

Islamic Religious Education and the Challenges of Digital Anonymity: Fostering Students' Moral Development in the Era of Social Media

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Abstract

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed students' communication patterns on social media. However, the weak reinforcement of digital ethics in education has created a reasoning gap, namely a discrepancy between freedom of expression and moral awareness, reflected in anonymous behavior without ethical consideration. This study aims to analyze the strategies of Islamic Education (PAI) teachers in addressing anonymous behavior among junior high school students. A qualitative case study design was employed at SMP Ma'arif 1 Metro. Participants included PAI teachers, the principal, and active social media users. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed using Miles & Huberman's interactive model. The findings indicate that although students actively use various platforms, negative interactions such as mockery, verbal abuse, and inappropriate comments leading to mild cyberbullying still occur. PAI teachers implement moral guidance, role modeling, integration of Islamic values (the concept of tabayyun), personal counseling, and collaboration with parents. The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on students' anonymous behavior on social media and the contextual integration of akhlakul karimah values into PAI teachers' strategies—an underexplored area at the junior high school level. The contribution is an empirical understanding and a strategic model for teachers and schools in fostering Islamic-based digital ethics. The limitation is the single-school case study design, meaning the results cannot be generalized to all junior high schools with different characteristics.

Keywords: Noble Character, Digital Ethics, Islamic Education Teacher, Social Media, Anonymous Behavior

Abstrak

Perkembangan teknologi digital telah mengubah pola komunikasi siswa di media sosial. Namun, lemahnya penguatan etika digital dalam pendidikan menimbulkan reasoning gap, yaitu kesenjangan antara kebebasan berekspresi dan kesadaran moral, yang tercermin dalam perilaku anonim tanpa pertimbangan etika. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis strategi guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) dalam menghadapi perilaku anonim siswa SMP. Pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus digunakan di SMP Ma'arif 1 Metro. Subjek meliputi guru PAI, kepala sekolah, dan siswa aktif media sosial. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi, lalu dianalisis dengan model interaktif Miles & Huberman. Hasil menunjukkan siswa aktif menggunakan berbagai platform, namun masih ditemukan interaksi negatif seperti ejekan, hinaan verbal, dan komentar tidak pantas yang mengarah pada perundungan siber ringan. Guru PAI menerapkan strategi pembinaan moral, keteladanan, integrasi nilai Islam (konsep tabayyun), konseling personal, serta kerja sama dengan orang tua. Novelty penelitian ini adalah fokus spesifik pada perilaku anonim siswa di media sosial dan integrasi nilai akhlakul karimah secara kontekstual dalam strategi guru PAI, yang belum banyak dikaji pada jenjang SMP. Kontribusi penelitian ini memberikan pemahaman empiris dan model strategi bagi guru serta sekolah dalam membentuk etika digital berbasis Islam. Limitasi penelitian ini adalah desain studi kasus pada satu sekolah sehingga hasilnya tidak dapat digeneralisasikan ke seluruh SMP dengan karakteristik berbeda.

Kata kunci: Akhlakul Karimah, Etika Digital, Guru Pendidikan Agama Islam, Media Sosial, Perilaku Anonim.

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has brought significant changes to various aspects of life, including the field of education. Advances in digital technology enable individuals to interact, share information, and build social relationships extensively through various digital platforms. This is consistent with previous research findings indicating that one form of such development is the emergence of social media, which has now become an essential part of daily life, particularly among younger generations (Utami, 2021).

Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok have become primary means for students to communicate and interact with their peers. Through social media, students can express themselves, exchange information, and expand their social networks. However, despite these conveniences, social media use also carries potential negative impacts when not accompanied by adequate digital literacy. Previous studies have shown that unwise use of social media may lead to negative behaviors, such as the dissemination of unverified information, the use of unethical language, and even cyberbullying (Hamama, 2024).

One phenomenon that has emerged in digital interactions is anonymous behavior, namely actions performed by individuals who interact without revealing a clear identity. This anonymous condition often makes individuals feel freer to express comments without considering their impact on others. Previous studies have revealed that anonymous behavior has the potential to generate negative communication, including mockery, the use of offensive language, and comments that demean other individuals (Damayanti, 2017).

This phenomenon has become an important concern in education, particularly among junior high school students who are in the adolescent developmental stage. At this phase, students are undergoing processes of identity formation as well as moral and social development. This is in line with previous research findings indicating that the use of social media without awareness of digital ethics can influence students' character formation and patterns of social interaction, both in virtual environments and in real-life settings (Nasution et al., 2025).

In the educational context, character development constitutes one of the primary objectives alongside cognitive development. Education is not only oriented toward the mastery of knowledge but also toward the formation of values, attitudes, and behaviors among learners (Hidayatullah et al., 2019). In this regard, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a strategic role in instilling the values of *akhlakul karimah* (noble character), such as honesty, responsibility, and mutual respect. These values are not only relevant to social life but also to digital interactions on social media (Azzahra et al., 2025).

