



Madrasah Ibtidaiyah as a Laboratory for Morality: Exploring the Potential for Holistic Character Building in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The social transformation brought about by advances in digital technology has presented complex challenges for character building efforts in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (elementary Islamic school) environments. The increasing dominance of digital exposure often conflicts with the moral principles and ethical values promoted by Islamic educational institutions. Therefore, this study aims to explore the strategic role of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah as a moral experimentation space in comprehensively shaping students' character in the digital age, while also identifying relevant and practically implementable approaches. This study was conducted qualitatively using content analysis with a content analysis approach on various scientific sources such as books, journals, and research reports published in the last five years. The analysis results indicate that character building can be strengthened through the integration of Islamic curriculum, the consistent instillation of moral habits, and the optimization of technology oriented toward values. Based on these findings, this study emphasizes that Madrasah Ibtidaiyah has great potential to become a center for adaptive digital character development, provided it is managed comprehensively, based on collaboration, and adapted to the dynamics of contemporary needs.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has had a major impact on the way of life and mindset of society, including students at the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah level. Children who should be in the phase of strengthening moral values now face moral challenges due to exposure to unfiltered digital information. Social media, online games, and unsupervised internet access have become sources of character degradation among children, such as decreased empathy, the emergence of consumerist behavior, and weakened ability to socialize healthily (Indriyati & Siswadi, 2023; Rahawarin et al., 2023; Yusnita et al., 2018).

On the other hand, the existence of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, which is based on Islamic values, should be an effective moral fortress in shaping the character of students. However, in reality, the implementation of moral education is often reduced by a learning approach that is too cognitive-oriented. This results in moral values only being memorized, rather than practiced.

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This challenge is exacerbated by the lack of integration between the use of technology and character education values within the madrasah environment (Komariyah & Purwanto, 2023). Therefore, a comprehensive evaluation of the position and role of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is necessary as an institution that should be an adaptive moral laboratory for the digital age.

A number of studies have shown that character education in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah has a significant contribution in shaping the moral character of students through curricular and cultural approaches. For example, approaches based on local wisdom and cultural ethics have been proven to be able to shape the character of students to be polite, caring, and responsible (Adisti & Rozikan, 2021). However, existing literature has not yet explicitly discussed how madrasah can adapt such character education approaches to the digital context, which is rife with distractions and moral challenges. Conventional character education theories also generally do not provide practical guidance on integrating digital technology with the formation of moral values in Islamic elementary school environments. This gap highlights the need for a character education model that is not only substantively relevant but also contextually aligned with the digital reality of today's children (Kulsum et al., 2024). Therefore, a more in-depth study is required on holistic character development approaches that align with advancements in information technology and the challenges of the digital era in Islamic elementary schools.

Based on the realities and gaps in the literature described above, this study aims to analyze the role of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in shaping the holistic character of students in the digital age. The main focus of this study is how madrasah are able to integrate moral education approaches into technology-responsive learning activities, and how the educational practices implemented can make madrasah laboratories of morality. This study also aims to identify the strategies and best practices implemented by Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in addressing moral and character challenges in the digital age. This objective aligns with the urgency of improving the quality of character education in madrasah based on Islamic values and can synergize with the demands of the times (Untung et al., 2022). Thus, this study is expected to contribute to the development of a contextual and applicable digital character education model in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.

The urgency of this research lies in the strategic need for Madrasah Ibtidaiyah to transform into an institution capable of balancing the use of digital technology with the strengthening of character education. As moral challenges become increasingly complex due to the rapid flow of digital information, a holistic approach to character building must become a top priority in the Islamic basic education system. This argument is reinforced by the fact that madrasah can no longer rely solely on conventional methods to instill values but must also utilize digital tools wisely and in an integrated manner (Arif, Chapakiya, et al., 2024). This research is also based on the objective of producing recommendations for an educational model that is in line with the characteristics of the digital generation of students, so that madrasah do not fall behind in facing the challenges of the times. Therefore, this research is not only important academically but also relevant in practical terms in helping madrasah carry out their function as centers for character building that are responsive to technological and social changes.

Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is a formal Islamic elementary education institution that plays a strategic role in shaping the personality and character of students from an early age. Within the context of Indonesia's national education system, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is equivalent to elementary school, but it has a unique feature in its integration of general knowledge with Islamic values. MI serves as an institution that instills moral and spiritual values that form the foundation of students' social lives (Walid, 2022). The uniqueness of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah lies in its educational approach that balances intellect, heart, and behavior through religious education, local culture, and modern

science. As part of the Islamic education system, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah not only shapes children into academically intelligent individuals but also into those with strong character, faith, and responsibility toward their social environment (Maharani, 2018). Thus, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is an important entity in Islamic education that is not only symbolic but also practical and transformative in addressing the challenges of the times, including in the digital era that demands adaptive and meaningful learning.

The manifestation of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in educational practice in Indonesia varies greatly, depending on socio-cultural background, institutional support, and educational policy. In general, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah can be classified into two main types: State Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, which is managed by the government, and Private Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, which is managed by the community or Islamic foundations. Both types of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah adhere to the national curriculum with the addition of an Islamic curriculum that is their distinctive feature. In practice, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah often adopts a values-based and locally-oriented learning approach to strengthen students' identity (Untung et al., 2022). Learning practices in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah also reflect a collaboration between the instillation of Islamic morals and adaptation to digital technology, such as through the integration of digital teaching materials and online learning management (Kulsum et al., 2024). In this context, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is not only an institution that preserves Islamic traditions but also an agent of change in modern and contextual Islamic education, especially in facing the transformations of 21st-century education.

Moral education is an educational process that focuses on shaping the character and personality of individuals based on moral and spiritual values. In the context of Islam, morals are a reflection of faith values that are manifested in daily behavior. Character education not only aims to teach what is right and wrong but also instills habits of acting in accordance with Islamic ethical norms. This includes developing the affective and psychomotor aspects of students, enabling them to demonstrate honesty, responsibility, empathy, and politeness in their social lives (Komariyah & Purwanto, 2023). Character education in madrasah has a dual role: as an instrument for character formation and as a guardian of national morality. Through an integrative approach combining cognitive, spiritual, and social learning, moral education aims to produce a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent but also emotionally and spiritually mature (R et al., 2022). Thus, moral education serves as the foundational pillar of a sustainable Islamic education system.

The manifestation of moral education in the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah environment is realized through various approaches, both direct, such as teaching the subject of Akidah Akhlak, and indirect, through teacher role modeling, habit formation, and school culture. The categorization of moral education can be seen in three main aspects: the formation of personal morality (such as honesty, patience, and responsibility), social morality (such as mutual assistance, politeness, and empathy), and spiritual morality (such as love for Allah, diligence in worship, and maintaining personal and environmental cleanliness). This approach is not only theoretical but is also implemented through consistent practical application within the madrasah environment (Indriyati & Siswadi, 2023). The implementation of moral values is further strengthened through extracurricular activities such as congregational prayer, daily religious talks, and memorization programs. In this practice, moral education in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah becomes an integrated system within the curriculum, school culture, and students' daily lives (Ratnaningsih, 2016), although challenges persist in maintaining consistency in implementation amid the influences of globalization and digitalization. The digital era is marked by the penetration of information technology into nearly all aspects of life, including the world of education.

In the context of basic Islamic education such as Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, the digital era has opened up new opportunities for transforming learning through the use of

digital media, the internet, and educational software. This era has not only changed the way students learn, but also changed the role of teachers as facilitators of digital learning and mentors of students' digital character. Digitalization facilitates quick access to information, but it also brings challenges in the form of exposure to negative content that can disrupt the character development of young children (Husnah & Yaqin, 2023). Within the framework of Islamic education, the digital age should be viewed as an opportunity to instill moral values through relevant and engaging media. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of the digital age is crucial in developing policies and strategies for moral education in elementary schools.

The manifestation of the digital era in the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah environment is reflected in the transformation of learning methods, the use of educational technology, and the patterns of interaction between teachers, students, and parents. The categorization of digital adaptation in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah includes Learning Management System (LMS)-based learning, the use of online applications such as Google Classroom or Zoom, and the development of digital learning content integrated with Islamic values. Moreover, routine activities such as learning assessments, character development, and monitoring student progress are now conducted digitally to enhance efficiency and transparency (Kulsum et al., 2024). On the other hand, the implementation of technology also presents risks such as digital distractions, reduced social interaction, and the consumption of irrelevant or non-Islamic information. Therefore, technology management at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah must be values-based and grounded in strong pedagogical and spiritual foundations (Nafi'ah et al., 2025), ensuring it is not only technically effective but also meaningful in shaping students' character.

