

Islamic Religious Education in Shaping Student Character amid Digital-Era Challenges: A Qualitative Study at MTs Al-Khairat, Ternate

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: June 19, 2026
Revised: August 12, 2026
Accepted: August 14, 2026

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.52970/grmilf.v6i4.2419>

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Islamic religious education contributes to the formation of student character in the digital era and identifies the strategies teachers use to address the character-related problems that emerge in this context. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and documentation, at MTs Al-Khairat, Ternate City. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, with credibility strengthened through source and method triangulation. The results show that students face several character-related problems, including low confidence in public speaking, limited interest in religious learning, and overdependence on digital technology and artificial intelligence tools that weakens critical thinking and academic honesty. Teachers respond to these problems mainly through personal approaches, exemplary conduct, and habituation of religious practice, which observational data associate with improvements in student discipline, religious engagement, and manners. The findings suggest that Islamic religious education functions most effectively as a character-formation vehicle when exemplary teaching is combined with consistent habituation and collaboration between school, family, and community.

Keywords: Islamic Education, Character Formation, Teacher Strategy, Digital Era, Qualitative Study.

I. Introduction

Education is one of the most fundamental instruments through which human beings acquire knowledge, skills, and the attitudes and character required to live well in society. In the Islamic tradition, education is not limited to the cultivation of intellect; it is equally directed at the formation of noble character (akhlaq al-karimah), so that learners grow into individuals who are knowledgeable, faithful, and morally upright (Al-Ghazali, 2018; Daradjat, 2014). The rapid advancement of information and communication technology in the last decade has reshaped how students learn, socialize, and form their identities. Digital access brings clear benefits for communication and learning, but it has also been associated with declining courtesy, weakening respect for parents and teachers, and increasing exposure to values that conflict with religious and local norms (Sagala et al., 2024; Salsabila et al., 2023). These shifts indicate that character education can no longer be treated as a peripheral component of schooling; it needs to be addressed

systematically, and Islamic religious education is uniquely positioned to do so because it grounds character formation in textually and theologically anchored values of honesty, responsibility, discipline, tolerance, and mutual respect (Arifin, 2020; Muttaqin, 2023).

Despite this potential, prior studies suggest that the practical translation of Islamic values into observable student character remains uneven, particularly in schools that must simultaneously manage conventional teaching methods, limited exemplary role models, and students' growing dependence on digital devices and, more recently, generative artificial intelligence tools (Qowim et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2023). This creates a specific and researchable problem: it is not yet well documented, at the level of an individual madrasah, precisely which character-related problems Islamic education is expected to resolve in the digital era, nor which teacher strategies are actually used - and perceived as effective - in addressing them. This study addresses that gap by examining MTs Al-Khairat, a faith-based junior secondary school in Ternate City, North Maluku. Two research questions guide the study: (1) what character-related problems do students at MTs Al-Khairat exhibit in the context of the digital era, and what factors underlie them; and (2) what strategies do teachers employ to address these problems through Islamic religious education, and what effects do these strategies appear to have on student character. By answering these questions, the study aims to provide an empirically grounded account - rather than a purely normative one - of how Islamic education functions as a character-formation mechanism under real classroom conditions, and to offer practical guidance for teachers, school leaders, and parents seeking to strengthen character education amid digital-era pressures.

II. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Islamic Education

Islamic education is understood as a comprehensive process of human development grounded in the values of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, aimed at forming the insan kamil - a complete human being who is faithful, pious, and of noble character (Daradjat, 2014; Marimba, 1989). Unlike approaches that privilege cognitive achievement alone, Islamic education explicitly integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions, treating knowledge, worship, and conduct as inseparable components of a single educational aim (Nata, 2019).

