

Addressing the Moral Crisis Among Generation Z: Islamic Religious Education Teachers' Responses in the Era of Social Connectivity

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ABSTRACT

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The rapid expansion of social connectivity and digital media has reshaped adolescents' moral environments, posing new challenges for moral and religious education. Generation Z students, as digital natives, increasingly negotiate moral values through online interactions that may conflict with religious and educational norms. This study examines how social connectivity influences the moral challenges faced by Generation Z students and explores the responses of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers within a culturally Islamic context. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design conducted in junior and senior high schools in Bima City, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 PAI teachers and 20 students, classroom observations, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework to identify recurring patterns related to moral behavior, digital engagement, and teacher responses. The findings reveal that intensive social media use contributes to technology dependency, weakened moral reflection, declining respect for authority, and reduced engagement in religious activities. Moral decision-making among students is often shaped by peer validation and online visibility. In response, PAI teachers adopt adaptive pedagogical strategies, including integrating digital ethics into religious instruction, reinforcing discipline, and collaborating with parents and counseling services. The study highlights teacher agency as a critical mediator between digital culture and moral development, suggesting that religious education remains relevant when responsive to students' socio-digital realities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technology and social media has fundamentally reshaped patterns of social interaction, learning behavior, and identity formation among adolescents. In contemporary educational contexts, Generation Z—often described as digital natives—has grown up in an environment characterized by constant connectivity, instant communication, and unrestricted access to online content (Granic et al., 2020; McKenzie et al., 2024). While these developments provide new opportunities for learning and self-expression, they simultaneously pose significant challenges for moral and character development, particularly within formal educational institutions where moral education remains a core objective.

Morality can be understood as a system of values and ethical principles that guide individuals in distinguishing between right and wrong and in regulating their behavior in accordance with social, cultural, and religious norms (Gibbs, 2019). A moral crisis emerges when individuals experience difficulty internalizing these values or translating them into consistent moral conduct. Recent studies indicate that adolescents' intensive engagement with social media may weaken moral sensitivity, reduce respect for authority, and normalize unethical behaviors such as cyberbullying, inappropriate language, and performative self-presentation for online recognition (Çakar-Mengü & Mengü, 2023; Indrayani, 2024). These challenges are further intensified by adolescents' developmental stage, which is marked by identity exploration and heightened susceptibility to peer influence (Erikson, as cited in Granic et al., 2020).

In Indonesia, religious education plays a central role in moral formation, as it is institutionally embedded within the national education system. Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) is designed not only to transmit religious knowledge but also to cultivate ethical behavior, discipline, and social responsibility grounded in Islamic values (Luthfiah et al., 2022; Muis et al., 2022). However, the effectiveness of PAI in shaping students' moral character is increasingly challenged by the dominance of digital culture, which introduces alternative value systems that often conflict with religious teachings (Ibdalsyah et al., 2022; Komala et al., 2024). As a result, religious education teachers must navigate a complex pedagogical landscape in which traditional moral instruction competes with the powerful influence of social media.

Although a growing body of research has examined the relationship between social media use and adolescent morality, much of the existing literature treats moral decline as a generalized and universal phenomenon, with limited attention to how moral challenges are constructed and addressed within specific local, cultural, and religious contexts (Syafitri et al., 2022; Susanty et al., 2020). Moreover, prior studies tend to emphasize behavioral outcomes—such as declining discipline or ethical misconduct—while paying less attention to the active role of teachers as moral agents who interpret, negotiate, and respond to these challenges in everyday educational practice (Ene & Barna, 2015; Wijaya & Miyanto, 2022).