This study focuses on the phenomenon of weak integration of moral education values in digital-based learning in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. In the context of rapid technological development, many madrasah face challenges in adapting their curriculum and learning methods to the demands of the digital age, while still maintaining their Islamic mission and the moral character of their students. This phenomenon becomes increasingly evident when there is a gap between the goals of character education and actual teaching practices, which remain purely cognitive in nature, without considering the affective and spiritual dimensions of students (Arif, Kartiko, et al., 2024). This issue becomes even more complex when students at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah are exposed to various digital content that is inconsistent with Islamic values, thereby placing the madrasah under dual pressure: adapting to digitalization and maintaining its role in character formation. Therefore, this study aims to examine how Madrasah Ibtidaiyah can function as a character laboratory through an integrated character education approach that wisely utilizes technology (Nijo & Wahab, 2024).

METHODS

This type of research is qualitative research with content analysis, which emphasizes the exploration and analysis of data from various sources of academic literature relevant to the theme of character education in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in the digital era. Primary data in this study were obtained from a review of current scientific journals that directly discuss the phenomenon of character education implementation and digitalization in madrasah, as well as books that formulate holistic character education theories (Engkizar et al., 2023; Murniyetti et al., 2016; Oktavia et al., 2023; Putri et al., 2025; Baroud et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2025; At-Thukhi et al., 2025). Meanwhile, secondary data includes additional literature reviews such as previous research results, academic papers, and scientific articles discussing general aspects of the research keywords: Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, moral education, and the digital era (Engkizar et al., 2025; Nurjanah et al., 2025; Oktavia et al., 2023; Sari et al., 2024;

Untung et al., 2022). The selection of a literature review approach allows the author to construct a deep academic argument by referring to relevant current theories and empirical findings, resulting in a reflective and critical outcome.

This study uses the basic theory of holistic character education developed by Thomas Lickona in 1991 in his work *Educating for Character*. This theory asserts that effective character education must include three main components: moral knowledge, moral feelings, and moral actions. Lickona states that character education is not sufficient merely to transmit values; it must also engage emotions and be manifested in students' actual behavior. In the context of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, this theory is highly relevant as it enables the integration of Islamic values and modern educational approaches, particularly in addressing the challenges of the digital age, which is rife with moral distractions and individualistic tendencies (Arif, Chapakiya, et al., 2024). Based on this, madrasah can design an approach that not only focuses on cognition but also shapes a resilient character that is spiritually and socially robust.

The data collection process in this study was conducted using literature review techniques, which included reading, recording, and analyzing relevant written sources. These sources included scientific books on character education and madrasah, articles in reputable journals, research reports, conference papers, and various other scientific publications on similar topics. The author systematically reviewed scientific works published in the last five years so that the analysis results remained contextual and actual (Sugiartha et al., 2024). This data collection method was considered effective because it could explore various perspectives from various sources and produce a comprehensive understanding of the issues being studied. In its implementation, the literature sources used must meet criteria for scientific validity, open access, and thematic relevance to the research focus.

In this study, the author used content analysis as the main approach to analyze the data. Content analysis is a systematic method used to identify patterns, themes, and relationships in text data derived from literature. This technique allows researchers to evaluate the content of documents in depth, both manifest (explicit) and latent (implicit), in order to find meanings and important information relevant to the research objectives (Ilma et al., 2024; Jaafar et al., 2025; Sari et al., 2025). The analysis procedure includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This process is also supported by categorization techniques that help researchers organize data based on key themes such as character education, digitalization, and practices in madrasah. With this approach, researchers are able to formulate conclusions based on literature evidence and provide meaningful conceptual contributions to the development of character education practices in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is an Islamic elementary school designed to integrate general and religious education in shaping students' character from an early age. Various studies show that Madrasah Ibtidaiyah plays a strategic role in fostering students' character and morals through a curriculum that combines Islamic values and national basic competencies. One approach used by Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in character development is locally-based learning, where cultural and religious values serve as the foundation for the learning process (Untung et al., 2022). On the other hand, the existence of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah amid the challenges of the digital era has created a need for learning innovations, including through the digitization of teaching materials and strengthening the synergy between teachers, parents, and the community in supporting children's character development (Arif, Kartiko, et al., 2024). Thus, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah has become a flexible institution in responding to the dynamics of the times without losing its Islamic identity.

