



## Strengthening Female Students' Character through Islamic Religious Education in the Digital Era

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### ABSTRACT

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This study aims to analyze the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in strengthening the character of ninth-grade female students (santriwati) at SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa in the digital era. The background of this research is based on the rapid development of information technology, which brings both positive impacts and challenges to students' character formation, particularly in moral and religious aspects. This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The research subjects consisted of five female students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observation, while data analysis used an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The results indicate that PAI plays a significant role in strengthening students' character, especially in terms of religiosity, discipline, and responsibility. In the digital era, PAI also functions as a moral foundation that helps students filter information and use technology wisely. Supporting factors include a religious school environment and the role of teachers as role models, while inhibiting factors come from technological influences and external environments.

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has brought significant changes to various aspects of human life, including among adolescents of junior high school age. The presence of the internet, social media, and various digital platforms has facilitated access to information, communication, and learning resources. For students at the junior secondary education level, this digital transformation creates substantial opportunities to enhance knowledge and skills. However, alongside these benefits, the digital era also presents serious challenges, including exposure to negative content, misinformation, cyberbullying, and the potential degradation of moral and spiritual values among the younger generation (Cahyono, 2016; Ginzarly & Teller, 2025; Putra et al., 2024).

Advancements in digital technology have transformed students' learning patterns from teacher-centered approaches to more independent, interactive, and technology-based learning (Habsi et al., 2026). Educational applications, digital learning media, and easy access to information have contributed positively to the improvement of students' digital literacy (Affan, 2025). Nevertheless, the overwhelming flow of information, which is not always aligned with moral and religious values, requires greater efforts in character development. In this context, education is expected not only to foster intellectual growth but also to strengthen students' spiritual and moral dimensions, enabling them to critically and responsibly evaluate information in the digital environment (Mohideen, 2025; Papakostas, 2025).

Islamic Religious Education occupies a strategic position in addressing these challenges. As a subject designed to cultivate faith, piety, and noble character, PAI serves not only as a medium for transmitting religious knowledge but also as a primary instrument for character formation (Albakhar et al., 2026; Nurbaiti et al., 2026; Suriana et al., 2025). Through PAI, students are expected to understand, internalize, and practice Islamic values in their daily lives, including in their use of digital technology (Mastori et al., 2025; Nurdi et al., 2026; Shaker et al., 2023). Thus, PAI functions as a moral foundation that equips students with the ability to withstand the negative impacts of technological development and to utilize digital media responsibly (Affan, 2025; Ma'rif et al., 2026).

The strategic role of PAI in character formation is realized through educational activities that extend beyond cognitive development to encompass affective and psychomotor dimensions (Habsi, 2025). PAI teachers are expected to act not only as instructors but also as mentors, role models, motivators, and facilitators who instill religious values in students (Baitusslam et al., 2025). Character formation through PAI includes fostering discipline, responsibility, honesty, social awareness, religiosity, and the habit of practicing Islamic teachings in everyday life (Mundiri & Bariroh, 2019).

In the digital era, the challenges faced by Islamic education extend beyond technological competence to include the cultivation of digital literacy grounded in Islamic values. From an Islamic perspective, digital literacy involves the ability to perform *tabayyun* (verification of information), maintain ethical communication in digital spaces, and select and utilize information in accordance with Islamic principles. These competencies are increasingly important given the extensive use of social media among adolescents, who are particularly vulnerable to misleading information and inappropriate online behavior (Fadillah, 2019).

Islamic schools and pesantren-based educational institutions possess unique advantages in supporting students' character development (Permatasari, 2023). A religious culture manifested through habitual worship practices, regular religious activities, and exemplary behavior demonstrated by teachers and caregivers plays a crucial role in shaping strong and sustainable character (Khoiriyah et al., 2026). The integration of formal education with daily religious practices allows Islamic values to be understood not merely at a theoretical level

but also to be reflected in students' actual behavior (Najib et al., 2026). Consequently, Islamic boarding school-based institutions have considerable potential to nurture a generation that is both religiously committed and adaptable to contemporary developments (Permatasari, 2023).

SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa is one of the educational institutions that integrates formal education with pesantren culture in its learning and character-building processes. The school's environment, which is deeply rooted in Islamic values, provides a strong foundation for fostering the character of female students (*santriwati*) amid the challenges of the digital era. Nevertheless, the growing influence of social media and technological advancement necessitates more effective and sustainable character-strengthening strategies. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the role of Islamic Religious Education in strengthening the character of ninth-grade female students at SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa in the digital era and to identify the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting its implementation.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in strengthening the character of female students (\*santriwati\*) at SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa in the digital era. The case study approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore and understand social phenomena within their real-life context comprehensively. The research participants consisted of five ninth-grade female students selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria were based on their active participation in PAI learning activities and involvement in religious programs conducted by the school. These participants were considered capable of providing rich and relevant information related to the research objectives. Data were collected primarily through in-depth interviews, which allowed the researcher to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and understanding of the role of PAI in character development within the context of digital transformation. To complement the interview data, direct observations were conducted to examine learning activities and character-building practices implemented in the school environment. The research instruments included a semi-structured interview guide developed based on character education and PAI indicators, as well as field notes used to document observational findings. Data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, data triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from interviews with observational data.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

#### **The Role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in Strengthening the Character of Female Students**

Based on the interviews conducted with five female students (santriwati), the findings revealed that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a significant role in strengthening students' character, particularly in the aspects of religiosity, discipline, responsibility, and moral conduct. The participants stated that PAI learning is not limited to the acquisition of religious knowledge in the classroom but is continuously implemented in daily life through worship activities, moral habituation, and the exemplary behavior demonstrated by teachers. Through these practices, students are encouraged to internalize Islamic values and translate them into concrete actions. This finding indicates that PAI contributes to holistic character development by addressing not only the cognitive domain but also the affective and psychomotor dimensions of learning. The students further explained that regular religious activities, such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, religious mentoring sessions, and daily moral guidance, have helped them develop positive habits and strengthen their commitment to Islamic values. These activities foster self-discipline, respect for others, honesty, and a sense of responsibility toward both religious obligations and academic duties. As a result, character formation is not merely taught as a theoretical concept but is embedded within the students' daily routines and social interactions. Such continuous exposure to religious values enables students to cultivate a strong moral foundation that guides their behavior both inside and outside the school environment.

These findings support the view of Murjani (2025), who argues that effective PAI teachers perform multidimensional roles, including educator, spiritual mentor, role model, motivator, facilitator, and counselor. In the context of SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa, PAI teachers were found to go beyond delivering lessons on Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and theology (aqidah). They actively guide students in developing an Islamic identity and navigating the challenges of contemporary life. Through personal advice, mentoring, and consistent role modeling, teachers encourage students to practice Islamic ethics in their daily activities and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the role of PAI becomes increasingly important in the digital era, where students are constantly exposed to various forms of information and social influences through digital media. The interview results indicated that PAI serves as a moral compass that helps students evaluate information critically and make decisions based on Islamic principles. Teachers frequently remind students about ethical behavior in online environments, including responsible social media use, respectful communication, and the importance of verifying information before sharing it. Consequently, PAI not only strengthens students' religious character but also equips them with moral and ethical competencies necessary for living in a rapidly evolving digital society.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that PAI serves as a central pillar in character development at SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa. Its influence extends beyond academic instruction and contributes substantially to shaping students into disciplined, responsible, and religiously committed individuals. The integration

of religious teachings, character habituation, and teacher role modeling creates a supportive environment that enables students to maintain strong moral values while adapting to the opportunities and challenges of the digital age.

**Figure 1. Researcher's Interview Session with the Principal and Ninth-Grade Female Students at SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa (Source: Researcher's Documentation, 2024)**



### **PAI as a Moral Fortress in the Digital Era**

The findings indicate that female students (*santriwati*) are highly aware of the challenges posed by the digital era in maintaining positive character and moral values. The widespread use of social media, excessive dependence on digital devices, and unrestricted access to online information expose students to various risks, including misinformation, inappropriate content, and negative behavioral influences. Despite these challenges, the participants emphasized that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) provides them with moral and spiritual guidance that helps them navigate the digital environment responsibly. Through the teachings and values embedded in PAI, students develop the ability to

distinguish between beneficial and harmful information and to align their behavior with Islamic principles in both offline and online contexts (Muflihini & Makhshun, 2020; Setyowati et al., 2025).

The interview results further revealed that PAI functions as a moral compass that encourages students to practice self-control, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making when interacting with digital media. Students reported that lessons on Islamic ethics, honesty, responsibility, and accountability help them become more cautious in using social networking platforms and sharing information. In particular, the concept of *tabayyun* (verification of information) was frequently emphasized by teachers as a means of preventing the spread of misinformation and fostering responsible digital citizenship. These findings suggest that PAI not only strengthens students' religious commitment but also equips them with essential competencies for living in an increasingly interconnected digital society.

