

Negotiating Spiritual Identity: Islamic Education Strategies in Adolescents' Digital Lives

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital technology has reshaped adolescents' social interactions, knowledge construction, and identity formation, raising concerns about the sustainability of spiritual identity in digitally mediated environments. This study examines how Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) contributes to adolescents' spiritual identity formation in the digital era. A qualitative descriptive case study was conducted in a public junior high school in Indonesia from January to February 2026. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving school leaders, teachers, and students, and analyzed inductively using an interactive model. The findings reveal three interconnected patterns: (1) contextual adaptation of Islamic teachings to digital realities, (2) experiential-reflective learning practices fostering critical awareness of digital behavior, and (3) ethical modeling supported by institutional structures. These patterns indicate that spiritual identity emerges through the interaction between pedagogy, lived digital experience, and school culture. This study proposes a situated model of spiritual identity formation, positioning religious education as a mediating space for negotiating values within digital contexts. The findings highlight the potential of PAI as an adaptive pedagogical framework that integrates religious values with contemporary digital life.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology over the past two decades has fundamentally transformed patterns of social interaction, knowledge construction, and identity formation, particularly among adolescents as the generation most intensively engaged with digital environments. Digitalization not only expands access to information but also creates new spaces for individuals to construct, negotiate, and represent their identities through various social media platforms (Azis et al., 2026; Livingstone & Third, 2020; Musonif, et al., 2026; Nesi et al., 2020). In this context, digital spaces function not merely as communication tools but as social arenas that shape value systems, meaning-making orientations, and perspectives on reality. Empirical data indicate that adolescents spend a significant portion of their time in digital environments, with high levels of social media usage and active engagement in both content consumption and production (APJII, 2023; Ramadona et al., 2026; UNICEF, 2021). This condition positions the digital environment as a crucial factor in the process of adolescent identity formation. From a theoretical perspective, adolescent identity is no longer understood as a static entity but as a dynamic construction shaped through diverse social interactions and cultural experiences (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). In the digital era, this process is further expanded as individuals engage not only in physical spaces but also in virtual environments characterized by anonymity, openness, and algorithmic mediation. Such conditions enable more complex processes of identity negotiation, in which individuals simultaneously encounter multiple and often competing value systems (Musonif,

et al., 2026; Radde-Antweiler, 2021; Saifudin et al., 2020). Within this dynamic, spiritual identity as an integral component of self-identity becomes increasingly vulnerable to fragmentation, particularly when religious values intersect with digital cultural logics that emphasize performativity, popularity, and social validation (Campbell, 2020). In this study, spiritual identity is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing religious awareness, value orientation, and life practices that reflect an individual's relationship with God and the broader social environment (Fahrezi et al., 2020; Halstead, 2018; Lim & Putnam, 2020; Musonif, et al., 2026). This identity is not formed instantaneously but develops through processes of value internalization, reflective experience, and continuous social interaction. However, in the context of the digital era, the formation of spiritual identity faces significant challenges due to unfiltered information exposure, value relativism, and the dominance of popular culture that often diverges from religious principles (Huda, 2021; Musonif & Misbah, 2026). Several studies have shown that the intensity of social media use has implications for shifts in adolescents' value orientations and religious behavior, where religiosity tends to become more symbolic and less reflective (Keles et al., 2020; Yustisia & Huda, 2022).