The implementation of character education in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is carried out

through habit formation, teacher role modeling, and strengthening school culture. Activities such as congregational prayer, morning sermons, and other religious practices are part of the daily routine of students at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. This approach is reinforced by instilling moral values in religious subjects such as Akidah Akhlak, Fiqih, and Islamic Cultural History (Komariyah & Purwanto, 2023). In the context of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah based on pesantren, character-building strategies are also implemented by strengthening the tahfiz program, religious activities, and digital literacy based on Islamic values. Various forms of community involvement also serve as reinforcements, such as collaboration between teachers, parents, and community leaders in maintaining the consistency of moral values taught at the madrasah (Arif, Kartiko, et al., 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2024). These activities demonstrate that MI not only functions as a formal educational institution but also as a social environment that shapes children's character comprehensively.

The current situation faced by Madrasah Ibtidaiyah shows serious challenges in maintaining its role in character building amid the rapid pace of digitalization. Data from literature reviews describing the strong role of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in character education shows that this institution has great potential as a laboratory for character building. However, this potential is often not fully realized due to limitations in integrating technology in line with Islamic values. The relationship between the description and explanation of data and reality highlights the urgent need to bridge the gap between the values taught in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah and the external influences brought about by the digital age (Nijo & Wahab, 2024).

Character education in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is a key pillar in the learning process aimed at shaping students into individuals who are faithful, knowledgeable, and of noble character. The character education curriculum implemented in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah typically covers individual, social, and spiritual moral aspects, which are conveyed both directly through subject lessons and indirectly through role modeling and school culture. Studies indicate that habit-forming programs such as performing the Dhuha prayer, greeting others, and maintaining cleanliness are effective means of fostering positive attitudes among students (Indriyati & Siswadi, 2023; Oktavia et al., 2025). This approach enables students to internalize moral values in their daily lives.

The effectiveness of moral education in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is determined by the synergy between the curricular approach and school culture. The instillation of moral values is not only carried out in the classroom, but also through extracurricular activities designed to strengthen students' attitudes of responsibility, cooperation, and discipline. Recent studies indicate that character education rooted in local culture, such as Javanese etiquette at the Karanganyar Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, can strengthen students' attitudes of respect, humility, and tolerance as a reflection of Islamic values (Adisti & Rozikan, 2021). Thus, moral education at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is holistic, addressing the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of children.

Although the literature indicates that moral education in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah has been comprehensively designed, the reality shows challenges in its implementation, particularly in aligning conventional approaches with the needs of the digital generation. Many Madrasah Ibtidaiyah teachers face obstacles in adapting moral values to digital learning without losing the essence of Islamic spirituality. This relationship shows that strengthening moral education that is contextual to the digital era is an urgent need for madrasah to remain relevant in shaping students' character amid rapid socio-cultural changes (Kulsum et al., 2024).

The digital era is characterized by the massive use of information technology in various aspects of life, including basic education. In Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (elementary school) environments, digitization has begun to be implemented in the form of online learning, the use of learning applications, and the digitization of school administration. Studies indicate that schools that are adaptive to technology can enhance the

effectiveness of learning while fostering digital literacy among students from an early age (Husnah & Yaqin, 2023). However, the use of technology also poses risks such as increased dependence on devices and a decline in social interaction among students.

Digital transformation in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah not only impacts the technical aspects of learning but also students' mindset and behavior. Uncontrolled use of digital media has the potential to weaken the character values taught in madrasah. Therefore, digitalization in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah must be carried out wisely and strategically, incorporating Islamic values into every aspect of its use. One proven effective strategy is the integration of a character-based digital curriculum, where students are not only taught technology but also encouraged to understand its ethical use (Kulsum et al., 2024).

Data from the literature indicate that educational digitalization can be a significant opportunity to strengthen the learning process, including in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. However, in reality, many Madrasah Ibtidaiyah are not yet prepared in terms of infrastructure or human resource capacity to manage technology-based education. This creates a gap between the positive potential of the digital era and its implementation in the field. Therefore, there needs to be a transformation that focuses not only on technology but also on a values-based approach so that Madrasah Ibtidaiyah can fulfill its role as a character education institution in the digital era (Bali & Rohmah, 2023).

The results of the study indicate that Madrasah Ibtidaiyah has strong potential as an adaptive Islamic values-based character education space in line with technological developments. Character formation is carried out through curriculum integration, moral conditioning, and the use of digital devices aligned with Islamic values. The approach used is collaborative, involving teachers, students, parents, and the madrasah community in creating a consistent religious climate. However, implementation in the field reveals a disparity between the readiness of technological infrastructure and the ideal of holistic character education. This imbalance acts as a barrier to achieving truly contextual moral education in the digital age (Kholifah et al., 2024; Kulsum et al., 2024).

