than authoritative scholarly texts. These failures are not incidental; they're the predictable product of a system that produces statistically likely text without understanding, without scholarly authority, and without the moral standing Islamic legal reasoning provides.

This study deepens scholarship by addressing two important contributions. The first is empirical: it offers the first systematic, side-by-side comparison of AI-generated *fatāwā* with *fatāwā* produced by human beings — an unambiguous factual record about ChatGPT's performance in this respect. The second contribution is conceptual: the notion of "algorithmic *ta'wīl*" — a hermeneutical tool to characterize an empirically observable structural habit in the properties and behaviors of AI systems that, if abstracted from any particular website or format, and in ways independent of particular content, behave like traditional forms of comprehending the nature and transformative aspects of religious content. Furthermore, the work of tomorrow

cannot be limited to these robots and models of AI but will draw on the great traditions of faith as well as all elements of Islamic jurisprudence. The stakes are high: Hundreds of millions of Muslims depend on these tools, and many still have not come to terms with what they cannot do.

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Appendix: ChatGPT Session Links

All responses were generated using ChatGPT (GPT-4o), June 2025. Sessions are linked for full reproducibility.

1. Dar al-Ifta Egypt: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_6858e625ace8819181911107750cb751
2. Sheikh Assim al-Hakeem: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_6858ecfa4b648191b13ae55492188ad5
3. AMJA: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_6858efa0f9248191839d99caa416b7d5
4. Dr. Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_6858f17091d48191a1e814427efa55bd
5. Darul Iftaa Mahmudiyah Zambia: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_6858f508044c819189e881640a8c235a
6. Muslim Judicial Council South Africa: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_685910ed55248191acee382cd4d2d539
7. Dr. Zakir Naik: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_68591305f5108191be769c63f17dcefb
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9. MUIS Singapore: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_685926d65d7081918adb1ae82172bde6
10. Jamiatul Ulamā South Africa: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_68592820abb881918b18e56055e03bea
11. MUI Indonesia: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_68592913023481918dee1f6a871bbd8e
12. Malaysian National Fatwā Council: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_68592f3b7b68819191dd484a31babff5
13. Darul Ifta Birmingham UK: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_685933eb5ca08191afd05fe1807483aa
14. IslamWeb Qatar/UAE: https://chatgpt.com/s/t_6859354c1fe48191ad4512a7c670fe8f