In Muslim societies, these challenges become even more complex due to the tension between normative Islamic values and the pluralistic and global nature of digital life. Research by Lim and Putnam (2020) indicates a growing tendency toward the individualization of religiosity among younger generations, in which religion is interpreted personally rather than through traditional authorities. Meanwhile, national studies have reported shifts in adolescents' moral and spiritual values as a result of intensive engagement with digital media (Musonif, et al., 2026; Suryadi & Maulidya, 2021; Zulkifli, 2023). These conditions suggest that digital spaces function not only as platforms for self-expression but also as arenas of value contestation that influence how adolescents understand and internalize religious teachings. These challenges are particularly relevant in Indonesian public schools located in areas experiencing rapid digital expansion. The present study was conducted in a public junior high school situated in a semi-urban district of Central Java, where internet access, smartphone ownership, and social media use among adolescents have become part of everyday life. At the same time, the school serves students from predominantly Muslim families and maintains various religious development programs as part of its educational culture. This combination of intensive digital engagement and strong religious educational practices provides a meaningful context for examining how adolescents negotiate spiritual identity within digitally mediated environments. In this context, Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) holds a strategic position as a formal institution responsible for shaping students' spiritual identity. Normatively, PAI is not only intended to transmit religious knowledge but also to develop religious awareness, moral character, and life orientations grounded in Islamic values (Azra, 2020; Musonif & Azis, 2026). However, existing studies indicate that PAI practices still face several limitations, particularly in responding to the dynamics of adolescents' digital lives. Learning processes tend to remain cognitively oriented and normatively structured, with limited integration of contemporary issues such as digital ethics, media literacy, and religious practices in virtual spaces (Musonif, et al., 2026; Rahman et al., 2023). Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the need for transforming PAI pedagogy to become more contextual and adaptive to technological developments. For instance, project-based and reflective learning approaches have been shown to enhance students' engagement in understanding religious values in a contextualized manner (Fahrezi et al., 2026; Maharani & Musonif, 2026; Rahman et al., 2023). Furthermore, the role of teachers as digital mentors has become increasingly important in guiding students to navigate digital spaces ethically and responsibly (Ali & Hasan, 2022).

Nevertheless, most of these studies remain normative in nature and focus primarily on pedagogical recommendations, without deeply exploring how such strategies are implemented in practice and how students interpret these experiences in the process of constructing their spiritual identity. Another limitation of previous research lies in the lack of qualitative approaches capable of capturing the complexity of students' and teachers' subjective experiences within digital interactions. Many studies still rely on quantitative approaches that focus on the relationship between social media usage and levels of religiosity, thereby failing to explain the processes of value internalization and meaning construction in depth (Keles et al., 2020; Twenge, 2021). In addition, the integration of theoretical perspectives on identity, religiosity, and digital culture remains limited, resulting in an incomplete understanding of how adolescent spiritual identity is formed in the digital era. Based on this analysis, there are significant conceptual and empirical gaps in the existing literature. First, there is a lack of studies that specifically examine Islamic Religious Education strategies in relation to the process of constructing adolescents' spiritual identity within digital contexts. Second, there is limited in-depth exploration of how students interpret their religious learning experiences in relation to their digital lives. Third, there is insufficient integration between theoretical frameworks of identity, religiosity, and digital culture within Islamic education research. Therefore, this study positions itself as an effort to address these gaps by examining PAI strategies in shaping adolescents' spiritual identity through a qualitative case study approach.

This study is guided by the following research questions: (1) how are Islamic Religious Education strategies implemented in responding to the dynamics of digital culture among adolescents; (2) how do students interpret their PAI learning experiences in relation to their digital lives; and (3) how do these processes contribute to the construction of adolescents' spiritual identity. These questions are exploratory in nature and oriented toward understanding meaning and processes, in line with the qualitative research paradigm. The objective of this study is to analyze in depth the strategies of Islamic Religious Education in shaping adolescents' spiritual identity in the digital era, as well as to understand how these strategies are interpreted and internalized by students in their daily lives. By employing a qualitative approach, this study seeks to explore participants' subjective experiences in a holistic and contextual manner, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Academically, this study contributes to enriching the discourse on Islamic education, particularly in the context of integrating religiosity and digital culture. The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to examine PAI strategies not merely as pedagogical practices but as processes of spiritual identity construction that emerge through the interaction between religious values and adolescents' digital experiences. Therefore, this study is expected to offer both conceptual contributions in understanding spiritual identity as a dynamic construct and empirical contributions in illustrating adaptive and contextualized religious education practices in the digital era.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive instrumental case study design to explore how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) strategies contribute to the formation of adolescents' spiritual identity in the digital era. A case study approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The instrumental nature of this case study lies in its function to provide a broader understanding of how PAI operates as a strategic educational response to digital cultural challenges. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Gombong, Kebumen, Indonesia, as a purposively selected site due to its active integration of digital learning practices