Islamic Religious Education teachers play an important role in guiding students to use social media wisely and responsibly. This is consistent with previous research findings showing that teachers serve not only as providers of learning materials but also as role models in everyday behavior (Yasmar & Amalia, 2024). Furthermore, the integration of Islamic values, such as the concept of *tabayyun*, into learning activities can serve as a relevant approach to fostering students' awareness, enabling them to become more critical and selective in receiving and disseminating information on social media.

Although numerous studies have examined social media use, digital literacy, and character education, most have focused on general aspects of student behavior or the broad impacts of social media. Research specifically investigating the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers in addressing students' anonymous behavior on social media remains relatively limited, particularly within the context of junior high school education. Moreover, only a few studies have integrated the *akhlakul karimah* educational approach with the phenomenon of anonymous behavior as a new challenge in students' digital interactions.

Based on these considerations, this study offers three aspects of novelty. First, it specifically examines students' anonymous behavior on social media, which constitutes one of the distinguishing factors of cyberbullying compared to conventional bullying and has the potential to exacerbate the psychological impact on victims (Sorokowski et al., 2024; Myers et al., 2025). Nevertheless, this issue has rarely been investigated within the context of Islamic Religious Education at the junior high school level. Second, this study not only discusses the concept of *tabayyun* normatively but also analyzes its empirical implementation by Islamic Religious Education teachers in fostering *akhlakul karimah* in the digital era, thereby addressing a research gap concerning the low implementation of *tabayyun* in students' digital communication practices (Fitri et al., 2025; (Ahsya et al., 2026). Third, this study focuses on contextual strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers at the junior high school level in responding to students' anonymous behavior through role modeling, the integration of Islamic values, personal counseling, and collaboration with parents. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its focus on anonymous behavior, the practical implementation of *tabayyun*, and the junior high school educational context, all of which remain underexplored in studies of Islamic education and digital ethics.

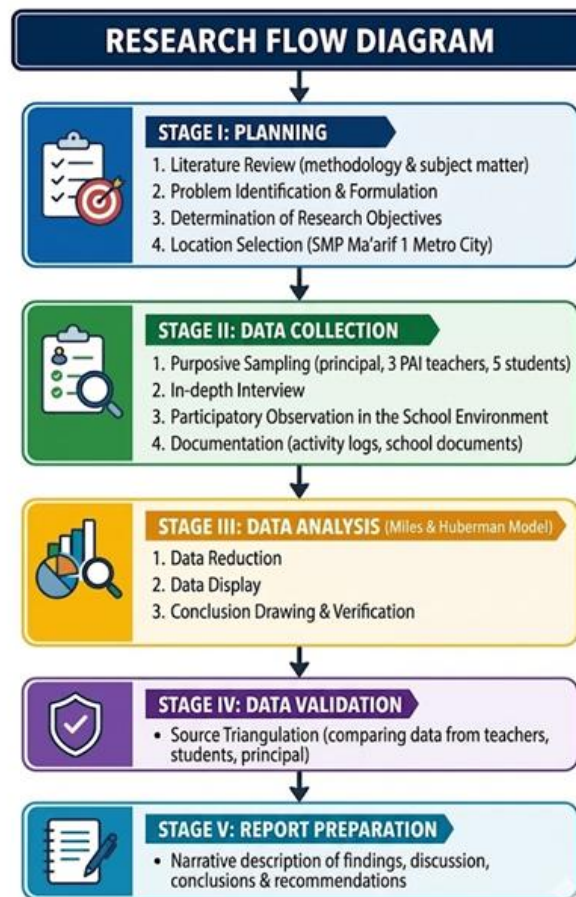


Figure 1. Research Framework Diagram

Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers in addressing anonymous behavior among junior high school students on social media. This study is expected to contribute to the development of Islamic education scholarship, particularly in character development based on the values of *akhlakul karimah* in the digital era, while also serving as a reference for teachers in developing learning strategies that are adaptive to technological advancements.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the social phenomenon related to students' anonymous behavior in social media use and the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers in instilling the values of *akhlakul karimah* among students (Mulyana et al., 2024).

The study was conducted at SMP Ma'arif 1 Metro City during the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, specifically from January 2026 to June 2026, with a total duration of approximately 22 weeks (equivalent to five months). The research site was selected based on the consideration that the school has students who

actively use social media, thereby allowing the emergence of various forms of digital interaction, including the phenomenon of anonymous behavior. The research timeline included the planning stage (4 weeks), data collection through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation (8 weeks), data analysis using the Miles and Huberman model (4 weeks), source triangulation for data validity (2 weeks), and preparation of the final report (4 weeks). This duration is consistent with the recommendations of Sugiyono (2010) and Creswell (2016) who suggest that qualitative research employing a case study design generally requires between three and six months, depending on the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation.

