

## RELIGIOUS CHARACTER FORMATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA THROUGH MTSN 2 SURAKARTA'S BOARDING SCHOOL SYSTEM

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### Abstract

Character education in the digital era requires a holistic and integrative approach. This study analyzes the implementation of religious character education through the boarding school program at MTsN 2 Surakarta. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using an interactive model. The findings show that religious values are internalized through a 24-hour dormitory ecosystem, structured worship habituation, regulated gadget use for one to two hours daily, Islamic digital literacy, and humanistic mentoring by musyrif and musyrifah. These strategies encourage students to move from externally controlled compliance toward moral autonomy and independent religious awareness. The integration of madrasah and dormitory systems offers a comprehensive approach to developing academically capable, spiritually resilient, socially responsible, and digitally literate students. With contextual adaptation, this model may serve as a best practice for other boarding madrasahs.

Keywords: Boarding school; Religious character; Digital literacy; Worship habituation; Humanistic mentoring.

### INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has brought society into a digital era characterized by rapid information exchange, hyperconnectivity, and changes in patterns of learning and social interaction. Digitalization provides educational opportunities through broader access to knowledge, electronic learning, and cross-platform communication (Zou, Kuek, Feng, & Cheng, 2025). At the same time, unrestricted exposure to digital media presents sociological and psychological risks, particularly for adolescents who are still developing their identities and systems of self-control (Khalaf, Alubied, Khalaf, & Rifaey, 2023).

Excessive use of gadgets and social media has been associated with cyberbullying, online game addiction, exposure to inappropriate content, hate speech, declining social empathy, and increasingly individualistic behavior among students. These conditions indicate that technological competence does not necessarily develop alongside emotional and spiritual maturity (Setiyorini & Jayanti, 2025). Education must consequently extend beyond cognitive achievement and provide systematic character formation that integrates moral knowledge, moral awareness, and consistent moral action (Susanti, 2022).

From the perspective of Islamic education, character formation is directed toward the development of *akhlakul karimah*. Religious values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and piety provide an ethical foundation for students' behavior, including their interaction in digital environments (Jusmaliah, Risnawati Hannang, & Nurul Ilma, 2025). However, religious instruction in regular schools is generally limited to several classroom hours per week. Such instruction may strengthen cognitive understanding but is insufficient to develop stable behavior without continuous habituation, exemplary conduct (*uswah hasanah*), and a supportive religious environment (*biah shalihah*) (Mahfud & Zahriyah, 2025).

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The boarding school system offers an alternative educational environment in which learning, caregiving, supervision, and habituation are integrated throughout the day. Fauzi et al., (2022) found that boarding education supports character development through continuous interaction and institutional supervision. Mahfudi & Rifa'i (2025) further demonstrated that pesantren-based activities, including congregational worship, Qur'anic learning, religious studies, and independent living, contribute to the development of discipline and religious character. These studies confirm the potential of boarding education as a controlled environment for character habituation.

Other studies have examined specific dimensions of Islamic character education. Haidar et al., (2025) emphasized the importance of holistic educational environments in religious character formation. Mahfud & Zahriyah (2025) focused on the internalization of Islamic values through moral education, while Said et al., (2025) examined discipline formation through the internalization of Islamic Religious Education values. Gemilang et al., (2025) discussed boarding school management strategies for student character development, and Azizah et al., (2025) highlighted humanistic support, self-efficacy, and independence in pesantren education. Collectively, these studies show that habituation, institutional management, exemplary conduct, and socio-emotional support are central components of character education.

Research on digital adaptation in Islamic educational institutions has developed separately. Saepurohman et al., (2025) examined strategic management of digital literacy in Islamic boarding schools. Nisa' (2025) identified digital literacy as necessary for developing critical thinking, responsible technology use, and twenty-first-century competencies. These studies suggest that Islamic educational institutions should neither reject technology completely nor allow unrestricted access. Technology needs to be managed through ethical guidance, supervision, and digital literacy.

Despite these contributions, previous studies tend to examine boarding school management, religious habituation, humanistic mentoring, or digital literacy as separate educational dimensions. Limited attention has been given to how these dimensions are integrated within a government-owned boarding madrasah at the junior secondary level. Previous research has also rarely explained how regulated gadget access, a 24-hour religious ecosystem, socio-emotional mentoring, and institutional supervision operate simultaneously to move students from externally controlled compliance toward independent moral awareness.