and religious education programs. Data collection took place over a two-month period, from January 13 to February 28, 2026, allowing sufficient time to observe instructional processes, conduct interviews, and validate findings through iterative engagement in the field. Although the formal fieldwork period lasted approximately two months, data collection was conducted intensively through repeated engagement in the research setting. The researcher visited the school several times each week and observed various educational activities, including PAI classroom instruction, Qur’anic enrichment programs (PPKS), and school-based religious activities. This sustained presence enabled the researcher to build familiarity with participants, observe recurring interaction patterns, and continuously compare emerging findings across different contexts. Data depth was therefore achieved not solely through the duration of fieldwork but through the intensity, repetition, and iterative nature of the researcher’s engagement with participants and settings. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the relevance and depth of information (Patton, 2015). A total of 10 informants were involved, consisting of one school principal, three PAI teachers, one guidance and counseling (BK) teacher, and five students. The inclusion criteria for teachers were a minimum of three years of teaching experience and active involvement in implementing PAI strategies in digital contexts. Students were selected based on varying levels of digital engagement and participation in religious learning activities to capture diverse perspectives.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant Category	Number	Selection Criteria	Role in Study
Principal	1	Policy decision-maker	Institutional perspective
PAI Teachers	3	≥3 years experience, active in digital pedagogy	Strategy implementation
BK Teacher	1	Student behavioral monitoring	Digital impact insight
Students	5	Varied digital engagement	Experiential perspective
Total	10	—	—

In addition to formal interviews, several informal conversations were conducted during observation periods to clarify emerging issues and deepen contextual understanding. These interactions allowed the researcher to explore participants’ interpretations in greater depth and served as an important complement to the formal interview data. Data were collected through three primary techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow flexibility in exploring participants’ experiences and interpretations (Kallio et al., 2016). Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants’ consent. Participant observations were conducted repeatedly in Grade VII, VIII, and IX PAI classes, Qur’anic enrichment sessions (PPKS), and other school-based religious activities. The observations focused on teacher-student interactions, discussions related to digital behavior, reflective learning processes, and students’ responses to religious instruction. Adopting a participant-as-observer role (Spradley, 2016), the researcher maintained regular engagement in the field while documenting detailed field notes after each observation session. The data analysis process followed an inductive thematic analysis approach informed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) and Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis was conducted iteratively alongside data collection to allow emerging insights to inform subsequent data gathering. This iterative process enabled preliminary interpretations emerging from early observations and interviews to be continuously refined, verified, and expanded through subsequent field engagement. The analytical stages included:

Table 2. Data Analysis Procedure

Stage	Description	Output
Data Reduction	Selecting and simplifying raw data	Initial categories
Open Coding	Identifying meaningful units	Codes
Axial Coding	Linking categories	Sub-themes
Selective Coding	Integrating themes	Core themes
Data Display	Narrative and matrix presentation	Structured findings
Conclusion Drawing	Interpretation and verification	Validated themes

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied several validation strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data triangulation was conducted by comparing information from interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was performed by returning key findings to participants for confirmation. Peer debriefing was also employed to enhance analytical rigor through critical discussion with fellow researchers. Additionally, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document assumptions and minimize bias during interpretation. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing participant identities. The study adhered to ethical standards for research involving human subjects, including voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage (Orb et al., 2001).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

3.1 Contextualization of Islamic Teaching Content in the Digital Sphere

Findings indicate that teachers actively reconstruct Islamic Religious Education (PAI) content to align with students' lived digital experiences. Rather than strictly following textbook structures, teachers selectively emphasize theological (tauhid) and moral (akhlak) concepts that are perceived as directly relevant to students' online behaviors. This contextualization is implemented progressively across grade levels. In lower grades (Grade VII), teaching focuses on strengthening foundational beliefs, particularly faith in God, as a way to stabilize students' internal values. In higher grades (Grades VIII and IX), the focus shifts toward more applied ethical concepts such as sincerity (ikhlas), modesty (zuhud), and self-restraint (qana'ah), which are explicitly contrasted with digital behaviors such as self-promotion and online validation-seeking. A PAI teacher explained: "We relate concepts like *riya'* (showing off) to what students see on Instagram or TikTok. So they don't just memorize the term, but understand it in their daily digital life." (Interview with PAI Teacher, January 18, 2026). Students also recognized this connection: "When the teacher explained about *riya'*, I realized it's similar to posting just to get likes. I never thought about it that way before." (Student Interview, February 3, 2026). Another student elaborated: "At first, I thought posting photos frequently was normal because everyone does it. But when we discussed the concept of *riya'* in class, I started questioning my own intentions. Sometimes I uploaded something mainly because I wanted people to notice me or react to it. The lesson made me reflect on whether my online behavior was really aligned with Islamic values." (Student Interview, February 3, 2026). In addition to conceptual adaptation, teachers assign digital-based projects such as creating short Islamic videos or moral messages for social media platforms. These tasks are perceived by students as both engaging and meaningful. However, teachers acknowledged limitations in the curriculum: "There is still no specific material about digital transactions or online ethics in detail. We adapt as much as we can, but it is not formally structured yet." (Interview with PAI Teacher, January 25, 2026). These findings show that content adaptation is not merely pedagogical adjustment but represents an ongoing effort to bridge normative Islamic teachings with students' digital realities.

