



BRAIN. Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience

e-ISSN: 2067-3957 | p-ISSN: 2068-0473

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2026, Volume 17, Special Issue 1, pages: 258-288

Submitted: May 29th, 2026 | Accepted for publication: July 1st, 2026

Trust, Authority, and Human–AI Mediation in Digital Dharma: An Exploratory Mixed-Methods Study of the Trúc Lâm Zen Tradition

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Abstract: Artificial intelligence (AI) and generative language models are increasingly reshaping religious communication, multilingual knowledge dissemination, and meaning-making within digitally mediated environments. While existing scholarship on Digital Religion has examined online authority, technological mediation, and networked religious participation, limited empirical attention has been devoted to how AI-mediated systems influence trust formation, interpretive authority, and engagement within Buddhist communication. This study addresses this gap through an exploratory mixed-methods investigation of Digital Dharma communication in the contemporary Trúc Lâm Zen tradition. The study employed a mixed-methods design combining a survey of 308 Buddhist practitioners and Digital Dharma users with 22 semi-structured interviews involving monastics, lay practitioners, retreat participants, and active users of AI-assisted religious platforms. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis, correlation analysis, and multiple regression, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. The findings indicate that doctrinal consistency, authority perception, technological mediation, and transformative experience are positively associated with trust in AI-mediated Dharma communication. Regression analyses identified doctrinal consistency as the strongest predictor of trust, while authority perception, technological mediation, and transformative experience significantly predicted Digital Dharma engagement. Qualitative findings further revealed recurring themes of expanded accessibility, doctrinal reliability, contemplative depth, and negotiated authority. Building on these findings, the study proposes the Integrated Human–AI Digital Dharma Mediation (IHDDM) Framework, which conceptualizes Digital Dharma as a dynamic ecosystem shaped by doctrinal integrity, technological mediation, transformative practice, trust negotiation, and distributed authority. The study contributes to emerging discussions on Digital Religion, Human–AI communication, and Buddhist Studies by providing an empirically informed framework for understanding religious meaning-making in the age of generative AI.

Keywords: Digital Dharma; Human–AI Communication; Digital Religion; Trúc Lâm Zen; Artificial Intelligence; Trust Negotiation; Religious Authority.

How to cite: Phong, D. T. (2026). Trust, Authority, and Human–AI Mediation in Digital Dharma: An Exploratory Mixed-Methods Study of the Trúc Lâm Zen Tradition. *BRAIN. Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience*, 17(Special Issue 1), 258-288. <https://doi.org/10.70594/brain/17.S1/22>

1. Introduction

1.1. AI, Religion, and the Transformation of Digital Communication

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly large language models (LLMs) and generative AI systems, is fundamentally transforming contemporary communication environments. Technologies such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and other AI-assisted platforms increasingly participate in information retrieval, translation, content generation, recommendation, and dialogical interaction across diverse social and cultural domains. Rather than functioning merely as passive technological tools, these systems actively shape how information is organised, interpreted, circulated, and consumed within digitally mediated societies.

Religious communication is among the domains most significantly affected by these developments. Religious traditions have historically relied upon processes of interpretation, translation, transmission, and authority construction to preserve doctrinal continuity while adapting to changing social contexts. In contemporary digital environments, AI-mediated systems increasingly participate in these processes by translating sacred texts, summarising religious teachings, recommending spiritual content, and generating conversational responses to religious questions. Consequently, the relationship between technology and religion can no longer be understood solely through the lens of communication efficiency or information accessibility. Instead, AI-mediated religious communication raises broader questions concerning authority, legitimacy, trust, and the production of religious meaning.

The emergence of generative AI has intensified these concerns. Unlike earlier digital technologies that primarily facilitated access to information, contemporary AI systems can generate context-sensitive responses that resemble interpretive engagement. Although such systems do not possess consciousness, intentionality, or spiritual understanding, they increasingly influence how users encounter, interpret, and evaluate religious knowledge. This development creates new opportunities for expanding access to religious teachings while simultaneously introducing challenges related to doctrinal reliability, interpretive authority, and ethical responsibility.

1.2. Digital Dharma in the Age of Generative AI

These transformations are particularly visible within Buddhist communication. In recent years, Buddhist communities around the world have increasingly adopted digital technologies to disseminate teachings, organise religious activities, support meditation practice, and facilitate transnational communication. Online Dharma talks, virtual retreats, livestreamed teachings, social media platforms, digital libraries, and AI-assisted translation tools have become important components of contemporary Buddhist communication ecosystems.

In this study, the term *Digital Dharma* refers to digitally mediated environments in which Buddhist teachings are produced, translated, circulated, interpreted, and experienced through online platforms, algorithmic infrastructures, and AI-assisted communication systems. Digital Dharma therefore encompasses not only the technological transmission of Buddhist content but also the broader processes through which religious meaning is negotiated and constructed within digital contexts.

Generative AI introduces a particularly significant development within Digital Dharma environments because it increasingly participates in communicative processes that have traditionally been associated with human interpreters, translators, teachers, and religious authorities. AI systems can now summarise sutras, explain doctrinal concepts, translate Buddhist texts across languages, recommend religious content, and engage users in seemingly interactive conversations. These capabilities have expanded access to Buddhist knowledge for many users while simultaneously raising concerns regarding accuracy, legitimacy, and the preservation of doctrinal integrity.

For Buddhist traditions, these concerns are especially important because religious understanding is not reducible to information acquisition alone. Buddhist learning traditionally emphasises ethical cultivation, contemplative practice, experiential realisation, and guidance from

qualified teachers. Consequently, questions arise regarding the extent to which AI-mediated communication can support authentic religious engagement and how authority is negotiated when algorithmic systems increasingly participate in interpretive processes.

1.3. Research Gap

Existing scholarship provides valuable insights into the relationship between religion and digital technologies. Research within Digital Religion has examined online religious communities, digital ritual practices, networked authority, and the transformation of religious participation in technologically mediated environments. Similarly, recent studies of AI and religion have begun exploring the implications of generative AI for religious communication, ethical reflection, and institutional adaptation (Campbell, 2021; Singler, 2018, 2024; Trotta et al., 2024; Tsuria & Tsuria, 2024; Rähme & Prohl, 2025). Despite these developments, several important gaps remain.

First, empirical research on AI-mediated Buddhist communication remains limited. While Digital Religion scholarship has extensively examined Christianity and other major religious traditions, comparatively less attention has been devoted to Buddhist contexts, particularly within Asian traditions.

Second, existing studies frequently focus on technological adoption rather than interpretive processes. Questions concerning how AI influences trust formation, doctrinal legitimacy, authority perception, and religious meaning-making remain underexplored.

Third, relatively little research has investigated how practitioners themselves perceive AI-mediated religious communication. The perspectives of Buddhist practitioners, monastics, and Digital Dharma users are essential for understanding how technological mediation is experienced in practice.

Finally, current scholarship lacks an integrative framework capable of explaining how doctrinal integrity, technological mediation, contemplative practice, trust formation, and authority interact within AI-mediated religious environments. Existing theoretical approaches often address these dimensions separately rather than examining their interrelationships within a unified analytical model.

These gaps highlight the need for interdisciplinary research capable of integrating empirical evidence with broader theoretical discussions concerning Human–AI communication, Digital Religion, and Buddhist Studies.

1.4. The Trúc Lâm Zen Tradition as a Case Study

The present study addresses these questions through the case of the Trúc Lâm Zen tradition, one of the most influential Buddhist traditions in Vietnam. Founded by King Trần Nhân Tông in the thirteenth century, Trúc Lâm has historically emphasised the integration of contemplative practice, ethical engagement, and active participation in social life (Lê, 2010; Trần, 2013). Rather than promoting withdrawal from the world, the tradition advocates spiritual cultivation within everyday experience.

Two concepts are particularly relevant for the present study. The first is *phân quan tự kỷ*, often understood as reflexive self-observation or inward contemplative awareness. This principle emphasizes direct experiential insight and critical self-reflection as foundations for authentic understanding. The second is *cư trần lạc đạo*, which encourages practitioners to cultivate spiritual realisation while remaining actively engaged with social realities.

These concepts offer valuable analytical resources for understanding contemporary Digital Dharma environments. In particular, they provide a framework for examining how contemplative awareness, ethical responsibility, and experiential validation may be maintained within technologically mediated communication systems. Rather than viewing technology as inherently opposed to spiritual cultivation, Trúc Lâm thought encourages a more nuanced examination of how religious practice can be meaningfully integrated within changing social and technological contexts.

1.5. Research Objectives

Against this background, the present study pursues four objectives.

First, it investigates how Buddhist practitioners perceive AI-mediated Digital Dharma communication.

Second, it examines factors associated with trust in AI-mediated Dharma communication and engagement within Digital Dharma environments.

Third, it explores how doctrinal consistency, authority perception, technological mediation, transformative experience, and monastic authority trust interact within contemporary Buddhist communication ecosystems.