This gap is particularly evident in regions with strong Islamic cultural foundations, such as Bima City, West Nusa Tenggara. Despite its deeply rooted religious traditions, recent observations indicate increasing moral concerns among Generation Z students, including excessive dependence on digital devices, declining respect for teachers, deviations in dress and appearance, and engagement in unethical online behavior (Jihan et al., 2023; Sarie et al., 2023). These patterns raise important questions about how moral challenges are shaped by social connectivity in local contexts and how Islamic Religious Education teachers respond to them amid rapid technological change.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the moral challenges faced by Generation Z students in Bima City through the lens of social connectivity and by exploring the responses of Islamic Religious Education teachers in addressing these challenges. Rather than framing technology solely as a source of moral degradation, this research adopts a contextual and interpretive approach that recognizes the dynamic interaction between digital culture, adolescent development, and religious

pedagogy. By foregrounding teachers' perspectives and strategies, this study highlights teacher agency as a critical factor in sustaining moral education in the digital era.

Specifically, this research aims to: (1) analyze how social connectivity influences the moral behavior and ethical reasoning of Generation Z students in Bima City, and (2) explore the pedagogical responses and strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers in addressing emerging moral challenges shaped by digital culture. Through a qualitative approach grounded in teachers' and students' lived experiences, this study contributes empirically to the literature on moral education in digitally mediated societies and conceptually to discussions on the adaptability of religious education in responding to Generation Z's socio-digital realities.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how social connectivity influences the moral challenges experienced by Generation Z students and how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers respond to these challenges in school settings. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth examination of participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of moral issues within their socio-cultural and educational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.2 Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in several junior and senior high schools in Bima City, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives. The participants consisted of 15 Islamic Religious Education teachers with varying lengths of teaching experience and active involvement in character education, as well as 20 Generation Z students representing different grade levels and patterns of social media use. Teachers were chosen based on their direct responsibility for moral and religious instruction, while students were included to provide complementary insights into lived moral experiences in the digital era.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. In-depth interviews with PAI teachers focused on their perceptions of students' moral challenges, the influence of social media, and the pedagogical strategies they employed in response. Student interviews explored daily social media practices, moral perceptions, and experiences of religious education in school. Classroom observations were conducted to capture naturally occurring interactions, behavioral patterns, and teacher-student dynamics related to moral conduct. Relevant school documents, such as codes of conduct and religious activity programs, were also examined to contextualize institutional approaches to moral education.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This process involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and observation notes, generating initial codes, identifying and reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing an analytic narrative that integrated empirical findings with relevant theoretical perspectives. The analysis emphasized patterns related to moral behavior, digital engagement, and teacher agency in responding to social connectivity challenges.

2.5 Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was conducted with selected participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. In addition, an audit trail was maintained to document analytic decisions and enhance transparency. These procedures contributed to the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Finding

The findings reveal that social connectivity significantly shapes the moral experiences and behaviors of Generation Z students in Bima City, particularly through intensive engagement with social media and digital technologies. These influences manifest in students' daily conduct at school, their interactions with teachers and peers, and their participation in religious activities. The analysis yielded three interrelated themes: (1) technology-mediated moral shifts among students, (2) moral tensions in religious and school practices, and (3) pedagogical responses of Islamic Religious Education teachers.

3.1.1 Technology-Mediated Moral Shifts

Students' extensive reliance on digital devices emerged as a dominant feature of their everyday lives. Teachers and students consistently reported that smartphones and social media platforms function as primary sources of entertainment, social interaction, and self-expression. This reliance often resulted in diminished attention during lessons, reduced engagement with academic responsibilities, and increased susceptibility to online trends. Teachers observed that students frequently replicated behaviors encountered on social media without critically evaluating their ethical implications, particularly when such behaviors were rewarded with peer recognition or online visibility. These patterns suggest that moral judgment among students is increasingly shaped by external digital validation rather than internalized ethical reflection.

Both teachers and students described digital devices—especially smartphones—as inseparable from students' daily lives. Teachers noted that students' moral decision-making is increasingly shaped by online trends and peer validation rather than reflective ethical reasoning. One teacher explained:

“Students now measure what is right or wrong based on what is viral. If something gets many likes, they think it is acceptable, even if it contradicts moral or religious values.” (PAI Teacher 3)

Students themselves acknowledged their strong dependence on social media and its influence on behavior. A student shared:

“Sometimes I know what I post is not appropriate, but my friends do it too, and people respond positively. It feels normal in social media.” (Student 7)

Teachers observed that this constant exposure to digital content reduced students' focus during lessons and weakened their sense of responsibility. As one participant stated:

"When students are already holding their phones, their attention is divided. Even during moral lessons, their minds are still on social media." (PAI Teacher 9)

These accounts indicate that moral judgment among students is increasingly mediated by digital environments that prioritize visibility, popularity, and peer approval.