3.2 Reflective and Experiential Learning Practices

The second major pattern emerging from the data is the use of reflective and experience-based learning approaches. Teachers consistently initiate lessons using real-life digital phenomena, including viral content, gaming habits, and influencer culture, to stimulate discussion. Classroom observations revealed that lessons often begin with open-ended questions related to students' daily digital practices. For example: "Do you think spending hours on games affects your (prayer)?" (Observed classroom interaction, January 22, 2026). These questions are not intended to test knowledge but to trigger self-reflection. Students are encouraged to express their opinions freely, often leading to peer discussion and negotiation of meaning. A student described this experience: "Sometimes we discuss things like gaming or social media, and it makes me think about my habits. It feels more real than just reading from the book." (Student Interview, February 5, 2026). One student described a personal dilemma: "Sometimes I spend so much time on social media or games that I realize I am delaying prayer. I know it is not right, but it happens because I get distracted. When the teacher asks us to discuss these situations, I begin to think about how I should manage my time better." (Student Interview, February 5, 2026). Project-based learning is also widely implemented. Students create digital content such as short videos about Asmaul Husna, tolerance, or ethical behavior. These activities allow students to engage directly with Islamic values through their own creative processes. Observation data shows that students demonstrate high engagement during these tasks: "Students were actively discussing video concepts and dividing roles in groups. Some focused on scripting, others on editing and presentation." (Field Note, February 10, 2026). Despite these strengths, reflective processes are not always systematically structured. Reflection tends to occur informally during discussions rather than through planned reflective sessions. A teacher noted: "Reflection happens during discussion, but we haven't designed a specific reflection session after every activity." (Interview with PAI Teacher, February 12, 2026). This suggests that while experiential learning is present, its reflective dimension remains partially underdeveloped.

3.3 Teacher Modeling and Digital Ethical Culture

Another significant finding highlights the role of teachers as behavioral models in shaping students' digital ethics. Teachers consistently demonstrate responsible digital behavior, both explicitly and implicitly, through classroom practices and communication styles. A key principle frequently emphasized is "filter before sharing," which students repeatedly mentioned during interviews. "Our teacher always says, 'Don't share before checking if it's true.' So now I try to be more careful." (Student Interview, February 6, 2026). Teachers also model respectful communication, time discipline, and responsible use of digital devices during lessons. These behaviors are observed directly by students and interpreted as practical examples of Islamic ethics. Observation data supports this: "The teacher maintained respectful dialogue, avoided harsh language, and encouraged students to express opinions without judgment." (Field Note, January 30, 2026). The role of guidance and counseling (BK) teachers further strengthens this process. They monitor students' social media behavior and provide guidance when necessary. A BK teacher explained: "We don't only intervene when there is a problem. We also guide students on how to use social media wisely before issues arise." (Interview with BK Teacher, February 8, 2026). A PAI teacher further explained: "Students are exposed to a huge amount of information every day. If we only teach religious concepts without showing how they apply online, students may struggle to connect them with their daily experiences. That is why we try to model responsible digital behavior ourselves." (Interview with PAI Teacher, February 9, 2026). These findings indicate that character formation is not limited to formal instruction but is reinforced through consistent modeling and institutional culture.

3.4 Institutional Support and Digital Learning Environment

The implementation of PAI strategies is supported by institutional policies and infrastructure. The school enforces regulated smartphone use, allowing devices only for supervised academic purposes. The principal stated: “Students can bring smartphones, but only for learning activities. Outside that, their use is restricted.” (Interview with Principal, January 20, 2026). The principal further emphasized: “Our challenge is not preventing students from using technology, because digital technology is already part of their lives. The challenge is ensuring that they use it responsibly and in ways that support their character and spiritual development.” (Interview with Principal, January 20, 2026). Technological facilities such as Wi-Fi, computers, and smart TVs are available and actively used in classroom activities. Teachers also participate in internal training programs to improve their digital teaching skills. Observation confirms integration of technology: “The teacher used a smart TV to display video examples, which were later discussed with students.” (Field Note, February 11, 2026). However, no formal program specifically integrates Islamic values into digital literacy training. This gap is acknowledged by school management: “We have technology training, but not yet specifically linked to Islamic digital ethics.” (Interview with Principal, February 14, 2026). These findings show that institutional support exists but remains partially fragmented in terms of value integration.