Fourth, it develops an empirically informed conceptual framework capable of explaining Human–AI mediation within Digital Dharma environments.

1.6. Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Buddhist practitioners perceive AI-mediated Digital Dharma communication?

RQ2: What factors predict trust in AI-mediated Dharma communication?

RQ3: What factors influence engagement within Digital Dharma environments?

RQ4: How is interpretive authority negotiated between human actors and AI-mediated systems?

RQ5: How can these relationships be integrated into a conceptual framework for Human–AI Digital Dharma mediation?

To answer these questions, the study employs an exploratory mixed-methods design combining survey data from 308 Buddhist practitioners and Digital Dharma users with qualitative interviews involving 22 participants. Building upon both empirical findings and interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives, the study proposes the Integrated Human–AI Digital Dharma Mediation (IHDDM) Framework as a model for understanding religious communication, trust formation, and authority negotiation in the age of generative AI.

2. Literature review

2.1. Digital Religion and Networked Religious Authority

The emergence of digital technologies has significantly transformed the ways religious communities communicate, organise, and negotiate authority. Early studies of religion and the internet primarily focused on questions of online religious presence, virtual communities, and the adaptation of traditional practices to digital environments. As digital technologies became increasingly integrated into everyday life, however, scholars began to recognise that digital media were not merely communication channels but social environments that actively shape religious experience and institutional authority (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020).

Within this context, the field of Digital Religion emerged as a major area of interdisciplinary inquiry. Campbell (2010, 2012) argues that digital technologies and religious traditions should not be understood as separate domains. Rather, religious actors actively appropriate technological infrastructures while simultaneously adapting religious practices, identities, and forms of authority to changing communicative environments. Digital Religion therefore refers not simply to religion online, but to the dynamic interaction between religious traditions and digital cultures.

One of the most influential themes within Digital Religion research concerns the transformation of religious authority. Historically, religious authority has often been associated with institutional structures, sacred texts, recognised teachers, and established interpretive traditions. Digital communication environments, however, enable the circulation of religious knowledge through decentralised networks that frequently extend beyond traditional institutional boundaries. As a result, authority increasingly becomes distributed across multiple actors, including religious

leaders, online communities, content creators, digital platforms, and algorithmically mediated systems.

Campbell (2020) describes this development as a process of networked religious authority in which legitimacy is continuously negotiated among competing sources of expertise and influence. Digital platforms facilitate broader participation in religious discourse while simultaneously challenging traditional mechanisms of doctrinal control (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022; Hutchings, 2017). Rather than eliminating institutional authority, digital environments create hybrid configurations in which institutional and non-institutional actors coexist and interact.

The concept of distributed authority has become increasingly important in understanding contemporary religious communication. Authority within digital environments is often relational, fluid, and contingent upon perceptions of credibility, expertise, accessibility, and trustworthiness. Consequently, religious authority can no longer be understood solely as a property of institutions or individuals but must also be examined as an emergent characteristic of networked communication systems.

Recent scholarship on digital Buddhism further demonstrates that Buddhist communities increasingly operate through hybrid online–offline communicative ecologies in which meditation practice, doctrinal learning, and communal participation are mediated through digital platforms and cybersangha formations (Grieve & Veidlinger, 2015; Helland, 2005). These developments suggest that Buddhist authority in digital environments is increasingly negotiated through networked participation, technological mediation, and digitally distributed forms of religious engagement.

2.2. AI-Mediated Communication and Meaning-Making

The rapid development of generative AI has introduced new complexities into digital communication. Unlike earlier information technologies that primarily facilitated access to content, contemporary AI systems increasingly participate in content generation, semantic organisation, translation, summarisation, and conversational interaction. As a result, AI-mediated communication has become an important area of inquiry within communication studies, media studies, and information science.

Generative AI systems are capable of producing context-sensitive responses that resemble human communication. Through probabilistic language generation, these systems can summarise complex information, provide explanations, answer questions, and generate multilingual content at unprecedented scales. Such capabilities have significantly expanded opportunities for information accessibility and cross-cultural communication.

However, scholars have emphasized that AI-generated communication should not be interpreted as genuine understanding. Bender and Koller (2020) argue that language models manipulate linguistic forms without possessing semantic comprehension or intentionality. Similarly, Floridi (2014) suggests that the increasing integration of intelligent systems into everyday life requires careful examination of how technological infrastructures shape human knowledge, agency, and decision-making.

Recent research has therefore shifted attention from purely technical capabilities toward broader questions concerning mediation, meaning-making, and interpretive influence. AI systems increasingly affect which information becomes visible, how content is framed, and which interpretive pathways users encounter (Gillespie, 2014). Consequently, AI-mediated communication should be understood not merely as information transmission but as a form of mediated meaning production.

These developments are especially significant in religious contexts. Religious communication frequently involves symbolic interpretation, ethical guidance, and doctrinal explanation rather than simple information exchange. When AI systems participate in translation, summarisation, or explanation of religious content, they inevitably influence how religious knowledge is represented and understood.

Recent scholarship on Buddhism and AI has similarly begun examining how generative AI technologies reshape Buddhist communication and religious adaptation in digitally mediated societies. Zheng (2024) argues that AI increasingly participates in the transformation of Humanistic Buddhism by restructuring communicative accessibility, religious interaction, and digitally mediated forms of Buddhist engagement. Such developments suggest that AI-mediated communication cannot be reduced to technical functionality alone but must also be examined as a social and interpretive process.

2.3. Trust, Translation, and Interpretive Legitimacy

Trust occupies a central position within both digital communication and religious life. In complex social environments, trust functions as a mechanism that enables individuals to act despite uncertainty. Luhmann (1979) conceptualises trust as a strategy for reducing social complexity, while Giddens (1990) emphasises its role in maintaining confidence within abstract systems and expert structures.

Digital communication environments introduce new challenges to trust formation. Information abundance, algorithmic filtering, misinformation, and the proliferation of competing sources of authority complicate the evaluation of credibility and reliability. As digital communication becomes increasingly mediated by AI systems, questions concerning trust become even more significant.

Within religious contexts, trust extends beyond technical reliability. Religious communication involves beliefs concerning doctrinal authenticity, moral legitimacy, spiritual guidance, and interpretive competence. Consequently, trust in Digital Dharma environments must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing technological, doctrinal, and experiential dimensions.

Translation studies provide additional insights into these issues. Scholars such as Baker (2018), Cronin (2013), Pym (2010), and Venuti (2012) emphasise that translation is not a neutral process of linguistic substitution but an interpretive activity involving selection, framing, contextualisation, and meaning negotiation. Every act of translation inevitably influences how knowledge is represented and understood.

This perspective becomes particularly relevant when considering AI-assisted translation of religious texts and teachings. Buddhist concepts often carry complex philosophical, cultural, and experiential meanings that may not be fully captured through literal translation. AI systems may enhance accessibility while simultaneously introducing interpretive distortions or semantic simplifications. As a result, trust in AI-mediated religious communication depends not only on technological performance but also on perceptions of doctrinal consistency and interpretive legitimacy.

The concept of interpretive legitimacy is therefore crucial. Within Digital Dharma environments, users continuously evaluate whether AI-generated content aligns with authoritative teachings, recognised traditions, and personal spiritual experience. Trust emerges not simply from technological efficiency but from the perceived coherence between mediated communication and established religious frameworks.

2.4. Digital Buddhism and Online Buddhist Practice

The digital transformation of Buddhism has attracted increasing scholarly attention over the past two decades. Research on digital Buddhism has documented the expansion of online meditation communities, digital Dharma platforms, virtual religious gatherings, and transnational Buddhist communication networks. These developments illustrate how Buddhist traditions adapt to changing technological environments while preserving continuity with established doctrinal and contemplative traditions.

Digital technologies have expanded access to Buddhist teachings in unprecedented ways. Practitioners can now access canonical texts, recorded lectures, meditation instructions, and online

communities regardless of geographical location. Such developments have contributed to the emergence of cybersanghas and digitally mediated forms of religious participation.

Grieve and Veidlinger (2015) demonstrates that online meditation communities frequently create experiences of collective practice despite physical separation. Similarly, Helland (2005) shows that digital Buddhist communities increasingly operate through complex networks that combine online and offline forms of participation. These findings suggest that digital technologies are not merely supplementary communication tools but increasingly important environments for Buddhist learning and practice.

At the same time, scholars have noted tensions between accessibility and authenticity. While digital technologies facilitate broader participation, questions remain regarding the relationship between mediated learning and direct contemplative experience. Buddhist traditions have historically emphasised embodied practice, teacher–student relationships, and experiential realisation. Digital communication may support these processes but does not necessarily replace them.

This distinction is particularly important in the context of AI-mediated communication. AI systems may significantly enhance informational accessibility while remaining limited in their capacity to facilitate genuine contemplative realisation. Consequently, understanding Digital Dharma requires attention to both technological opportunities and spiritual limitations.