Furthermore, the integration of digital technology into PAI learning has enhanced the relevance and effectiveness of religious education. Teachers utilize various digital resources, including educational videos, Qur'anic applications, and online learning platforms, to facilitate students' understanding of Islamic teachings. This approach allows students to engage with religious content through media that are familiar and appealing to their daily lives. Consequently, PAI serves a dual function: preserving Islamic values while simultaneously helping students adapt to technological advancements in a constructive and ethical manner. The role of PAI in the digital era at SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa can be summarized in several key dimensions, including digital literacy, digital ethics, the utilization of digital media for learning, and character development. These dimensions collectively contribute to the formation of students who are not only technologically literate but also morally responsible and spiritually grounded.

**Table 1. The Role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in the Digital Era at SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa**

(Source: Adapted from various sources, 2020–2025)

Aspect	Role of PAI	References
<b>Digital Literacy</b>	Guides students in verifying, evaluating, and filtering information; promotes the practice of <i>tabayyun</i> when engaging with social media content.	Muflihini & Makhshun (2020); Hasibuan et al. (2025)
<b>Digital Ethics</b>	Instills ethical principles in social media use; prevents the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and cyberbullying.	Asrofi et al. (2025); Samsuddin et al. (2025)

<b>Digital Media Utilization</b>	Integrates educational videos, Qur'anic applications, and digital learning platforms to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of PAI instruction.	Rifani et al. (2024); Hadziq et al. (2024)
<b>Character Development</b>	Cultivates discipline, responsibility, religiosity, and noble character through habituation, mentoring, and teacher role modeling.	Pramana & Wirian (2025); Murjani (2025)

The findings demonstrate that PAI serves as a vital moral safeguard for students in the digital age. By integrating religious teachings with digital literacy and ethical awareness, PAI enables students to respond wisely to technological developments while maintaining strong Islamic values and character. This role is particularly important in preparing young Muslims to become responsible digital citizens who can contribute positively to society without compromising their religious identity.

### **Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Character Strengthening through PAI**

The findings of this study revealed several supporting factors that contribute to the successful implementation of character strengthening through Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa. One of the most influential factors is the school's religious environment, which consistently promotes Islamic values through various religious activities and daily worship practices. The continuous habituation of congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, religious mentoring, and other faith-based activities creates an atmosphere that supports the internalization of moral and spiritual values among students. Such an environment encourages students to practice Islamic teachings not only within the classroom but also in their daily lives, thereby fostering stronger character development.

Another important supporting factor is the role of teachers as role models. The participants emphasized that teachers consistently demonstrate positive behavior, discipline, responsibility, and religious commitment, which inspire students to emulate these qualities. The effectiveness of character education is enhanced when students observe the practical implementation of the values being taught. In addition, the Islamic culture embedded within the educational system serves as a strong foundation for character formation. The integration of religious values into academic activities, school regulations, and interpersonal interactions creates a holistic educational environment that reinforces students' moral and ethical development (Putra & Sayekti, 2025; Paramansyah et al., 2024).

Despite these strengths, several inhibiting factors were identified. The most prominent challenges originate from external influences, particularly the

rapid development of digital technology and the broader social environment outside the school. Students are frequently exposed to social media content, online entertainment, and digital trends that may conflict with the values promoted by the school. Excessive use of gadgets for entertainment purposes can reduce students' focus on religious activities and potentially weaken the effectiveness of character-building efforts. Furthermore, unrestricted access to information increases the risk of exposure to inappropriate content and misinformation, which may negatively affect students' attitudes and behaviors.

In addition to external challenges, several internal obstacles were also identified. These include limited digital literacy among some educators, inadequate technological infrastructure, and the relatively limited instructional time allocated for PAI subjects. Such constraints may hinder the integration of digital literacy and character education within the learning process. Therefore, strengthening students' character in the digital era requires collaborative efforts involving schools, teachers, parents, and the wider community. Effective supervision of technology use, the enhancement of teachers' digital competencies, and the creation of a supportive educational ecosystem are essential to ensuring that character education through PAI can be implemented optimally and sustainably (Muflihin & Makhshun, 2020; Damayanti et al., 2025; Sunarya, 2024).

**Figure 2. Classroom Observation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Instruction and Collaborative Group Discussions Conducted by Ninth-Grade Female Students at SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa (Source: Researcher's Documentation, 2024)**



## Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a pivotal role in strengthening the character of female students at

SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa, particularly in fostering religiosity, discipline, responsibility, and moral behavior. This finding supports the argument that PAI is not merely a subject aimed at transmitting religious knowledge but also serves as a medium for character formation and moral development. The implementation of religious values through worship practices, moral habituation, and teacher role modeling reflects the holistic nature of Islamic education, which emphasizes the integration of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. These results are consistent with the findings of Asrofi et al. (2025) and Pramana and Wirian (2025), who emphasize that effective character education occurs when religious teachings are continuously practiced in students' daily lives rather than being confined to classroom instruction.