3.5 Student Perceptions and Negotiation of Meaning

Students’ responses reveal a dynamic process of meaning-making. While some initially perceive PAI as outdated, their engagement increases when lessons are connected to real-life digital experiences. A student expressed: “Before, I thought PAI was just theory. But when it talks about social media, it feels more relevant.” (Student Interview, February 4, 2026). At the same time, students continue to negotiate between religious values and digital culture: “Sometimes I know something is not good, like showing off, but it’s hard because everyone does it.” (Student Interview, February 7, 2026). Another student expressed a similar tension: “I often see content creators who become popular because they constantly share their lives online. Sometimes I want to do the same because it seems normal and attractive. At the same time, I remember what I learned in PAI about sincerity and avoiding showing off. So there is always a conflict in my mind about what is acceptable and what is not.” (Student Interview, February 7, 2026). This indicates that identity formation is not linear but involves tension and continuous negotiation. The school’s spiritual program (PPKS-Qur’anic deepening sessions) plays an important role in reinforcing students’ spiritual awareness. Observation shows: “Students participated in Qur’an recitation and correction sessions with high focus and seriousness.” (Field Note, February 13, 2026). Students described this activity as grounding: “PPKS makes me feel calmer. It reminds me about religion after being busy online.” (Student Interview, February 13, 2026)

3.6 Synthesis of Empirical Patterns

Across the findings, three interconnected patterns emerge, reflecting how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) strategies operate within students’ digital lifeworlds. These patterns are not isolated practices but form an integrated process through which spiritual identity is constructed, negotiated, and reinforced. To clarify the empirical relationships, the synthesis is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Synthesis of Empirical Patterns in Spiritual Identity Formation

Core Pattern	Empirical Practices	Observed Student Responses	Meaning Construction Process
Contextual Adaptation of Islamic Teachings	Integration of tauhid and akhlak with social media phenomena (e.g., <i>riya'</i> ,	Students relate religious concepts to daily digital behavior;	Students reinterpret Islamic teachings as relevant moral

	flexing); digital-based assignments (Islamic videos, moral messages)	increased awareness of ethical implications of online actions Students demonstrate engagement, self-reflection, and critical awareness of their own habits (e.g., gaming, social media use)	frameworks for navigating digital life Values are internalized through lived experience and reflection rather than memorization
Experiential–Reflective Learning Practices	Use of real-life digital cases; open-ended questioning; project-based learning; group discussions	Students imitate responsible digital behavior; increased caution in sharing content; strengthened spiritual awareness through routine activities	Ethical norms and spiritual discipline are reinforced through consistent social and institutional interaction
Modeling and Institutional Reinforcement	Teacher role modeling (“filter before sharing”); ethical communication; BK monitoring; school digital policies; PPKS program		

The table shows that each pattern operates at a different but interconnected level. The first pattern emphasizes cognitive reinterpretation, where students begin to understand Islamic teachings within the context of their digital experiences. The second pattern reflects experiential internalization, where values are processed through active engagement and reflection. The third pattern highlights social reinforcement, where consistent modeling and institutional structures stabilize students’ ethical orientations. Importantly, these patterns do not function independently. Instead, they form a continuous cycle of meaning-making. Students first encounter religious values through contextualized instruction, then engage with those values through lived experiences, and finally reinforce them through observation of role models and institutional practices. This integrated process suggests that the formation of students’ spiritual identity is not merely the result of formal instruction but emerges through the interaction between pedagogical strategies, everyday digital practices, and the broader school environment.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the formation of adolescents’ spiritual identity in the digital era cannot be adequately explained through linear or transmission-based models of religious education. Instead, the data reveal a complex, multi-layered process in which Islamic Religious Education (PAI) operates as a mediating space where religious norms, digital experiences, and institutional structures intersect. This challenges dominant assumptions within traditional religious education frameworks that position identity formation as a direct outcome of cognitive internalization of doctrinal knowledge. Rather, the findings suggest that spiritual identity is constructed through continuous negotiation between competing value systems embedded in both religious teachings and digital culture. From a theoretical perspective, these findings partially align with constructivist models of identity, which emphasize that identity emerges through social interaction and meaning-making processes (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). However, this study extends and simultaneously critiques such models by demonstrating that, within Islamic educational contexts, identity construction is not value-neutral. Existing identity theories often assume a relativistic framework in which individuals freely construct meaning from diverse influences. In contrast, the present findings show that students’ identity negotiation is normatively anchored in theological constructs such as tauhid, ikhlas, and zuhud, which function as moral evaluative frameworks rather than merely symbolic resources. This suggests that prevailing models of digital identity formation insufficiently account for the role of normative religious epistemologies, particularly in non-Western contexts where religious authority continues to shape