2.5. Trúc Lâm Zen and Digital Interiority

The Trúc Lâm Zen tradition offers a valuable framework for addressing these tensions. Founded by King Trần Nhân Tông during the Trần Dynasty, Trúc Lâm represents one of the most influential indigenous Buddhist traditions in Vietnam. The tradition is characterised by its emphasis on contemplative practice, ethical cultivation, and active engagement with social life.

Central to Trúc Lâm thought is the principle of *phản quan tự kỷ*, often translated as reflexive self-observation or inward contemplation (Thích, 2018). This principle emphasises direct awareness of one's own mental processes and encourages practitioners to examine experience through sustained contemplative reflection. Rather than relying exclusively upon external authorities, authentic understanding emerges through disciplined self-observation and experiential insight.

A second foundational principle is *cư trần lạc đạo*, which advocates spiritual cultivation within ordinary social existence (Trần, 2015). This perspective rejects rigid separations between contemplative practice and worldly engagement. Instead, spiritual realisation is understood as something cultivated within everyday life and changing social circumstances.

These concepts provide important resources for understanding what may be termed *digital interiority*. In the present study, digital interiority refers to the capacity to sustain reflexive awareness, ethical intentionality, and contemplative depth within digitally mediated communication environments. Digital interiority does not reject technology but emphasises the need for reflective engagement with technological systems.

Emerging studies of online Buddhist meditation communities further suggest that digitally mediated contemplative practice may simultaneously expand accessibility and reshape the experiential conditions of meditation itself (Grieve & Veidlinger, 2015). This tension reinforces the importance of distinguishing between informational participation and contemplative realisation within Digital Dharma environments.

2.6. AI as Co-Interpreter

Building upon the preceding discussions, the present study introduces the concept of *AI as co-interpreter*. This concept does not imply that AI possesses consciousness, intentionality, or genuine religious understanding. Rather, it highlights the increasingly influential role of AI systems in shaping interpretive processes within Digital Dharma communication.

AI-mediated systems participate in religious co-interpretation through five principal functions: translation, summarisation, semantic framing, algorithmic recommendation, and

dialogical generation. Through translation, AI systems transform Buddhist discourse across linguistic and cultural contexts while shaping semantic equivalence and interpretive emphasis. Through summarisation, they condense religious teachings and influence which doctrinal elements become foregrounded or marginalised. Through semantic framing, they reorganise Buddhist concepts within particular explanatory structures. Through algorithmic recommendation, they shape visibility and circulation within digital platforms. Through dialogical generation, conversational AI systems simulate interactive religious response.

In this sense, AI-mediated co-interpretation differs fundamentally from traditional computational assistance. Rather than merely supporting communicative transmission, generative AI increasingly participates in semantic prioritisation, contextual restructuring, and dialogical simulation. The concept of co-interpreter therefore foregrounds the interpretive influence embedded within contemporary AI-mediated communication systems while avoiding anthropomorphic assumptions concerning machine consciousness or spiritual realisation.

2.7. Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that Digital Religion scholarship has substantially advanced understanding of online religious authority, digital participation, and technologically mediated communication. Research on AI-mediated communication has further highlighted the growing influence of generative AI on information production and meaning-making. Studies of digital Buddhism have revealed the emergence of hybrid online–offline religious ecologies, while Trúc Lâm philosophy offers conceptual resources for understanding contemplative engagement within technological environments.

Nevertheless, significant gaps remain. Existing research rarely integrates doctrinal legitimacy, technological mediation, contemplative practice, trust formation, and authority negotiation within a single analytical framework. Furthermore, empirical investigations of AI-mediated Buddhist communication remain limited, particularly within Asian Buddhist traditions.

The conceptual gap is therefore not simply the absence of Buddhist examples in AI studies, but the lack of an integrated framework capable of explaining how doctrinal consistency, technological mediation, transformative experience, trust, and authority interact within Digital Dharma communication. The present study addresses this gap through an exploratory mixed-methods investigation and the development of the Integrated Human–AI Digital Dharma Mediation (IHDDM) Framework, an empirically informed model for understanding Human–AI mediation in contemporary Buddhist communication environments.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed an exploratory mixed-methods design to investigate trust, authority, and Human–AI mediation within contemporary Digital Dharma environments. The mixed-methods approach was selected because the research questions involve both measurable patterns of perception and behaviour as well as more complex processes of interpretation, meaning-making, and authority negotiation that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures alone.

The study combined a quantitative survey with qualitative semi-structured interviews. The quantitative component was designed to identify relationships among key constructs associated with AI-mediated Buddhist communication, including trust, authority perception, technological mediation, doctrinal consistency, transformative experience, and Digital Dharma engagement. The qualitative component was subsequently used to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding AI-assisted religious communication and digital Buddhist practice.

This design enabled methodological triangulation by integrating statistical findings with participant narratives. The mixed-methods approach therefore provided both breadth and depth in understanding the emerging dynamics of Human–AI mediation within Digital Dharma environments.

3.2. Participants and Sampling Strategy

3.2.1. Survey Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling from Buddhist retreat programs, Trúc Lâm-affiliated practice communities, online Buddhist learning groups, and Digital Dharma platforms operating in Vietnam. Recruitment announcements were distributed through social media groups, Buddhist educational networks, retreat registration systems, and online Dharma communities.

The inclusion criteria required participants to:

1. Be at least 18 years of age;
2. Have prior exposure to Buddhist teachings or practice;
3. Have experience using digital platforms for accessing Buddhist content;
4. Have basic familiarity with AI-assisted communication tools such as translation

systems, chatbots, or generative AI applications.

Participants were excluded if they submitted incomplete questionnaires, duplicated responses, or failed quality-control checks embedded within the survey instrument.

A total of 327 responses were initially collected. After data screening, 19 responses were removed due to incompleteness or duplication, resulting in a final sample of 308 valid participants for quantitative analysis. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the survey participants.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants (N = 308)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	156	50.6
	Female	145	47.1
	Other/Prefer not to say	7	2.3
Age Group	18–25	72	23.4
	26–35	81	26.3
	36–45	68	22.1
	46–55	52	16.9
	56+	35	11.4
Education	High School or Below	54	17.5
	Bachelor's Degree	156	50.6
	Master's Degree	78	25.3
	Doctoral Degree	20	6.5
Buddhist Practice Frequency	Monthly or Less	48	15.6
	Weekly	84	27.3
	Several Times per Week	91	29.5
	Daily	85	27.6
AI Usage Frequency	Rarely	51	16.6
	Occasionally	112	36.4
	Frequently	97	31.5
	Very Frequently	48	15.6

Note. Percentages may not total 100% because of rounding.

3.2.2. Interview Participants

To complement the survey findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants selected through purposive sampling. The interview sample included monastics, lay Buddhist practitioners, retreat participants, and active users of Digital Dharma platforms.

The interview participants represented diverse levels of Buddhist engagement and technological familiarity. To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned identification codes. Monastic participants were coded as M01–M08, while lay participants were coded as P01–P14. Table 2 summarises the characteristics of the interview participants.

Table 2. Characteristics of Interview Participants (N = 22)

Code	Participant Type	Gender	Age Group	Primary Role
M01	Monastic	Male	36–45	Dharma Teacher
M02	Monastic	Male	46–55	Retreat Instructor
M03	Monastic	Male	36–45	Monastic Educator
M04	Monastic	Female	46–55	Dharma Instructor
M05	Monastic	Male	56+	Senior Monastic
M06	Monastic	Female	36–45	Meditation Instructor
M07	Monastic	Male	46–55	Temple Administrator
M08	Monastic	Male	56+	Senior Teacher
P01–P14	Lay Practitioners	Mixed	18–56+	Retreat Participants and Digital Dharma Users

Note. Individual lay participants are anonymised to preserve confidentiality.

3.3. Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was developed based on existing scholarship in Digital Religion, communication studies, trust research, and Buddhist studies. Several items were adapted from previous studies on digital communication, authority, and trust, while others were developed specifically for the context of AI-mediated Digital Dharma communication.

The questionnaire consisted of seven constructs measured using five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication (TDC)

This construct measured participants’ trust in AI-generated explanations, translations, and responses related to Buddhist teachings.

Authority Perception (AP)

This construct assessed perceptions concerning interpretive authority, expertise, and legitimacy within Digital Dharma environments.

Technological Mediation (TM)

This construct examined the extent to which digital technologies and AI-assisted systems facilitate access to Buddhist teachings and religious communication.

Transformative Experience (TE)

This construct measured participants’ perceptions of personal reflection, contemplative development, and transformative learning associated with Digital Dharma participation.

Doctrinal Consistency (DC)

This construct assessed perceptions regarding the doctrinal coherence and reliability of AI-mediated Buddhist content.