The study also confirms the strategic role of PAI teachers as central agents in the character-building process. The participants perceived their teachers not only as instructors but also as spiritual mentors, counselors, motivators, and role models. This finding aligns with Murjani's (2025) perspective that the effectiveness of PAI largely depends on the teacher's ability to perform multidimensional roles that address students' academic, emotional, and spiritual needs. Through consistent guidance and exemplary conduct, teachers contribute significantly to the internalization of Islamic values among students. The presence of teachers as moral exemplars is particularly important in adolescence, a developmental stage in which students actively seek behavioral models and identity references.

Another important finding concerns the role of PAI as a moral safeguard in the digital era. The study reveals that students face numerous challenges arising from the rapid expansion of digital technology, including exposure to misinformation, inappropriate online content, and excessive social media use. In this context, PAI serves as a moral compass that helps students navigate digital environments responsibly. The emphasis on Islamic ethical principles, such as honesty, responsibility, self-control, and tabayyun (verification of information), equips students with critical skills needed to engage with digital media wisely. This finding supports previous studies by Muflihin and Makhshun (2020), which highlight the relevance of Islamic values in promoting digital literacy and responsible online behavior among young people.

The integration of digital technology into PAI learning further strengthens its relevance in contemporary education. The use of educational videos, Qur'anic applications, and online learning platforms demonstrates that Islamic education can adapt to technological advancements without compromising its core values. This finding is consistent with the work of Hadziq et al. (2024), who argue that the integration of digital innovations into Islamic education can enhance student engagement and learning effectiveness. Rather than perceiving technology as a threat, PAI educators at SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa utilize digital tools as instruments for strengthening religious understanding and character development. This approach reflects a balanced educational model that combines technological competence with moral and spiritual growth. The findings also

reveal that the success of character strengthening through PAI is strongly influenced by environmental factors. A religious school atmosphere, intensive religious activities, teacher role modeling, and an Islamic school culture emerged as key supporting factors. These findings reinforce the theory that character formation is more effective when educational values are consistently reinforced across multiple dimensions of students' lives. The school environment functions as a social ecosystem that continuously shapes students' attitudes and behaviors through daily interactions and shared values. Therefore, character education should not be viewed solely as the responsibility of PAI teachers but as a collective effort involving the entire school community.

Despite these positive contributions, the study identifies several challenges that hinder the effectiveness of character education in the digital era. External influences, particularly social media and unrestricted internet access, present significant obstacles to maintaining students' moral consistency. Furthermore, internal constraints such as limited digital literacy among some educators, insufficient technological infrastructure, and restricted instructional time for PAI reduce the potential impact of character education programs. These findings corroborate previous research by Damayanti et al. (2025) and Sunarya (2024), which emphasize that digital transformation requires educational institutions to continuously improve both technological readiness and pedagogical strategies.

Overall, this study highlights that the role of PAI in character strengthening extends beyond religious instruction and encompasses moral guidance, digital literacy development, and the cultivation of responsible citizenship. The findings suggest that character education in the digital era should integrate Islamic values with contemporary educational approaches that address technological challenges. Consequently, strengthening collaboration among schools, teachers, parents, and the broader community is essential to creating an educational environment that supports students' moral, spiritual, and social development. Through such collaborative efforts, PAI can continue to function effectively as a foundation for developing a generation that is religiously committed, ethically responsible, and capable of navigating the complexities of the digital age.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a significant role in strengthening the character of ninth-grade female students at SMP Islam Sabilul Wafa in the digital era. PAI contributes to the development of religiosity, discipline, responsibility, and moral behavior through the integration of religious learning, worship practices, character habituation, and teacher role modeling. The findings indicate that PAI extends beyond the transmission of religious knowledge and functions as a comprehensive framework for fostering students' moral and spiritual development. Furthermore, PAI serves as a moral compass that helps students navigate the challenges of the digital age by

promoting ethical behavior, critical thinking, and the application of Islamic values in both online and offline environments.

The study also identifies several supporting factors that enhance character strengthening through PAI, including a religious school environment, intensive religious activities, exemplary teachers, and a strong Islamic culture within the institution. However, challenges such as the negative influence of social media, excessive gadget use, limited digital literacy, and inadequate educational infrastructure remain significant obstacles. Therefore, effective character education in the digital era requires collaboration among schools, teachers, parents, and the wider community. By integrating Islamic values with digital literacy and ethical awareness, PAI can continue to play a vital role in preparing students to become morally responsible, spiritually grounded, and socially responsible members of society.

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