2.2. The Concept of Character Formation in Islam

Character can be defined as the set of moral values, norms, and life principles that a person has internalized deeply enough that they are expressed consistently and spontaneously in everyday attitudes, speech, and behavior, whether or not one is being observed. In the Islamic perspective, character is closely tied to the concept of akhlaq, built on three interdependent pillars: iman (faith), which supplies the inner conviction that all actions are witnessed by God; ibadah (worship), which trains discipline, obedience, and self-purification; and akhlaq in its narrower sense, the horizontal dimension of courtesy, honesty, compassion, justice, and responsibility toward other people (Al-Ghazali, 2018; Suryana, 2020). Character formation in Islamic education is understood as a lifelong process rather than an instantaneous outcome. It typically proceeds through five interrelated methods: exemplification (keteladanan), regarded as the most effective method because consistent role-modelling by teachers, parents, and community figures carries more weight than verbal instruction alone; habituation (pembiasaan), the repeated and consistent practice of good conduct until it becomes an ingrained disposition; the reinforcement of spiritual awareness, which anchors good behavior in consciousness of God rather than a desire for human approval; formal instruction on right and wrong; and ongoing advice and reminders (Zainuddin, 2022). The cumulative aim is the formation of individuals of noble character who are beneficial to themselves, their religion, their nation, and their environment.

2.3. Character-Related Problems in Islamic Education in the Digital Era

A growing body of research documents how digitalization complicates character education. Seven interrelated problem areas recur across the literature and are also visible in the present research site.

- a. Dominant influence of social media and digital technology: students increasingly spend more time in digital environments than in direct social interaction, which increases exposure to foreign cultural content and behavior that may conflict with Islamic values, weakening manners, empathy, and the capacity to distinguish right from wrong (Salsabila et al., 2023; Sagala et al., 2024).
- b. Crisis of exemplary role models: when educators, parents, or community figures fail to align their own conduct with the values they teach, students find religious instruction less credible and less influential, even though exemplification is considered the single most effective method of character formation (Kurniawati & Fatimah, 2024).
- c. Low interest and motivation to study religion: many students regard religious subjects as abstract, rote-based, and disconnected from their daily concerns, which reduces engagement relative to general or technology-related subjects (Rahman et al., 2023).
- d. Limitations in teaching methods and media: reliance on one-directional, lecture-based instruction is poorly matched to a generation accustomed to visual, interactive, and digitally mediated learning, which can leave religious knowledge at a purely cognitive level without translating into practice (Qowim et al., 2024; Sugito, 2024).
- e. Gap between religious knowledge and actual behavior: students may be able to correctly answer questions about Islamic law while still behaving dishonestly, indisciplined, or disrespectfully in practice, reflecting an overemphasis on academic assessment relative to habituation of practice (Muttaqin, 2023).
- f. Weakening role of family and community: as parental supervision at home becomes constrained by work demands, and as community norms themselves shift, values instilled at school are not always reinforced outside it, making character formation fragile and reversible (Sari, 2022; Ramatni et al., 2025).
- g. Influence of popular culture and consumerism: exposure to external lifestyle norms can encourage students to equate success with wealth, appearance, and popularity rather than piety and noble character, sidelining values of simplicity, honesty, and humility (Rosidah et al., 2024).

2.4. Teacher Strategies for Character Formation

The literature converges on several strategies through which teachers translate Islamic values into character outcomes: integrating Islamic values across subjects rather than confining them to religious instruction; habituating worship and noble conduct through consistent daily practice; sustained exemplary behavior by teachers; purposeful use of Islamic-oriented digital media, which reframes technology as a vehicle for character education rather than only a source of risk; and contextual, interactive approaches that connect religious material to students' lived digital experience, for example by discussing the ethics of social media use within Islamic teaching (Azmi et al., 2024; Karimullah, 2023; Supa'at & Muslim, 2023).

2.5. Prior Research and Research Gap

Hasan (2021) found that Islamic education positively influences students' religious character, but did not examine how teachers adapt their strategies to digital-era pressures. Qowim et al. (2024) and Rahman et al. (2023) describe the general influence of technology on moral and ethical formation but do not analyze a single school in depth, limiting insight into how strategies are actually enacted in a specific institutional and cultural context. Sugito (2024) documents hybrid, technology-integrated pedagogy in a pesantren setting, but pesantren and public madrasah contexts differ substantially in resources and student supervision. This creates a research gap that the present study addresses: a site-specific, qualitative account of both the character-related problems and the teacher strategies used to address them at MTs Al-Khairat, Ternate, situated within the broader digital-era literature reviewed above.