Monastic Authority Trust (MAT)

This construct evaluated trust in monastic guidance and traditional religious authority.

Digital Dharma Engagement (DDE)

This construct measured participants’ frequency and intensity of engagement with Digital Dharma environments.

The complete list of survey items is presented in Appendix A.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted between January and April 2026.

The survey was administered online using a secure questionnaire platform. Prior to participation, respondents were provided with an informed consent statement explaining the purpose of the study, voluntary participation procedures, confidentiality protections, and data management practices.

To minimise duplicate responses, several quality-control procedures were implemented. These included timestamp screening, response-pattern analysis, duplicate IP checks where permitted by platform settings, and consistency checks across demographic variables.

The qualitative interviews were conducted online using video conferencing platforms. Interviews lasted between 25 and 50 minutes and were recorded with participants' consent. The interviews explored experiences of Digital Dharma participation, perceptions of AI-assisted religious communication, trust formation, authority negotiation, and the relationship between technological mediation and Buddhist practice.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymised prior to analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

3.5.1. Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS. The analysis proceeded in five stages.

First, descriptive statistics were calculated to summarise participant characteristics and construct-level responses.

Second, internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha.

Third, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to evaluate construct validity and identify underlying factor structures. Sampling adequacy was assessed through the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity.

Fourth, Pearson correlation analyses were performed to examine relationships among the principal constructs.

Finally, multiple regression analyses were conducted to identify predictors of Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication and Digital Dharma Engagement.

Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level.

3.5.2. Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis.

The analytical process consisted of four stages:

1. Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts;
2. Initial open coding of meaningful segments;
3. Development of broader thematic categories through axial coding;
4. Refinement and interpretation of final themes.

The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns concerning trust formation, doctrinal reliability, technological mediation, contemplative experience, and authority negotiation within Digital Dharma environments.

Illustrative quotations were selected to represent major themes while preserving participant anonymity.

3.5.3. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Following separate analyses, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated through triangulation and comparative interpretation.

The integration process sought to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence between statistical patterns and participant narratives. Particular attention was given to relationships among doctrinal consistency, technological mediation, transformative experience, trust, and authority.

The integrated findings subsequently informed the development of the Integrated Human–AI Digital Dharma Mediation (IHDDM) Framework presented in Section 6.

3.6. Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Considerations

The reliability of the survey instrument was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. Construct validity was assessed through Exploratory Factor Analysis. Multiple forms of evidence, including quantitative patterns and qualitative narratives, were employed to strengthen analytical credibility through methodological triangulation.

The study adhered to internationally recognised ethical principles for social science research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all survey and interview data were anonymised prior to analysis. No personally identifiable information is reported in this article. The research complied with institutional guidelines concerning confidentiality, data protection, and responsible research conduct.

4. Results

4.1. Participant Characteristics

A total of 327 survey responses were initially collected from Buddhist practitioners and Digital Dharma users across multiple online and offline Buddhist communities in Vietnam. Following data screening procedures, 19 responses were removed due to incompleteness or duplication, resulting in a final analytical sample of 308 participants.

The sample included individuals with varying levels of Buddhist engagement, educational backgrounds, and familiarity with AI-assisted communication technologies. Most participants reported regular use of digital platforms to access Buddhist teachings, including social media channels, livestreamed Dharma talks, online study groups, digital libraries, and AI-assisted search or translation tools. This diversity provided an appropriate basis for examining perceptions of AI-mediated Digital Dharma communication across different user profiles.

The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

4.2. Reliability and Construct Validation

4.2.1. Reliability Analysis

Table 3. Reliability Statistics for Research Constructs

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication (TDC)	5	.809	Good
Authority Perception (AP)	4	.786	Acceptable
Technological Mediation (TM)	5	.833	Good
Transformative Experience (TE)	5	.831	Good
Doctrinal Consistency (DC)	4	.828	Good
Monastic Authority Trust (MAT)	3	.759	Acceptable
Digital Dharma Engagement (DDE)	5	.777	Acceptable

Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated for all seven constructs included in the study. As presented in Table 3, the reliability coefficients ranged from .759 to .833, indicating acceptable to good internal consistency.

Technological Mediation demonstrated the highest reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .833$), followed closely by Transformative Experience ($\alpha = .831$) and Doctrinal Consistency ($\alpha = .828$). Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication also demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .809$). The remaining constructs—Authority Perception ($\alpha = .786$), Digital Dharma Engagement ($\alpha = .777$), and Monastic Authority Trust ($\alpha = .759$)—all exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of .70.

These findings indicate that the measurement scales possess satisfactory internal consistency and are suitable for subsequent analyses.

4.2.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis

To evaluate construct validity and examine the underlying factor structure of the survey instrument, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted.

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was .838, indicating that the dataset was appropriate for factor analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically

significant, $\chi^2(465) = 3334.87$, $p < .001$, confirming sufficient intercorrelations among the measured items.

The EFA extracted seven factors with eigenvalues greater than one, corresponding closely to the theoretically proposed constructs. Together, these factors explained 60.97% of the total variance. Factor loadings generally aligned with the intended dimensions, supporting the multidimensional structure of the survey instrument.

Taken together, the reliability and validity analyses provide preliminary support for the adequacy of the measurement model used in the present study.

Table 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) Summary

Indicator	Value
Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO)	.838
Bartlett’s Test χ^2	3334.87
Degrees of Freedom	465
Significance	< .001
Number of Extracted Factors	7
Total Variance Explained (%)	60.97

Note. Extraction method: Principal Axis Factoring. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.

4.3. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine relationships among the principal constructs.

As shown in Table 5, Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication (TDC) was significantly and positively associated with all major dimensions of the model. The strongest relationship was observed between Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication and Doctrinal Consistency ($r = .378$, $p < .01$), suggesting that perceptions of doctrinal coherence are closely related to trust in AI-generated Buddhist content.

Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication was also positively associated with Authority Perception ($r = .322$, $p < .01$), Transformative Experience ($r = .264$, $p < .01$), Monastic Authority Trust ($r = .246$, $p < .01$), and Technological Mediation ($r = .207$, $p < .01$).

Digital Dharma Engagement (DDE) likewise demonstrated significant positive relationships with several constructs. The strongest correlations were observed with Transformative Experience ($r = .286$, $p < .01$), Technological Mediation ($r = .269$, $p < .01$), and Authority Perception ($r = .248$, $p < .01$). Digital Dharma Engagement was also positively associated with Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication ($r = .214$, $p < .01$) and Doctrinal Consistency ($r = .171$, $p < .01$).

By contrast, Monastic Authority Trust exhibited only a weak association with Digital Dharma Engagement ($r = .096$), suggesting that engagement in Digital Dharma environments may depend on factors beyond institutional trust alone.

Overall, the correlation matrix indicates a coherent network of positive relationships among doctrinal, technological, experiential, and authority-related dimensions of Digital Dharma participation.

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. TDC	—						
2. AP	.322**	—					
3. TM	.207**	.174**	—				
4. TE	.264**	.146*	.110	—			
5. DC	.378**	.318**	.062	.275**	—		
6. MAT	.246**	.258**	.023	.220**	.381**	—	
7. DDE	.214**	.248**	.269**	.286**	.171**	.096	—

Note. TDC = Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication; AP = Authority Perception; TM = Technological Mediation; TE = Transformative Experience; DC = Doctrinal Consistency; MAT = Monastic Authority Trust; DDE = Digital Dharma Engagement.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

4.4. Predictors of Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication

To identify the factors associated with trust in AI-mediated Dharma communication, a multiple regression analysis was conducted using Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication (TDC) as the dependent variable.

The regression model was statistically significant, $F = 22.72$, $p < .001$, and explained 23.1% of the variance in trust ($R^2 = .231$; Adjusted $R^2 = .221$). This indicates that the selected predictors collectively account for a substantial proportion of variation in participants' trust toward AI-mediated Buddhist communication.

Among the predictors, Doctrinal Consistency emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .268$, $p < .001$). Participants who perceived AI-generated Dharma content as doctrinally coherent were significantly more likely to express trust in AI-mediated communication.

Authority Perception also contributed significantly to the model ($\beta = .191$, $p = .001$), indicating that perceptions of interpretive legitimacy and expertise are associated with higher levels of trust. Transformative Experience demonstrated a significant positive effect ($\beta = .147$, $p = .004$), suggesting that individuals who reported meaningful contemplative or personal benefits from Digital Dharma participation were more likely to trust AI-assisted religious communication.

Technological Mediation likewise remained significant ($\beta = .141$, $p = .009$), indicating that perceptions of technological usefulness and accessibility contribute positively to trust formation.

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values remained well below accepted thresholds, indicating no evidence of problematic multicollinearity among the predictors.

Taken together, these findings suggest that trust in AI-mediated Dharma communication is shaped by a combination of doctrinal, experiential, technological, and authority-related considerations rather than by technological functionality alone.