This gap is particularly relevant because state madrasas differ institutionally from traditional pesantren and private boarding schools. They must implement the national curriculum, comply with government regulations, accommodate students from heterogeneous backgrounds, and simultaneously maintain Islamic educational traditions. In an urban and digitally connected environment, these institutions face the dual responsibility of protecting students from the negative effects of digital media while preparing them to use technology critically and responsibly.

MTsN 2 Surakarta represents this institutional condition. Its boarding school program combines formal madrasah education, structured religious habituation, dormitory supervision, humanistic mentoring, and regulated access to digital technology. The central argument of this study is that religious character in the digital era cannot be developed through classroom instruction, technology restriction, or disciplinary rules alone. It requires the integration of a continuous religious environment, exemplary socio-emotional mentoring, controlled digital engagement, and gradual development of students' self-regulation.

Accordingly, this study addresses two principal research gaps. The first is the limited empirical understanding of integrated religious character education within a state-owned boarding madrasah. The second is the lack of explanation regarding how Islamic educational traditions can be maintained while digital technology is selectively incorporated into students' learning and daily lives. The novelty of this study lies in analyzing these elements as a unified educational strategy rather than as separate programs.

This study therefore aims to analyze the strategies used by MTsN 2 Surakarta to internalize religious values and form students' character through its boarding school system in the digital era.

It specifically examines the 24-hour dormitory ecosystem, structured worship habituation, regulated gadget use, Islamic digital literacy, and humanistic mentoring by musyrif and musyrifah. The findings are expected to enrich the literature on Islamic educational management and provide a context-sensitive model of integrated religious character education that may be adapted by other boarding madrasas.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen to explore, understand, and describe in depth field phenomena related to the strategy of religious education based on boarding school in forming students' character in the digital era at MTsN 2 Surakarta. In accordance with the characteristics of qualitative research, the researcher acts as the key instrument to capture the meaning of reality and social interaction naturally (Lim, 2025).

The determination of informants was carried out using purposive sampling technique, by selecting subjects who have the capacity and direct involvement with the research focus, namely Boarding School Managers, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Teachers, and dormitory supervisors. Comprehensive data collection was carried out through three main techniques, namely observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was applied through passive participation to directly observe students' *ubudiyah* routines, social interactions, and the implementation of rules for using digital devices in the dormitory environment. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to explore information related to curriculum design, methods of moral development, and madrasah interventions against the negative excesses of the digital era. This process was supported by documentation study to collect supporting data such as dormitory regulations, PAI syllabus, and institutional profile (Lim, 2025).

Data validity was tested using triangulation techniques, both source triangulation by cross-checking information among informants, and technique triangulation by comparing the suitability between interview results, observation findings, and written documents. The valid data were then analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña through three circular stages that take place simultaneously, namely data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Saldaña, 2020).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Internalization of Religious Values Through a 24-Hour Dormitory Ecosystem

Education at the Boarding School of MTsN 2 Surakarta is based on the philosophical goal of forming a complete human being (*insan kamil*) who has a noble personality, faith, piety, and is able to interact positively with the environment. To achieve this goal, the madrasah implements a boarding education system that creates a comprehensive-holistic learning ecosystem for 24 hours. This concept is highly relevant to the theory of Holistic-Integrative Character Education in the latest pedagogical study of Haidar et al., (2025), which emphasizes that the formation of religious character cannot rely solely on cognitive transfer in the classroom, but requires a total educational environment. In the dormitory system of MTsN 2 Surakarta, Islamic values are not limited to being studied through theory, but are integrated into every aspect of students' lives through habituation, exemplary conduct, guidance, and continuous direct supervision (Mauludin, Marwazi, & Fadhil, 2025).

The process of internalizing religious values is based on the principles of training and habituation arranged in the daily routines of santri, starting from waking up before Subuh until the night rest period. Daily worship practices such as congregational fardhu prayer at Masjid Al-Ikhlas MTsN 2 Surakarta, sunnah Tahajud and Dhuha prayers, tadarus Al-Qur'an, and the tahfidz program with a minimum target of three juz are carried out in a structured and repeated manner every day. This mechanism is in line with the stages of Value Transinternalization proposed in contemporary Islamic education studies (Said et al., 2025). This theory explains that religious routines that are strictly engineered in the dormitory will lead students to transition from the stage of rule-based

compliance toward the stage of belief. Through consistent repeated practices in this dormitory ecosystem, religious actions slowly transform into internal awareness and behavioral independence that become established within the santri (Qamari, Saputra, Husna, Banjarmasin, & Author, 2025).