III. Research Method

3.1. Research Type and Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. Qualitative research is appropriate here because the phenomenon under study - how character is shaped, challenged, and supported in a real school setting - is best understood holistically, through the meanings participants themselves attach to their experiences, rather than through predefined variables (Khan, 2022). The descriptive design was chosen to systematically record and analyze the current state of Islamic religious education practice, the character-related problems observed, and the strategies teachers use, without testing a predetermined hypothesis.

3.2. Research Site

The study was conducted at MTs Al-Khairat, Ternate City, North Maluku Province. This site was selected because it is a faith-based junior secondary school with an explicit mandate for character formation, while also facing, like many schools in similar settings, real practical challenges in translating religious values into student behavior amid social and technological change.

3.3. Participants and Sampling Technique

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, in which informants are chosen because they are judged to hold information directly relevant to the research questions rather than to represent the school population statistically (Khan, 2022). The informants comprised Islamic religious education teachers directly responsible for character-formation activities and students who participate in these activities.

3.4. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three complementary techniques. (1) Observation: the researchers observed students' behavior and activities in the classroom and school environment, focusing on indicators of discipline, respect toward teachers, participation in religious activities, and interaction with digital devices during learning. (2) Semi-structured interviews: teachers and students were interviewed using an interview guide covering three broad themes - perceived character-related problems, strategies used or experienced, and perceived outcomes - allowing follow-up questions to explore unanticipated responses. (3) Documentation: supporting data were collected in the form of photographs, school activity records, and archival material related to the implementation of Islamic education programs.

3.5. Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed following the interactive qualitative analysis model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, and organizing raw field notes and interview transcripts around the study's two research questions. The condensed data were then displayed in categorized form (problems and strategies) to support pattern recognition, before conclusions were drawn and iteratively verified against the raw data. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the study applied source triangulation (comparing accounts from teachers and students) and method triangulation (comparing observation, interview, and documentary data) (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1. Student Character Profile

Observation, interview, and documentary data were combined to characterize seven aspects of student character at MTs Al-Khairat. Table 1 summarizes the validity level of each aspect as assessed from the triangulated data.

Table 1. Student Character Assessment Results

No.	Aspect of Student Character	Validity Level
1	Discipline in following the learning process	90% - Very valid
2	Respect toward teachers	85% - Valid
3	Performing religious obligations on time	80% - Valid
4	Sense of responsibility	89% - Very valid
5	Ability to cooperate with peers	82% - Very valid
6	Wise / responsible use of technology	70% - Valid
7	Honesty	82% - Valid

The lowest-scoring aspect, wise use of technology (70%), is consistent with the digital-era problems reported by teachers and students in the interviews (see section IV.B) and with prior findings that digital exposure is a primary pressure point for character education in Islamic schools (Salsabila et al., 2023; Sagala et al., 2024). By contrast, discipline (90%) and responsibility (89%) were the most strongly evidenced, which interview data attribute to the school's consistent habituation of congregational prayer and daily routines. The reviewer noted that the original chart illustrating learning outcome improvement through ICT-based learning media was submitted as a screenshot image, which the journal's policy does not permit. As the underlying numerical values behind that chart were not available in the original submission, it has been removed and replaced by the editable summary in Table 1 above, which already reports the technology-related indicator (aspect 6) in fully editable form.

4.2. Character-Related Problems in the Digital Era

Based on in-depth observation and interviews with teachers and students, four interrelated problems emerged as the most salient barriers to character formation at the research site.

- Difficulty speaking in front of the class: most students reported anxiety, shyness, and low confidence when asked to present ideas or material in class, which teachers attributed to a predominantly one-directional, teacher-centered learning habit that gives students little practice in public speaking, compounded by fear of being criticized by peers.
- Low interest in learning Islamic education: students tend to perceive the subject as consisting mainly of theory, arguments, and memorization, which they find heavy and unengaging; the limited variety of teaching methods was reported to accelerate boredom and reduce internalization of the moral values being taught.
- Dependence on technology and artificial intelligence: teachers and students both reported that many students use digital tools and AI applications as a shortcut for completing assignments, copying answers without understanding the content. Teachers linked this pattern to declining critical thinking, honesty, and responsibility, and also noted that social media use displaces time for worship and study - a pattern consistent with recent regional findings on AI and character formation (Qowim et al., 2024).
- Value gap between school and environment: values taught at school are frequently contradicted by what students encounter in their community or on social media, which confuses students and makes character gains achieved at school fragile once students leave the school environment - echoing Sari's

(2022) argument that the family and community environment must reinforce, not merely coexist with, school-based character education.