Table 6. Multiple Regression Model Predicting Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication
Dependent Variable: Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication (TDC)

Predictor	β	t	p	VIF
Doctrinal Consistency	.268	4.56	< .001	1.19
Authority Perception	.191	3.44	.001	1.16
Transformative Experience	.147	2.91	.004	1.08
Technological Mediation	.141	2.63	.009	1.05

Model Summary

Statistic	Value
N	308
R^2	.231
Adjusted R^2	.221
F	22.72
p	< .001

Note. VIF values indicate no evidence of problematic multicollinearity.

4.5. Predictors of Digital Dharma Engagement

A second multiple regression analysis examined factors associated with Digital Dharma Engagement (DDE).

The model was statistically significant, $F = 5.22$, $p < .001$, accounting for 8.0% of the variance in engagement ($R^2 = .080$; Adjusted $R^2 = .064$). Although the explanatory power of the

model was more modest than that observed for trust, several predictors demonstrated significant associations with Digital Dharma engagement.

Table 7. Multiple Regression Model Predicting Digital Dharma Engagement
Dependent Variable: Digital Dharma Engagement (DDE)

Predictor	β	t	p
Authority Perception	.148	2.64	.009
Technological Mediation	.146	2.78	.006
Transformative Experience	.150	2.71	.007
Doctrinal Consistency	-.009	1.34	.182
Monastic Authority Trust	-.026	0.95	.344

Model Summary		
	Statistic	Value
	N	308
	R ²	.080
	Adjusted R ²	.064
	F	5.22
	p	< .001

Note. Authority Perception, Technological Mediation, and Transformative Experience significantly predicted Digital Dharma Engagement, whereas Doctrinal Consistency and Monastic Authority Trust did not achieve statistical significance.

Authority Perception emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = .148$, $p = .009$), indicating that perceptions of interpretive legitimacy and credibility contribute positively to engagement within Digital Dharma environments.

Technological Mediation also demonstrated a significant positive effect ($\beta = .146$, $p = .006$), suggesting that digital accessibility and technological support facilitate greater participation in Digital Dharma activities.

Similarly, Transformative Experience remained a significant predictor ($\beta = .150$, $p = .007$). Participants who reported greater personal reflection, contemplative benefit, or transformative learning were more likely to engage actively with Digital Dharma platforms and resources.

In contrast, Doctrinal Consistency ($\beta = -.009$, $p = .182$) and Monastic Authority Trust ($\beta = -.026$, $p = .344$) did not reach statistical significance within the final regression model. Although both variables demonstrated positive correlations with engagement, their predictive influence diminished when considered alongside the broader set of explanatory factors.

These findings indicate that engagement within Digital Dharma ecosystems is more strongly associated with perceptions of accessibility, meaningful experience, and interpretive relevance than with traditional authority structures alone.

4.6. Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the 22 semi-structured interviews identified four recurring themes that illuminate how participants experience AI-mediated Digital Dharma communication.

Theme 1: Expanded Accessibility

Participants consistently emphasised the ability of digital technologies and AI-assisted systems to improve access to Buddhist teachings. Many interviewees described AI-supported translation, content retrieval, and summarisation as useful tools for overcoming linguistic, geographical, and informational barriers.

One lay practitioner explained:

“AI helps me quickly find explanations of Buddhist concepts that would otherwise require searching through many different sources.” (P07)

Similarly, several participants noted that AI-assisted translation tools facilitated access to teachings delivered in languages they did not understand.

Theme 2: Doctrinal Reliability

Despite recognising the benefits of AI systems, participants repeatedly stressed the importance of doctrinal accuracy.

Both monastic and lay respondents expressed concerns that AI-generated responses may occasionally simplify, misinterpret, or decontextualise Buddhist teachings. Consequently, many participants reported cross-checking AI-generated content against canonical texts or consulting qualified monastic teachers.

As one monastic participant noted:

“AI can provide useful information, but it cannot replace the responsibility of verifying teachings against authentic Buddhist sources.” (M03)

Theme 3: Contemplative Depth

A third theme concerned the distinction between informational access and spiritual realisation.

Participants frequently described AI and digital platforms as valuable educational tools while emphasising that genuine contemplative development requires personal practice and direct experience.

One retreat participant stated:

“Reading about meditation is different from actually practicing meditation. Technology can guide you, but it cannot meditate for you.” (P11)

These reflections suggest that participants distinguish between cognitive understanding and experiential realisation within Digital Dharma environments.

Theme 4: Negotiated Authority

The final theme involved changing perceptions of authority.

Participants described authority as increasingly distributed across multiple actors, including monastic teachers, digital communities, online content creators, and AI-assisted systems. Nevertheless, most interviewees continued to view monastic expertise and doctrinal knowledge as important reference points when evaluating AI-generated content.

As one participant explained:

“AI can help me understand a teaching, but I still want confirmation from respected teachers when the issue is important.” (P04)

Collectively, these findings indicate that authority within Digital Dharma environments is neither fully centralised nor fully decentralised. Instead, authority appears to be continuously negotiated among human actors, technological systems, and religious communities.

4.7. Integrated Summary of Findings

Across both quantitative and qualitative analyses, several consistent patterns emerged.

First, doctrinal consistency appears to play a central role in trust formation. The quantitative findings identified Doctrinal Consistency as the strongest predictor of Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication, while interview participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of doctrinal reliability.

Second, technological mediation contributes positively to both trust and engagement. Participants generally viewed AI-assisted systems as valuable tools for expanding access to Buddhist teachings and supporting religious learning.

Third, transformative experience emerged as an important factor in both quantitative and qualitative findings. Participants who reported greater contemplative benefit and personal reflection also demonstrated higher levels of trust and engagement.

Finally, both strands of evidence suggest that authority within Digital Dharma environments is increasingly negotiated across multiple actors rather than residing exclusively within traditional institutional structures.

Taken together, the findings provide empirical support for a multidimensional understanding of Human–AI mediation in Digital Dharma communication and establish the foundation for the Integrated Human–AI Digital Dharma Mediation (IHDDM) Framework presented in the following sections.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpreting Trust in AI-Mediated Dharma Communication

The quantitative findings indicate that trust in AI-mediated Dharma communication is shaped by a combination of doctrinal, technological, experiential, and authority-related factors. Among these variables, doctrinal consistency emerged as the strongest predictor of trust, followed by authority perception, transformative experience, and technological mediation. These findings suggest that participants do not evaluate AI-generated Buddhist content solely on the basis of technological convenience or informational accessibility. Rather, trust appears to be grounded in perceptions of doctrinal legitimacy and interpretive reliability.

The qualitative findings further reinforce this pattern. Interview participants consistently emphasised the importance of verifying AI-generated explanations against canonical teachings, monastic guidance, and established Buddhist traditions. Although many participants acknowledged the usefulness of AI-assisted tools for information retrieval, translation, and educational support, few regarded AI as an autonomous source of religious authority. Instead, AI was generally perceived as a supplementary interpretive resource whose legitimacy depends upon its alignment with recognised doctrinal frameworks.

Taken together, these findings suggest that trust within Digital Dharma environments remains fundamentally relational rather than purely technological. The empirical evidence indicates that users evaluate AI-generated religious content through existing structures of religious authority and doctrinal validation rather than replacing them altogether.

5.2. Authority, Technology, and the Reconfiguration of Religious Interpretation

The findings also reveal important shifts in how authority operates within digitally mediated religious communication. Authority perception was positively associated with both trust in AI-mediated Dharma communication and Digital Dharma engagement. This relationship suggests that technological innovation does not necessarily diminish the importance of religious authority. Instead, digital environments appear to redistribute interpretive influence across multiple actors, including monastic teachers, Buddhist scholars, online communities, algorithmic systems, and individual practitioners.

The interview data illustrate this process clearly. Participants frequently described situations in which AI-generated explanations were consulted alongside traditional sources rather than independently of them. Such practices suggest an emerging form of distributed interpretive authority in which religious meaning is negotiated through interactions among human expertise, digital infrastructures, and personal evaluation.

These findings resonate with Digital Religion scholarship, which has increasingly emphasised the transformation rather than disappearance of authority in networked environments. Rather than displacing traditional authority structures, digital technologies appear to create new conditions under which authority must be continuously negotiated, verified, and contextualised.

5.3. Digital Interiority and Contemplative Meaning-Making

A particularly noteworthy finding concerns the relationship between transformative experience and Digital Dharma engagement. Both the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that participants evaluate digital religious resources not only according to informational usefulness but

also according to their perceived capacity to support self-reflection, ethical awareness, and contemplative development.

Building upon these findings, this study introduces the concept of digital interiority as a theoretical lens for understanding contemplative engagement within digitally mediated religious environments. The empirical data indicate that many participants actively reflect upon the reliability, relevance, and spiritual implications of AI-generated content rather than accepting such content uncritically. This reflexive process appears especially important when participants encounter doctrinal ambiguity, conflicting interpretations, or unfamiliar teachings.