The unification of learning time between regular madrasah activities in the morning and dormitory guidance, such as Islamic studies and Malam Bina Iman dan Taqwa/MABIT, in the afternoon and evening ensures that the process of character internalization runs without interruption. The existence of the dormitory is optimally functioned not merely as a place to live, but as a central medium for the complete development of attitudes, knowledge, and skills. The implementation of this 24-hour ecosystem proves that character education requires the engineering of a supportive environment to fortify students. This also realizes the mandate of the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Education No. 6987 of 2019, in which dormitory guidance is intended to fully develop a generation of faith and noble character. This argumentative construction is very crucial, considering that article standards for publication in the field of education, such as Cetta journal and similar journals, require a practical foundation from field findings strengthened by contemporary theoretical discourse (Gonçalves, Costa, & Almeida, 2025).

### **Measured Policy on the Use of Gadgets and Digital Media**

Facing the era of globalization and information-communication transformation, MTsN 2 Surakarta realizes that the advancement of digital technology is both a challenge and a great opportunity for the world of education. One of the graduate profiles targeted by the madrasah is students who are able to actively master information technology to support learning, without losing their Islamic identity. Nevertheless, the management also identifies significant obstacles in the form of exposure to social media and the tendency of students to be more interested in digital entertainment than academic activities. Therefore, the Boarding School of MTsN 2 Surakarta does not take an extreme step by totally prohibiting technology, but instead implements a limited, directed, and educational policy on the use of digital media. This approach is highly relevant to the discourse of Islamic Digital Citizenship, which has been widely studied recently. This theory emphasizes that modern Islamic educational institutions must facilitate technology integration, while also fortifying students with moral literacy so that they are able to filter information that contradicts religious values (Sugianto, 2024).

The implementation of this policy is realized through strict and proportional regulation of gadget access. In the dormitory environment, students are not allowed to use gadgets freely; gadget access is only given for about one to two hours per day for specific purposes, and after use must be returned to the accompanying musyrif or musyrifah. This “diet gadget” policy is balanced with a layered supervision system coordinated among dormitory managers, musyrif-musyrifah, homeroom teachers, Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers, and the entire madrasah community. This gadget management practice represents the application of Digital Wellness theory in the boarding education ecosystem. Consistent external control from the school environment functions as a preventive intervention to prevent addiction (screen dependency), while gradually training students’ capacity for self-regulation toward technology (Mohammed Ali, H Mohamed, Talal Marashli, & Osman, 2024).

Behind this time restriction, digital technology is actually optimally utilized as a catalyst for religious education. Gadget facilities are used to access religious materials, utilize Al-Qur'an and tajwid applications, and watch credible Islamic learning videos. Furthermore, the madrasah proactively provides education on digital literacy, which includes social media ethics, maintaining polite communication, preventing the spread of hoaxes, and the importance of maintaining a positive digital footprint. This comprehensive strategy is designed so that santri are able to become intelligent, critical, and responsible technology users. This is in line with the strategic direction of the Director General of Islamic Education No. 6987 of 2019, namely producing a generation that is not only skilled in information and communication technology, but also has critical and innovative thinking skills while remaining grounded in noble character (Nisa', 2025).

### Humanistic Mentoring by Musyrif and Musyrifah

The success of the boarding education system at MTsN 2 Surakarta cannot be separated from the crucial role of musyrif and musyrifah who apply a humanistic approach in mentoring students. Based on the dormitory education principles adopted by the madrasah, exemplary conduct becomes the main instructional instrument, where the mentors are required to consistently provide real examples through words, attitudes, and daily behavior that can be imitated by santri. This mentoring concept is in line with the theory of Humanistic-Religious Pedagogy in contemporary Islamic education studies (Gemilang et al., 2025). This study underlines the importance of the role of educators in the dormitory as *in loco parentis*, where character formation is not engineered merely through authoritarian instruction, but is built on the foundation of emotional closeness, exemplary conduct (*uswah hasanah*), and supportive caregiving bonds.

In practice, musyrif and musyrifah carry out dual roles that are comprehensive in nature: acting as worship guides, discipline supervisors, motivators, and counselors for the santri. They are tasked with intensively accompanying daily activities, monitoring behavioral development, and becoming a place of consultation for students who experience difficulties. In enforcing rules, the dormitory management combines the principles of firmness and wisdom; discipline is carried out through guidance and the provision of consequences that are entirely educational in nature, not punishments that degrade the dignity of santri. This interaction pattern represents the implementation of Socio-Emotional Mentoring emphasized by Azizah et al., (2025) This theory argues that behavioral regulation of adolescent students will be far more effective when accompanied by authority figures who have high empathy, so that students feel psychologically safe to learn from their mistakes.