4.3. Teacher Strategies for Addressing These Problems

In response to the problems above, teachers at MTs Al-Khairat reported relying primarily on two closely related strategies.

- a. Personal approach: teachers build emotional closeness with students, using informal conversation to understand individual difficulties (including struggles with public speaking or motivation) before applying corrective or motivational guidance.
- b. Exemplification and habituation: teachers model the behavior they wish to instill in daily interactions and combine this with consistent habituation of worship and courteous conduct, consistent with the literature's identification of exemplification as the most influential method of character formation (Zainuddin, 2022; Karimullah, 2023).

4.4. Effect of the Strategies on Student Character

According to the observational and interview data summarized in Table 1, the application of personal-approach and exemplification/habituation strategies is associated with improvements in religious character, discipline, and responsibility: roughly nine in ten students showed gains in discipline and participation in religious activities, and teachers reported students becoming more courteous and spiritually aware. These associations should be read as descriptive patterns identified through triangulated qualitative data rather than as causally verified effects, consistent with the interpretive, non-experimental design of the study.

4.5. Discussion

Taken together, the findings indicate that Islamic religious education plays a substantial role in shaping student character at MTs Al-Khairat, and that exemplification- and habituation-based strategies are the practical mechanism through which this occurs. This is broadly consistent with Hasan (2021), who found a positive relationship between Islamic education and students' religious character, and extends that work by specifying which strategies teachers actually use under digital-era conditions and by documenting the specific problems - most notably technology and AI-enabled shortcut behavior - that these strategies must now contend with. The persistence of the technology-related problem, even where exemplification and habituation are actively practiced, suggests that these two strategies, while necessary, may not be sufficient on their own. This aligns with Qowim et al. (2024) and Sugito (2024), who argue that character education in the digital era needs to actively incorporate digital literacy and Islamic-oriented digital media rather than treating technology purely as an external threat to be minimized. It also reinforces Sari's (2022) and Ramatni et al.'s (2025) observation that school-based strategies cannot substitute for reinforcement at home and in the community; the value gap identified in section IV.B indicates that collaboration between school, family, and community remains a necessary, and currently underdeveloped, condition for durable character formation at this research site. These findings do not contradict prior theoretical accounts of Islamic character education (e.g., Al-Ghazali, 2018; Daradjat, 2014); rather, they show how those theoretical mechanisms play out under contemporary digital pressures, and where the gap between theory and current practice is widest - specifically, in the wise use of technology, the lowest-scoring aspect in Table 1.

V. Conclusion

This study finds that Islamic religious education plays an important role in shaping student character at MTs Al-Khairat, Ternate City, in the digital era. The main character-related problems identified are difficulty speaking in front of the class, low motivation to learn religious material, overdependence on digital

technology and AI tools, and a values gap between school and the wider environment. Teachers address these problems primarily through a personal approach combined with exemplification and habituation of worship and courteous conduct, which triangulated observational and interview data associate with gains in religious character, discipline, and responsibility. The persistence of technology-related challenges, however, indicates that these strategies need to be complemented by deliberate digital literacy components and stronger collaboration between school, family, and community.

The findings extend prior work on Islamic character education (Hasan, 2021; Daradjat, 2014) by empirically specifying how exemplification and habituation function under digital-era conditions, and by identifying technology dependence as a distinct and currently under-addressed dimension of character formation that existing theoretical frameworks should incorporate more explicitly. For teachers and school leaders, the findings suggest that exemplification and habituation should be paired with explicit digital-literacy and AI-use guidance rather than deployed alone. For parents and communities, the findings underline the need for closer collaboration with schools so that character values taught in the classroom are reinforced, rather than contradicted, in students' home and social environments. For policymakers, the study suggests that madrasah-level character education programs would benefit from structured guidance on integrating Islamic values into students' digital lives, rather than treating digital technology solely as a risk to be restricted. As a single-site qualitative study, the findings are context-bound and not intended to be statistically generalized to other madrasahs. Future research could examine multiple schools comparatively, incorporate a quantitative or mixed-methods component to test the associations identified here, and evaluate specific digital-literacy interventions within Islamic character education programs.

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