Within the Trúc Lâm tradition, the principle of *phân quan tự kỷ* emphasises inward observation and critical self-awareness as foundations of spiritual development. Although the present study does not directly measure contemplative awareness, the interview findings suggest that similar forms of reflexive engagement may occur during interactions with digital religious technologies. Digital interiority therefore extends this contemplative orientation into contemporary communication environments, highlighting the importance of reflective discernment when engaging with algorithmically generated religious information.

5.4. Challenges and Risks of AI-Mediated Dharma Communication

While the findings demonstrate the potential benefits of AI-assisted religious communication, they also highlight several challenges that deserve careful consideration.

First, AI-generated religious content may contain factual inaccuracies, doctrinal distortions, or misleading interpretations that appear convincing despite lacking scriptural support and thereby acquiring an appearance of algorithmic authority (Öhman, 2024). Several interview participants expressed concern that less experienced practitioners may be unable to distinguish reliable explanations from inaccurate or fabricated content.

Second, algorithmic systems may introduce forms of bias that shape the visibility and circulation of religious information. Recommendation systems often prioritise engagement and popularity rather than doctrinal accuracy, potentially amplifying simplified, sensationalised, or contextually incomplete representations of Buddhist teachings while marginalising other forms of knowledge through algorithmic ranking and visibility structures (Noble, 2018).

Third, excessive reliance on AI-generated guidance may weaken direct engagement with canonical texts, qualified teachers, and lived religious communities. Although participants generally viewed AI as a useful educational tool, many emphasised that spiritual development ultimately depends upon personal practice, ethical cultivation, and experiential realisation rather than information acquisition alone.

These concerns suggest that the integration of AI into Digital Dharma environments should be accompanied by ongoing attention to doctrinal accountability, interpretive transparency, and ethical oversight.

5.5. Implications for Digital Religion and Human–AI Communication

The findings contribute to several ongoing scholarly conversations. For Digital Religion research, the study provides empirical evidence that religious authority continues to play a central role within technologically mediated environments, even as interpretive practices become increasingly distributed across human and algorithmic actors.

For Human–AI Communication scholarship, the findings suggest that AI systems may function as more than information-delivery tools. Participants frequently used AI for explanation, translation, summarisation, and interpretive support. Building upon these observed practices, this study proposes AI as a co-interpreter as an analytical category for understanding situations in which AI participates in the mediation of religious meaning. This concept does not imply intentional agency on the part of AI but rather highlights its growing role within interpretive communication processes.

Finally, for Buddhist Studies, the findings demonstrate the continuing relevance of TrúC Lâm concepts such as *phản quan tự kỷ* and *cư trần lạc đạo* in contemporary digital contexts. The empirical evidence suggests that technological engagement and contemplative practice need not be treated as opposing domains. Instead, digital environments may create new opportunities for religious learning, reflection, and community participation when supported by appropriate forms of doctrinal guidance and critical awareness.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the future of Digital Dharma communication will depend not only upon technological innovation but also upon the interpretive conditions through which trust, authority, and contemplative meaning-making are sustained within increasingly AI-mediated environments.

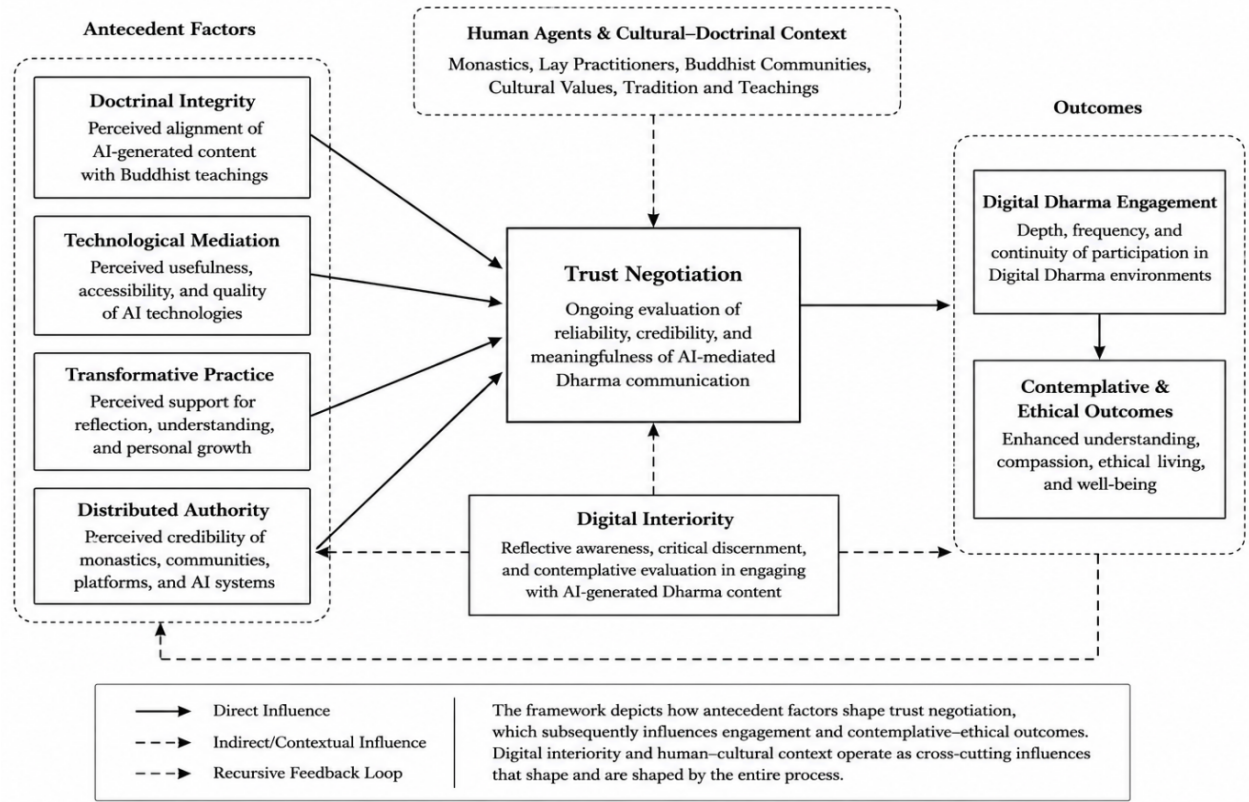


Figure 1. The Integrated Human-AI Digital Dharma Mediation Framework

6. The Integrated Human-AI Digital Dharma Mediation (IHDDM) Framework

6.1. Framework Overview

Building upon the empirical findings and theoretical discussions presented in the preceding sections, this study proposes the Integrated Human-AI Digital Dharma Mediation (IHDDM) Framework as a conceptual model for understanding Human-AI interaction within contemporary Digital Dharma environments.

Figure 1 illustrates the framework. Rather than viewing AI merely as a technological tool or Buddhist communication simply as information transmission, the IHDDM Framework conceptualises Digital Dharma communication as a dynamic process in which religious meaning emerges through continuous interactions among doctrinal, technological, experiential, and authority-related dimensions.

The framework synthesises five interconnected components identified throughout the study: doctrinal integrity, technological mediation, transformative practice, trust negotiation, and distributed authority. Together, these elements form a recursive system through which Buddhist teachings are accessed, interpreted, evaluated, and integrated into contemporary digital religious life.

Importantly, the framework does not assume that technological advancement automatically enhances religious understanding. Instead, it suggests that meaningful Digital Dharma communication depends upon the interpretive conditions through which technological capabilities are aligned with doctrinal reliability, contemplative practice, and ethical forms of authority.

6.2. Structural Relationships within the Framework

The empirical findings indicate that doctrinal consistency constitutes the strongest foundation for trust in AI-mediated Dharma communication. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of doctrinal reliability when evaluating AI-generated explanations of Buddhist teachings. Consequently, the framework positions doctrinal integrity as a central stabilising force within the broader communication process.

At the same time, technological mediation expands access to Buddhist teachings and facilitates engagement with digital religious resources. The survey findings demonstrate that technological mediation contributes positively to both trust and Digital Dharma engagement. However, technology alone does not determine religious meaning. Instead, its influence becomes significant only when mediated through users' interpretive practices and evaluative judgments.

Transformative experience represents the experiential dimension through which digital interactions acquire religious significance. The findings suggest that participants engage with Digital Dharma not merely to obtain information but also to cultivate understanding, reflection, and personal development. In this sense, transformative practice functions as the mechanism through which technological interactions become integrated into lived religious experience.

Trust negotiation occupies a mediating position within the framework. Rather than being treated as a fixed attribute, trust emerges through ongoing evaluations of doctrinal consistency, authority credibility, technological reliability, and personal experience. The study's quantitative results demonstrate that trust is shaped simultaneously by doctrinal, authority-related, technological, and experiential factors, supporting the interpretation of trust as a negotiated rather than predetermined outcome.