This study reinforces previous findings on the importance of integrating character education into the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah curriculum, but has the advantage of exploring the synergy between Islamic values and digital transformation. Unlike the study by (Zahra & Aminah, 2024), which focused more on teachers' readiness in character education, this study highlights the management of madrasah as a system that involves the wider community, including the use of a digital curriculum based on Islamic values. Another advantage is the emphasis on a holistic approach that not only targets cognitive and moral aspects but also accommodates the social and technological dimensions of students. This makes the study more applicable in designing character education strategies amid the challenges of digitalization. The findings of this study reflect that strengthening the role of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah as a laboratory of character is not limited to the theoretical realm but has practical implications in shaping a generation of character. When moral education is designed in an integrated manner with digital media, students not only learn to understand values but also apply them in a digitally transformed social environment. This reflection indicates that the research objective of exploring an adaptive character education model for the digital era is highly relevant and can serve as the foundation for transforming madrasah into institutions that shape the Islamic personalities of future generations of children (Syamsul et al., 2023).

The implications of these research findings are the importance of developing contextual technology-based character education policies for Islamic elementary education. Strengthening teachers' capacity in the use of digital media and character curriculum development should be a priority in madrasah education policy. On the

other hand, these findings also imply that digital curricula need to include value content, not just digitalization formats. Thus, these findings can serve as a basis for policymakers in formulating character curriculum standards for Madrasah Ibtidaiyah that can integrate Islamic values and 21st-century skills (Abdillah & Munawwaroh, 2024). One of the dominant causes of the research results showing a disparity between the implementation of values and technology is the uneven distribution of digital literacy in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah environments. Many teachers and students lack the technological and pedagogical readiness to optimally implement digital character-based learning. Additionally, the lack of training, weak institutional support, and the absence of a comprehensive digital character education ecosystem are major obstacles. Internal factors such as conservative thinking and resistance to change also slow down the transformation process in madrasah (Bali & Rohmah, 2023).

Based on these findings, affirmative action is needed in the form of intensive training for Madrasah Ibtidaiyah teachers on integrating character education with digital media, as well as strengthening collaboration between madrasah and parents and the community in monitoring children's digital character. In addition, it is necessary to develop age-appropriate digital modules based on Islamic values. National policies also need to provide incentives to madrasah that successfully implement digital character learning based on Islamic values. This action is crucial to encourage Madrasah Ibtidaiyah not only to survive in the digital age but also to excel as centers for shaping the moral character of the Muslim generation who are both ethical and technologically literate (Yusuf et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Based on theoretical studies in the literature, it can be concluded that Madrasah Ibtidaiyah has far greater potential than has been understood in the discourse on character education. Amidst the rapid digitalization that is often feared to corrupt the morals of the younger generation, madrasah have shown their capacity as laboratories of morality that are able to unite Islamic values with modern technological approaches. The integration of digital learning and moral values is not only possible but has already shown success in some madrasah that have progressively utilized digital media to strengthen moral habits, role modeling, and the reinforcement of religious culture. This finding shows that when technology is guided by a sense of values, moral education will not be eroded by the times but will instead become increasingly relevant and contextual in accompanying the digital generation.

This study makes an important contribution to enriching theoretical studies on character education in madrasah by adding an integrative dimension between spiritual values and digital skills. From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces a holistic approach to character education that not only focuses on cognitive and affective aspects but also touches on technological social transformation. Practically, this research provides a model for the application of technology-based moral education that can be used as a reference by educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers in the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah environment. By presenting best practices from madrasah that have successfully implemented digital character education, this research serves as a source of inspiration for other Islamic educational institutions in building a quality education system that is relevant to the digital era.

The limitations of this study lie in the limited scope of sources, which are restricted to a literature review and do not include empirical field verification. However, these limitations are not weaknesses but rather open up a wide space for further research development. This study provides a strong initial direction for further action-based or qualitative field studies to examine the actual implementation of the digital character education model that has been studied. Additionally, further exploration of the role of parents and the digital community in supporting the

character education process in madrasah could become a highly relevant new focus. Thus, this study not only concludes but also paves the way for innovative, adaptive Islamic character education that aligns with the changing times.

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