Table 1. Causes of the Moral Crisis Among Gen Z Students in Bima City

Indicator	Description
Dependence on Gadgets and Technology	Gen Z students in Bima City demonstrate a high dependence on gadgets and digital technology, which often become their primary source of interaction and entertainment. This overreliance leads to distractions from learning, reduced concentration, and diminished attention to moral values taught in schools.
Negative Influence of Social Media	Social media platforms frequently serve as channels for spreading immoral behavior, inappropriate language, and unhealthy lifestyles. Many Gen Z students replicate negative behaviors from influencers or peers online, shaping their real-life attitudes and conduct. Their reliance on curated self-images and virtual popularity further exacerbates the decline in moral awareness.
Lack of Parental Supervision	Limited parental supervision over students' technology use and online activities leaves them vulnerable to harmful digital content that contradicts societal and religious values. The absence of consistent family involvement in monitoring behavior intensifies the moral challenges faced by Gen Z students.

3.1.2 Moral Tensions in School and Religious Practices

The findings indicate a growing tension between students' digital lifestyles and the moral expectations upheld within schools and religious education contexts. Teachers reported recurring challenges related to students' discipline, respect for authority, and adherence to school regulations, including dress codes and behavioral norms. Participation in religious activities such as prayers and faith-based programs was often described as inconsistent, with some students displaying low motivation or passive compliance. Observations further revealed that students' engagement with digital devices frequently persisted during religious and moral instruction, signaling a fragmented moral focus. These tensions reflect a misalignment between institutional moral expectations and students' digitally mediated identities.

The findings also highlight tensions between students' digital lifestyles and the moral expectations upheld by schools and religious education. Teachers frequently reported challenges related to discipline, respect for authority, and participation in religious activities. One teacher remarked:

"Many students attend religious activities physically, but mentally they are not present. They follow the routine, but without awareness or commitment." (PAI Teacher 1)

Observations and interviews revealed that digital devices often distracted students even during religious or moral instruction. A student admitted:

"During prayer or religious programs, some of us still think about games or social media. It is difficult to disconnect." (Student 12)

Issues related to appearance and school regulations also emerged as indicators of moral tension. Teachers noted that compliance with dress codes was often superficial rather than value-driven:

"Some students wear the hijab only because of school rules, not because they understand its meaning. When outside school, they follow social media trends instead." (PAI Teacher 6)

These findings suggest a disconnect between institutional moral norms and students' digitally constructed identities.

3.1.3 Teacher Responses and Pedagogical Adaptation

Islamic Religious Education teachers responded to these moral challenges through a range of adaptive strategies. Rather than relying solely on doctrinal instruction, teachers emphasized discipline, moral habituation, and contextual moral guidance. These efforts included integrating ethical discussions into classroom activities, addressing digital behavior explicitly within religious lessons, and collaborating with counseling staff and parents to reinforce moral expectations beyond the classroom. Teachers also sought to guide students toward more reflective uses of technology by encouraging awareness of digital consequences and ethical self-regulation. Such practices illustrate teachers' active role in mediating the influence of social connectivity and repositioning religious education as a relevant moral framework in the digital era.

Overall, the findings suggest that the moral challenges faced by Generation Z students are not isolated behavioral issues but are embedded within broader socio-digital environments. At the same time, the data highlight the capacity of Islamic Religious Education teachers to adapt their pedagogical roles in response to these challenges, positioning teacher agency as a key factor in sustaining moral education amid rapid technological change.