Distributed authority constitutes the broader social context within which these processes occur. The findings indicate that religious interpretation increasingly involves interactions among monastic teachers, Buddhist communities, digital platforms, AI systems, and individual practitioners. Authority therefore becomes distributed across multiple actors while remaining subject to continuous verification and negotiation (Castells, 2010).

Taken together, these relationships suggest that Digital Dharma communication cannot be adequately understood through either technological determinism or traditional authority models alone. Instead, communication emerges through the interaction of multiple forms of mediation operating simultaneously within contemporary religious environments.

6.3. Dynamic Feedback Loops and Digital Interiority

A distinctive feature of the IHDDM Framework is its emphasis on recursive interaction rather than linear communication. The relationships among the framework's components are not unidirectional. Instead, they continuously influence one another through ongoing cycles of engagement, evaluation, interpretation, and reflection.

As individuals engage with AI-assisted religious resources, their experiences shape subsequent perceptions of trust, authority, and doctrinal reliability. These revised perceptions then influence future patterns of engagement, creating feedback loops that continuously reshape Digital Dharma participation.

Within this process, digital interiority functions as a balancing mechanism linking external technological mediation with internal contemplative awareness. The concept emerged from the qualitative findings and reflects the importance of reflexive evaluation when engaging with AI-generated religious content. Rather than passively accepting algorithmically produced

information, participants frequently described practices of verification, reflection, and critical discernment.

The notion of digital interiority extends the Trúc Lâm principle of *phản quan tự kỷ* into digitally mediated environments. While traditional contemplative practice emphasises inward observation and self-awareness, digital interiority highlights the importance of maintaining similar forms of reflexive engagement when navigating increasingly complex digital communication ecosystems. In this way, contemplative awareness becomes not only a religious practice but also a critical interpretive resource for evaluating AI-mediated religious information.

6.4. Future Applications of the Framework

Although developed within the context of Vietnamese Trúc Lâm Buddhism, the IHDDM Framework may provide a useful analytical model for future investigations of digitally mediated religious communication more broadly.

Future studies may apply the framework to other Buddhist traditions, including Theravāda, Tibetan, Pure Land, or Chan/Zen communities, in order to examine how doctrinal traditions shape interactions with AI-assisted technologies. Comparative studies may also explore whether similar patterns of trust negotiation and distributed authority emerge across different cultural and religious contexts.

Beyond Buddhism, the framework may contribute to broader research on Human–AI communication within religious environments by providing a conceptual structure for examining how technological systems participate in processes of meaning-making, interpretation, and authority formation.

Accordingly, the primary contribution of the IHDDM Framework lies not in predicting technological outcomes but in clarifying the interpretive conditions under which religious communication may remain doctrinally coherent, ethically grounded, and contemplatively meaningful in the age of generative AI.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between trust, authority, and Human–AI mediation within contemporary Digital Dharma environments through an exploratory mixed-methods investigation of the Trúc Lâm Zen tradition in Vietnam. Integrating survey findings, interview data, and theoretical analysis, the study explored how Buddhist practitioners evaluate AI-assisted religious communication and how technological mediation intersects with doctrinal, experiential, and authority-related dimensions of religious life.

The empirical findings indicate that trust in AI-mediated Dharma communication is shaped by multiple interconnected factors. Among these, doctrinal consistency emerged as the strongest predictor of trust, followed by authority perception, transformative experience, and technological mediation. The qualitative findings further revealed that participants generally viewed AI not as a replacement for traditional religious authority but as a supplementary interpretive resource whose legitimacy depends upon doctrinal reliability and critical evaluation. These findings suggest that the adoption of AI within Buddhist communication environments remains embedded within broader processes of trust negotiation and authority verification.

Building upon these findings, the study proposed the Integrated Human–AI Digital Dharma Mediation (IHDDM) Framework. Rather than treating religious communication as a purely technological process, the framework conceptualises Digital Dharma communication as a dynamic interaction among doctrinal integrity, technological mediation, transformative practice, trust negotiation, and distributed authority. In addition, the concepts of AI as a co-interpreter and digital interiority were introduced to account for emerging forms of religious meaning-making and contemplative engagement within digitally mediated environments. Importantly, these concepts are offered as analytical tools derived from the study's findings rather than as claims regarding autonomous AI agency or universal patterns of religious experience.

The study contributes to three areas of scholarship. First, it extends Digital Religion research by providing empirical evidence that religious authority remains significant within technologically mediated environments while becoming increasingly distributed across human and algorithmic actors. Second, it contributes to Human–AI Communication studies by demonstrating how AI systems participate in interpretive processes related to religious knowledge, translation, explanation, and meaning-making. Third, it contributes to contemporary Buddhist Studies by showing how Trúc Lâm concepts such as *phân quan tị kỷ* may remain relevant in emerging digital contexts and by highlighting the role of contemplative reflection in the evaluation of AI-generated religious content.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a specific cultural and religious context involving Vietnamese Trúc Lâm Buddhist practitioners and therefore should not be assumed to represent all Buddhist traditions or religious communities. The findings should be interpreted as exploratory and context-dependent. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, while self-reported responses may be influenced by individual perceptions and experiences. Future research should examine the applicability of the IHDDM Framework across different Buddhist traditions, cultural settings, and religious communities, as well as through longitudinal and comparative research designs.

The findings also suggest that the integration of AI into religious communication presents both opportunities and challenges. While AI-assisted technologies may expand access to Buddhist teachings and facilitate multilingual communication, concerns regarding doctrinal accuracy, algorithmic bias, interpretive transparency, and overreliance on AI-generated guidance remain significant. Consequently, the future development of Digital Dharma environments will require not only technological innovation but also sustained attention to ethical responsibility, doctrinal accountability, and contemplative discernment.

Ultimately, the value of the IHDDM Framework lies not in predicting technological outcomes, but in clarifying the interpretive conditions under which Buddhist communication may remain doctrinally coherent, ethically grounded, and contemplatively meaningful in the age of generative AI.

Author Contributions

Conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, visualisation, and project administration: D.T.P. (Đương Tiến Phong).

The author has read and approved the final published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with internationally recognised ethical principles for social science research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all survey and interview data were anonymised prior to analysis. No personally identifiable information is reported in this article.

Data Availability

The anonymised dataset, questionnaire, interview protocol, codebook, and supplementary methodological documentation are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable academic request, subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

Appendix A. Survey instrument

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication (TDC)

TDC1. I trust AI-generated explanations of Buddhist teachings.

TDC2. AI-assisted Dharma communication provides reliable information.

TDC3. AI-generated responses can support my understanding of Buddhist concepts.

TDC4. I feel confident using AI tools to explore Buddhist teachings.

TDC5. AI-mediated Dharma communication can be a trustworthy learning resource.

Authority Perception (AP)

AP1. Qualified Buddhist teachers remain important sources of interpretive authority.

AP2. Religious expertise influences my evaluation of Buddhist information online.

AP3. I consider authority when assessing AI-generated Dharma content.

AP4. Interpretive legitimacy is important in Digital Dharma environments.

Technological Mediation (TM)

TM1. Digital technologies improve access to Buddhist teachings.

TM2. AI tools facilitate Buddhist learning and study.

TM3. Digital platforms make Buddhist resources easier to access.

TM4. Technology helps overcome geographical barriers to Buddhist education.

TM5. AI-assisted systems enhance the accessibility of Buddhist knowledge.

Transformative Experience (TE)

TE1. Digital Dharma participation encourages self-reflection.

TE2. AI-assisted learning can support personal spiritual development.

TE3. Digital Buddhist resources contribute to my contemplative practice.

TE4. Online Buddhist engagement promotes ethical reflection.

TE5. Digital Dharma participation positively influences my understanding of Buddhist teachings.

Doctrinal Consistency (DC)

DC1. AI-generated Dharma content should remain consistent with Buddhist teachings.

DC2. Doctrinal accuracy is important when evaluating AI-generated religious information.

DC3. I trust AI-generated content more when it aligns with canonical teachings.

DC4. Consistency with Buddhist doctrine influences my acceptance of AI-mediated Dharma communication.

Monastic Authority Trust (MAT)

MAT1. I trust Buddhist monastics as reliable interpreters of Buddhist teachings.

MAT2. Monastic guidance remains important when evaluating religious information online.

MAT3. I prefer to verify AI-generated Dharma content with qualified Buddhist teachers.

Digital Dharma Engagement (DDE)

DDE1. I regularly use digital platforms to access Buddhist teachings.

- DDE2. I frequently participate in online Buddhist learning activities.
- DDE3. I actively engage with Digital Dharma resources.
- DDE4. Digital technologies play an important role in my Buddhist learning.
- DDE5. I intend to continue using Digital Dharma resources in the future.