meaning-making processes (Campbell, 2020). At the same time, the findings complicate the assumption that increased exposure to religious instruction necessarily leads to stronger or more coherent religiosity. Consistent with recent empirical studies showing the symbolic and fragmented nature of youth religiosity in digital contexts (Keles et al., 2020; Lim & Putnam, 2020), this study reveals that students often recognize Islamic ethical principles yet struggle to consistently enact them in their digital practices. This tension reflects what may be described as a condition of “performative religiosity,” where religious awareness coexists with competing pressures of visibility, validation, and social acceptance within digital platforms. Such findings challenge normative expectations within Islamic education that moral knowledge naturally translates into moral behavior, suggesting instead that identity formation is contingent upon situational and contextual factors. The study further contributes to the literature by demonstrating that experiential and reflective pedagogical strategies play a crucial role in bridging the gap between abstract religious teachings and students’ lived realities. While prior research has emphasized the importance of student-centered and contextual learning approaches (Rahman et al., 2023), this study provides empirical evidence that such approaches are particularly effective in enabling students to reinterpret religious values within their digital environments. However, the findings also reveal a critical limitation: the absence of systematically structured reflective processes. This gap suggests that experiential learning, when not accompanied by intentional reflection, risks remaining at the level of engagement without leading to deeper internalization. This extends critiques within educational theory that experiential learning models often assume reflection as an inherent outcome, whereas in practice it requires deliberate pedagogical design (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 2000).

Another significant contribution of this study lies in its reconceptualization of the teacher’s role in the digital era. While previous studies have highlighted the importance of teacher modeling in moral education (Ali & Hasan, 2022), this study shows that such modeling acquires new complexity within digital contexts. Ethical behavior is no longer confined to observable physical interactions but extends into less visible digital practices, such as information verification, online communication, and content sharing. The notion of teachers as “digital moral mediators” emerges from the data, indicating that their role extends beyond instruction and exemplification toward actively guiding students in navigating ethically ambiguous digital environments. This finding critiques traditional pedagogical models that separate moral education from technological engagement, demonstrating instead that ethical formation in the digital era requires their integration. Institutional factors further reinforce this process, highlighting that identity formation is not solely an individual or interpersonal phenomenon but is structurally conditioned. The presence of digital regulations, technological infrastructure, and spiritual programs creates a mediated environment that both constrains and enables students’ behavior. This aligns with sociocultural theories that emphasize the role of institutional structures in shaping individual practices (Giddens, 1984). However, the study also exposes a critical inconsistency: while schools have adapted technologically, they have not fully developed integrated frameworks that align digital literacy with Islamic ethical principles. This fragmentation reflects a broader issue in contemporary education, where technological adoption often outpaces conceptual and ethical integration (Selwyn, 2021). Consequently, current institutional approaches may inadvertently reproduce the very dissonance they seek to address. Taken together, these findings lead to a conceptual reframing of spiritual identity formation in the digital era as a process of “mediated negotiation.” This process involves the continuous interaction between three domains: normative religious values, lived digital experiences, and institutional-cultural structures. Unlike existing models that treat these domains separately, the present study demonstrates that their interaction is constitutive rather than additive. Spiritual identity emerges not from the dominance of one domain