In response to these challenges, PAI teachers described actively adjusting their pedagogical approaches. Rather than relying solely on doctrinal teaching, they emphasized moral habituation, dialogue, and contextual guidance. One teacher explained:

"If we only tell students what is forbidden, it does not work anymore. We have to explain why and relate it to their digital lives." (PAI Teacher 11)

Teachers also highlighted collaboration as a key strategy, particularly with counseling staff and parents:

"We cannot handle this alone. Moral education must involve parents, because students' behavior is shaped more at home and online than in school." (PAI Teacher 4)

Some teachers intentionally incorporated discussions about social media ethics into religious lessons:

"I ask students to reflect on what they watch and share online. We discuss whether it brings benefit or harm, according to Islamic values." (PAI Teacher 8)

These practices illustrate how teachers reposition themselves as moral mediators who bridge religious values and students' socio-digital realities.

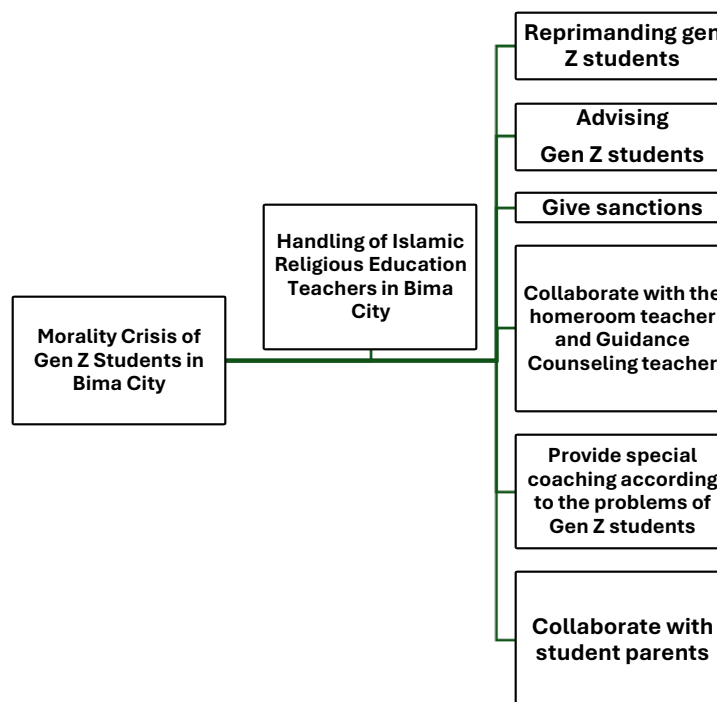


Figure 1. Solution to overcome morals

Overall, the findings indicate that the moral challenges faced by Generation Z students are embedded within technology-driven social environments that reshape moral reasoning and behavior. At the same time, Islamic Religious Education teachers demonstrate significant adaptive capacity by reinterpreting their roles and pedagogical strategies. Teacher agency emerges as a crucial factor in sustaining moral education amid rapid technological and cultural change.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the moral challenges experienced by Generation Z students in Bima City are closely intertwined with the dynamics of social connectivity and digital culture. Consistent with the argument presented in the Introduction, moral issues observed among students—such as excessive gadget dependency, declining respect for teachers, deviations in dress and appearance, and unethical online behavior—should not be understood merely as individual misconduct. Rather, they reflect a complex interaction between adolescents' developmental characteristics, pervasive digital environments, and the shifting authority of moral education in the digital era.

From the perspective of moral development theory, the findings suggest that many Gen Z students operate predominantly within the conventional stage of moral reasoning, where behavior is strongly influenced by peer approval, social conformity, and external validation (Gibbs, 2019). In the context of

social media, this tendency is amplified by algorithm-driven visibility, viral trends, and online peer reinforcement, which often normalize behaviors that conflict with religious and ethical norms. The pursuit of online recognition—through content creation, performative self-presentation, or provocative language—illustrates how moral judgment becomes increasingly situational and audience-oriented rather than grounded in internalized moral principles. This supports earlier research indicating that digital platforms can reshape adolescents' moral priorities by privileging popularity and visibility over ethical reflection (Çakar-Mengü & Mengü, 2023; Indrayani, 2024).