Demographic Variables

Gender
Age Group
Education Level
Buddhist Practice Frequency
AI Usage Frequency
Digital Dharma Participation Frequency

Appendix B. Interview protocol

Opening Questions

1. Could you briefly describe your Buddhist practice background?
2. How often do you use digital platforms to access Buddhist teachings?
3. Have you used AI-assisted tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, or translation systems for Buddhist learning?

AI-Mediated Dharma Communication

4. How do you perceive the use of AI in Buddhist communication?
5. What advantages do AI-assisted systems offer for learning Buddhist teachings?
6. What concerns do you have regarding AI-generated religious content?

Trust and Reliability

7. Under what conditions would you trust AI-generated explanations of Buddhist teachings?
8. How do you evaluate the reliability of AI-generated Dharma content?
9. Have you ever encountered inaccurate or misleading AI-generated Buddhist information?

Authority and Interpretation

10. Who do you consider the most reliable authority when evaluating Buddhist teachings?
11. How do you perceive the relationship between AI systems and traditional religious authority?
12. Can AI ever function as an interpreter of Buddhist teachings? Why or why not?

Contemplative Practice

13. Does Digital Dharma participation influence your spiritual practice?
14. Can AI support meditation or contemplative development?
15. What aspects of Buddhist practice cannot be replaced by technology?

Future Perspectives

16. How do you envision the future of AI-mediated Buddhist communication?
17. What recommendations would you make for Buddhist organisations using AI technologies?

Appendix C. Representative quotations

Theme 1. Expanded Accessibility

“AI helps me quickly find explanations of Buddhist concepts that would otherwise require searching through many different sources.” (P07)

“Translation tools allow me to access teachings that were previously unavailable because of language barriers.” (P12)

Theme 2. Doctrinal Reliability

“AI can provide useful information, but it cannot replace the responsibility of verifying teachings against authentic Buddhist sources.” (M03)

“I always compare AI-generated explanations with canonical texts before accepting them.” (P05)

Theme 3. Contemplative Depth

“Reading about meditation is different from actually practicing meditation. Technology can guide you, but it cannot meditate for you.” (P11)

“Spiritual transformation requires personal experience, not simply information.” (M06)

Theme 4. Negotiated Authority

“AI can help me understand a teaching, but I still want confirmation from respected teachers when the issue is important.” (P04)

“Authority today comes from multiple sources, but monastic experience remains essential.” (M02)

Appendix D. EFA factor loadings

Exploratory Factor Analysis Summary

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

KMO = .838

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity:

$\chi^2(465) = 3334.87$

$p < .001$

Total Variance Explained = 60.97%

Factor Loadings (Representative Items)

Item	Factor Loading
TDC1	.781
TDC2	.764
TDC3	.741
TDC4	.718
TDC5	.697
AP1	.726
AP2	.742
AP3	.701
AP4	.688
TM1	.794
TM2	.768
TM3	.752
TM4	.731
TM5	.709
TE1	.773
TE2	.748
TE3	.735
TE4	.712
TE5	.687
DC1	.781
DC2	.769
DC3	.743
DC4	.721
MAT1	.736
MAT2	.708
MAT3	.691
DDE1	.742
DDE2	.728
DDE3	.714
DDE4	.697
DDE5	.681

Note. Only primary factor loadings are displayed. All retained items exceeded the minimum loading threshold of .60 and demonstrated acceptable discriminant performance.

Appendix E. Codebook

E.1. Dataset Overview

The dataset consists of 308 valid survey responses collected from Buddhist practitioners and Digital Dharma users in Vietnam. The questionnaire was designed to measure perceptions of AI-mediated Dharma communication, authority, trust, technological mediation, doctrinal consistency, transformative experience, and Digital Dharma engagement.

All attitudinal items were measured using a five-point Likert scale:

Value	Response Category
1	Strongly Disagree
2	Disagree
3	Neutral
4	Agree
5	Strongly Agree

E.2. Demographic Variables

Variable	Description	Coding
Gender	Participant gender	1 = Male; 2 = Female; 3 = Other/Prefer not to say
Age_Group	Age category	1 = 18–25; 2 = 26–35; 3 = 36–45; 4 = 46–55; 5 = 56+
Education	Highest educational attainment	1 = Secondary; 2 = High School; 3 = Bachelor's; 4 = Master's; 5 = Doctoral
Practice_Frequency	Frequency of Buddhist practice	1 = Rarely; 2 = Monthly; 3 = Weekly; 4 = Several times/week; 5 = Daily
AI_Digital_Usage	Frequency of AI-assisted digital tool usage	1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Occasionally; 4 = Frequently; 5 = Very Frequently

E.3. Research Constructs

Trust in AI-mediated Dharma Communication (TDC)

Code	Item Description
TDC1	Trust in AI-generated explanations of Buddhist teachings
TDC2	Reliability of AI-assisted Dharma communication
TDC3	Confidence in AI-generated Buddhist information
TDC4	Trust in AI-assisted learning
TDC5	Overall trust in AI-mediated Dharma communication

Cronbach's Alpha = .809

Authority Perception (AP)

Code	Item Description
AP1	Importance of qualified religious authority
AP2	Influence of expertise on interpretation
AP3	Authority as a criterion for evaluating content
AP4	Importance of interpretive legitimacy

Cronbach's Alpha = .786

Technological Mediation (TM)

Code	Item Description
TM1	Improved access to Buddhist teachings
TM2	Facilitation of Buddhist learning
TM3	Accessibility through digital platforms
TM4	Overcoming geographical barriers
TM5	Enhanced access through AI-assisted systems

Cronbach's Alpha = .833

Transformative Experience (TE)

Code	Item Description
TE1	Encourages self-reflection
TE2	Supports spiritual development
TE3	Contributes to contemplative practice
TE4	Promotes ethical reflection
TE5	Enhances understanding of Buddhist teachings

Cronbach's Alpha = .831

Doctrinal Consistency (DC)

Code	Item Description
DC1	Consistency with Buddhist teachings
DC2	Importance of doctrinal accuracy
DC3	Alignment with canonical sources
DC4	Influence of doctrinal reliability on trust

Cronbach's Alpha = .828

Monastic Authority Trust (MAT)

Code	Item Description
MAT1	Trust in monastic guidance
MAT2	Reliance on monastic expertise
MAT3	Verification of AI-generated content through monastics

Cronbach's Alpha = .759

Digital Dharma Engagement (DDE)

Code	Item Description
DDE1	Frequency of Digital Dharma participation
DDE2	Online Buddhist learning engagement
DDE3	Active use of Digital Dharma resources
DDE4	Importance of digital technologies in Buddhist learning
DDE5	Intention to continue Digital Dharma participation

Cronbach's Alpha = .777

E.4. Reliability Summary

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
TDC	5	.809
AP	4	.786
TM	5	.833
TE	5	.831
DC	4	.828
MAT	3	.759
DDE	5	.777

E.5. Exploratory Factor Analysis Summary

Indicator	Value
KMO	.838
Bartlett's χ^2	3334.87
p-value	< .001
Number of Factors	7
Variance Explained	60.97%

Appendix F. Ethics and consent statement

F.1. Research Ethics Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with internationally recognised ethical principles for social science research, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and responsible data management.

Because the study involved minimal risk and focused on participants' perceptions of digital communication and Buddhist learning, no sensitive personal, medical, or psychological information was collected.

F.2. Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through Buddhist retreat communities, Digital Dharma learning groups, Trúc Lâm-affiliated practice networks, and online Buddhist communities operating in Vietnam.

Participation was entirely voluntary. No financial compensation or material incentives were provided.

F.3. Informed Consent Procedure

Prior to participation, all respondents received an information statement describing: the purpose of the research; the voluntary nature of participation; confidentiality protections; the right to withdraw at any time; intended academic use of the collected data. Participants indicated informed consent electronically before accessing the survey questionnaire.

Interview participants additionally provided verbal or written consent before recording commenced.

F.4. Confidentiality and Anonymity

No personally identifiable information is reported in this article.

Survey responses were anonymised before statistical analysis.

Interview participants were assigned pseudonymous identification codes:

- Monastic participants: M01–M08
- Lay participants: P01–P14

All quotations presented in the manuscript have been anonymised to protect participant identity.

F.5. Data Storage and Security

Electronic data were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

Interview recordings, transcripts, survey datasets, and analytical materials were anonymised and securely archived following completion of the research.

F.6. Participant Rights

Participants retained the right to: decline participation; skip any survey question; discontinue participation at any time; request clarification regarding the study. No participant withdrew after completing the study.

F.7. Ethical Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence tools were not used to generate participant responses, interview transcripts, or research data.

AI-assisted tools may have been employed for language editing, formatting assistance, and manuscript preparation. However, all research design decisions, data collection procedures, statistical analyses, interpretations, and scholarly conclusions were conducted and verified by the author.

F.8. Data Availability Statement

The anonymised survey dataset, questionnaire, codebook, interview protocol, and supplementary methodological materials are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable academic request, subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

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