over others but from the dynamic tension and negotiation between them. This conceptualization offers a more nuanced understanding of how adolescents construct meaning in environments characterized by both moral guidance and epistemic uncertainty.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to the advancement of Islamic education studies by integrating perspectives from identity theory, digital religion, and educational sociology into a coherent analytical framework. It challenges the adequacy of existing models that either overemphasize individual agency or neglect the role of normative structures, proposing instead a relational and context-sensitive understanding of identity formation. Practically, the findings suggest that efforts to strengthen students' spiritual identity must move beyond curricular reform toward a more holistic approach that integrates pedagogy, teacher development, and institutional policy. Specifically, there is a need to develop structured models of Islamic digital literacy that explicitly address ethical challenges in online environments, as well as pedagogical strategies that systematically incorporate reflection as a core component of learning. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education in the digital era depends not on the quantity of religious instruction but on its capacity to engage with the realities of students' lived experiences. Spiritual identity formation is neither automatic nor guaranteed; it is a contingent and negotiated process shaped by the interplay of knowledge, experience, and environment. This finding underscores the need for a paradigm shift in religious education, from transmission-oriented models toward integrative approaches that recognize the complexity of contemporary identity formation. Future research should extend this inquiry by examining how these dynamics operate across different cultural and institutional contexts, as well as through longitudinal designs that capture the evolving nature of spiritual identity over time. Additionally, further studies are needed to develop and empirically test comprehensive models of Islamic digital literacy that can serve as practical frameworks for educators navigating the challenges of the digital age.

4. CONCLUSION

The formation of adolescents' spiritual identity in the digital era cannot be adequately understood as a linear outcome of religious instruction, but rather as a dynamic, relational, and contextually mediated process shaped by the interplay between pedagogical strategies, digital experiences, and institutional culture. The findings reveal that Islamic Religious Education (PAI), when enacted through contextually adaptive content, experiential-reflective pedagogy, and embodied ethical modeling, operates not merely as a knowledge transmission system but as a meaning-making space in which students negotiate, reinterpret, and internalize religious values within digitally saturated lifeworlds. The study advances the argument that spiritual identity formation in contemporary Muslim adolescents is dialogical, emerging through continuous interaction between doctrinal teachings and algorithmically mediated digital realities. In this regard, the integration of tauhid and akhlak with everyday digital practices, such as social media engagement and content production, illustrates how religious values are translated into lived ethical orientations, rather than remaining abstract moral prescriptions. Furthermore, the prominence of experiential and reflective learning processes indicates that internalization of religious values is contingent upon students' capacity to critically engage with their own digital behaviors, thereby transforming religious knowledge into self-regulatory awareness. At a theoretical level, this research contributes to the growing discourse on religion and digital culture by proposing a situated model of spiritual identity formation, in which education functions as a mediating structure between normative religious frameworks and fluid digital environments. This model challenges reductionist perspectives that either frame digital technology as inherently secularizing or position

religious education as resistant to change. Instead, the findings suggest that religious education can actively appropriate digital contexts as sites of ethical cultivation, thereby expanding existing conceptualizations of religiosity in late modern societies. From a practical standpoint, the study underscores the necessity of reorienting PAI pedagogy toward integrative and reflexive approaches that bridge doctrinal knowledge with students' digital realities. Teachers are required to move beyond traditional instructional roles and assume positions as ethical mediators and digital mentors, capable of guiding students through complex moral landscapes shaped by visibility, performativity, and social validation. At the institutional level, schools play a crucial role in sustaining this process by establishing normative environments and policy frameworks that reinforce ethical digital engagement while enabling constructive use of technology for spiritual development.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the findings and the proposed model of spiritual identity formation are derived from a single instrumental case study conducted in a public junior high school located within a socio-cultural context characterized by active digital engagement and institutional support for technology-assisted learning. As a result, the findings should not be interpreted as universally representative of all Islamic educational settings. Second, the relatively short period of field engagement limits the ability to capture longer-term processes of identity development. Future research is therefore encouraged to employ comparative, multi-sited, and longitudinal qualitative designs to examine how spiritual identity evolves across different educational contexts. In particular, further studies are needed to explore whether the mediated negotiation model identified in this research operates similarly within Islamic educational institutions such as Madrasah and Pesantren, where religious cultures, learning traditions, and policies regarding smartphone use and digital access differ substantially from those of public schools. In conclusion, this study affirms that the sustainability of adolescents' spiritual identity in the digital era depends not on resistance to technological change, but on the capacity of Islamic education to recontextualize its values within the lived realities of digital life, thereby fostering forms of religiosity that are both authentic and adaptive in an increasingly complex world.

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