These patterns can be further understood through Erikson's psychosocial theory, particularly the stage of *identity versus role confusion*. Adolescence is a critical period for identity formation, during which individuals experiment with multiple roles and self-representations (Granic et al., 2020). The findings indicate that social media has become a dominant arena for such experimentation, enabling students to construct digital identities that may diverge from the moral and religious values promoted within schools and families. When identity exploration is primarily mediated through digital spaces—without sufficient ethical guidance—students may experience moral disorientation, resulting in behaviors that challenge established norms of respect, discipline, and religiosity.

Importantly, the study reveals that the moral crisis among Gen Z students is not solely the result of technological exposure but is also shaped by the contested position of religious education in the digital age. Islamic Religious Education (PAI), which traditionally serves as a cornerstone of moral formation in Indonesian schools, now operates in a pedagogical landscape where its moral authority competes with powerful digital narratives and influencers (Komala et al., 2024; Ibdalsyah et al., 2022). This tension helps explain why students may demonstrate strong cognitive abilities while simultaneously exhibiting weaknesses in ethical sensitivity, self-regulation, and moral discipline.

In response to these challenges, the findings highlight the active and strategic role of PAI teachers as moral agents, rather than passive transmitters of religious knowledge. Teachers in Bima City adopt a range of adaptive strategies, including reinforcing discipline, integrating moral reflection into classroom practices, collaborating with counseling services, and engaging parents in moral supervision. These practices reflect an effort to reposition moral education as a lived and relational process, rather than a purely doctrinal one. Such teacher agency aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of educators' interpretive and relational roles in moral and religious formation (Ene & Barna, 2015; Wijaya & Miyanto, 2022).

From a media studies perspective, particularly the Uses and Gratifications theory, the findings suggest that Gen Z students engage with social media to fulfill needs related to entertainment, social belonging, and identity affirmation (Zadeh et al., 2023). Recognizing this, PAI teachers attempt to redirect students' media engagement toward more constructive and value-oriented uses by promoting digital literacy grounded in Islamic ethics. Rather than rejecting technology outright, teachers encourage critical evaluation of online content, ethical self-restraint, and responsible participation in digital spaces. This approach supports the argument advanced in the Introduction that moral education in the digital era must be adaptive and dialogical, rather than prohibitive or purely normative.

Furthermore, the collaborative efforts between teachers, counseling staff, school leadership, and parents reflect an ecological approach to moral education, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's framework. Moral development is reinforced when consistent values are communicated across interconnected environments, including school, family, and community. The absence of parental supervision over digital practices, as identified in the findings, weakens this ecological consistency and exacerbates students' moral vulnerabilities. Conversely, coordinated moral guidance strengthens students' capacity to internalize ethical and religious values across both offline and online contexts.

Overall, the findings affirm the central argument of this study: the moral challenges faced by Generation Z students in the era of social connectivity cannot be adequately addressed through moral instruction alone. Instead, they require a multidimensional response that integrates insights from moral development theory, psychosocial theory, and media studies, while foregrounding the adaptive role of teachers as moral educators. By situating moral issues within students' socio-digital realities and

emphasizing teacher agency, this study extends existing research on moral education and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how religious education can remain relevant and effective in digitally mediated societies.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the moral challenges faced by Generation Z students in the era of social connectivity are shaped not only by intensive social media engagement but also by adolescents' developmental orientation toward peer validation and digital identity formation, which often weakens the internalization of religious and ethical values. The findings highlight that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers play a pivotal mediating role in addressing these challenges by adapting moral instruction through disciplinary reinforcement, digital ethical guidance, and collaborative engagement with counseling services and parents, thereby reaffirming teacher agency as central to moral education in digitally mediated contexts. However, the study is limited by its focus on a single local setting in Bima City and its reliance on qualitative, self-reported data, which restricts the generalizability of the findings and may reflect participants' subjective interpretations. Future research should therefore adopt comparative and longitudinal designs across diverse socio-cultural regions to examine variations in moral challenges and educational responses, as well as assess the long-term effectiveness of teacher-led digital moral interventions in strengthening adolescents' ethical reasoning and character development in the digital age.

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