Furthermore, this humanistic approach is realized through the principle of “education through advice”, namely the provision of reminders of goodness and truth using methods that touch the heart so that they are practiced consciously by students. The presence of musyrif and musyrifah as emotional facilitators has proven to be very crucial in overcoming adaptation obstacles, especially considering that the santri come from heterogeneous family backgrounds, habits, and cultures. Through dialogic and communicative mentoring—including establishing continuous synergy with parents—the atmosphere of closeness and brotherhood in the dormitory can be firmly built. Ultimately, intensive and empathy-centered mentoring becomes the main catalyst that ensures the process of santri character formation runs optimally amid various challenges of the modern era (Mustain & Bakar, 2025).

### Character Transformation Toward Independent Awareness

The ultimate goal of implementing boarding education at MTsN 2 Surakarta is not merely to create santri compliance with regulations, but the realization of independence and internal awareness. In the madrasah profile document, independence is defined as the ability and capacity of students to learn to manage their own interests resiliently in facing life challenges, without having to continuously depend on others. In the early stages of implementation, discipline and worship habituation are often driven by compliance with dormitory rules and supervision from musyrif-musyrifah. This phenomenon can be explained through the perspective of Self-Determination Theory applied in contemporary character education studies. This study explains the process of internalization, in which external regulation, namely school rules, is gradually integrated by students until it becomes intrinsic regulation, namely motivation from within, especially when the educational environment supports their autonomy and competence (Azizah et al., 2025).

One of the greatest challenges acknowledged by the boarding school management in this digital era is how to build students' internal awareness so that they remain disciplined even when they are not being supervised. However, through a process of habituation that is consistently guarded and continuous evaluation, a significant metamorphosis can be seen. Daily religious and disciplinary practices slowly shift from merely fulfilling obligations to rules into a need and an

inseparable part of the santri's character identity itself. This shift reflects the achievement of Moral Autonomy in the modern pesantren ecosystem (Jusubaidi, Lindgren, Mujahidin, & Rofiq, 2024). The theory of moral autonomy emphasizes that the success of character education is marked by the transition from the stage of heteronomy, namely compliance due to external control, toward autonomy, where students are able to control themselves, obey rules, and live orderly based on their personal moral convictions (Wahyuningsih, Pangestu, & ..., 2025).

The success of this character transformation is measured comprehensively, not only based on cognitive academic achievement, but also through observation of daily behavior, examinations of pesantren materials, and formal documentation in the Raport Kepondokan. The program evaluation results show that, in general, students experience striking positive development; ranging from increased independence in daily activities, growing responsibility toward themselves and the surrounding environment, to increased social concern and the spirit of mutual cooperation. Furthermore, the religious character that is formed has proven to be far stronger and more deeply rooted than when the santri first entered the boarding school program. Overall, the integration of the dormitory curriculum and humanistic guidance contributes concretely to forming students' maturity, as well as preparing them as excellent graduates who have intelligent mindsets and noble personalities (Mas et al., 2025).

## CONCLUSION

This study found that religious character formation at MTsN 2 Surakarta is developed through the integration of four main elements: a 24-hour dormitory ecosystem, structured worship habituation, humanistic mentoring by musyrif and musyrifah, and regulated use of digital technology. These elements support the gradual movement of students from externally controlled discipline toward moral autonomy, independent religious awareness, responsible technology use, and stronger social concern. The main contribution of this study is the identification of an integrated model of religious character education in a state-owned boarding madrasah. The model demonstrates that Islamic educational traditions and digital adaptation do not need to be positioned as opposing approaches. Religious habituation, socio-emotional mentoring, digital literacy, and controlled gadget access can be combined within one institutional strategy. This finding enriches the literature on Islamic educational management and may serve as a contextual best-practice reference for other boarding madrasas.

This study is limited by its qualitative case study design, its focus on a single institution, and the absence of quantitative measurement of students' character development. The findings therefore cannot be generalized to all boarding madrasas without contextual consideration. Future research should involve multiple institutions, include student and parent perspectives, and quantitatively examine the relationship between mentoring intensity, digital self-regulation, religious character, and academic resilience.

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