The participants in this study consisted of the principal, three Islamic Religious Education teachers, and five seventh-grade students who actively used social media. Of the five students, three were male and two were female. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which involves selecting participants based on specific considerations related to the focus of the study (Sahir, 2021). In this study, the criteria for participant selection included: (a) active use of social media, and (b) the ability to communicate openly. This technique was chosen because, in qualitative research, sampling is not intended for generalization but rather for obtaining rich and in-depth information that aligns with the objectives of the study (Nurhayati et al., 2024).

Data were collected through three primary methods: interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers and students to obtain information regarding students' use of social media, forms of anonymous behavior that emerged, and the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers in instilling the values of *akhlakul karimah* within the context of students' digital lives. This is consistent with previous research findings. Observation was conducted to directly examine the Islamic Religious Education learning process and the interactions between teachers and students within the school environment. Meanwhile, documentation was used to complement the research data related to learning activities, character development programs, and other documents relevant to the focus of the study.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive data analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting, focusing, and simplifying the data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Subsequently, the data were presented in the form of narrative descriptions to facilitate the researcher's understanding of patterns and relationships among the data (Ahmad & Muslimah, 2021).

The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verification to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers in addressing students' anonymous behavior on social media. To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation by comparing data obtained from various informants, namely teachers, students, and school authorities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was conducted during the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, involving data sources from students, teachers, and the principal. Interview data were analyzed using the stages of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The research findings are presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of the Impact of Social Media on Students and Strategies for Fostering *Akhlakul Karimah* by Islamic Religious Education Teachers

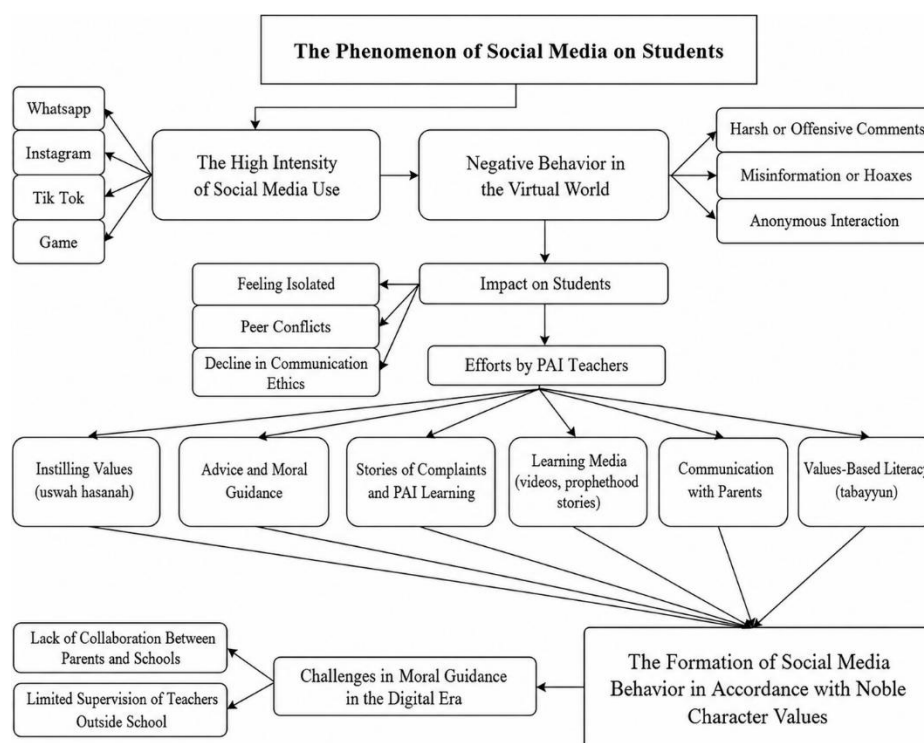


Figure 2 illustrates the research findings regarding the phenomenon of social media use among students at SMP Ma'arif 1 Metro. A more detailed explanation of the findings is presented as follows.

Intensity of Social Media Use Among Students

The findings indicate that social media use has become an important part of junior high school students' daily lives. Most informants admitted to using mobile phones almost throughout the day to access WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and

online games. These findings reinforce the study of Sherlyanita & Rakhmawati (2016) which states, that social media has become a communication and entertainment necessity for adolescents. The findings are also consistent with the study of Suriadi & Sriwahyuni (2025), which demonstrates that contemporary adolescents constitute a digital generation that is highly connected to information technology, resulting in many of their social activities taking place through digital media. These findings are further supported by (Lu & Gu, 2025), whose systematic review revealed that digital media has become an integral part of adolescents' lives and influences patterns of social interaction, identity formation, and digital citizenship behavior.

From the perspective of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the high level of social media use indicates that students utilize digital media to fulfill their needs for information, entertainment, social interaction, and self-actualization. However, excessive use may result in negative consequences, such as reduced study time, sleep disturbances, and increased exposure to negative online behaviors. These findings support the results of Fauzan et al (2025), who explain that social media functions not only as a communication tool but also as a new social space that shapes the interaction patterns of younger generations. The findings are also in line with (Kumari et al., 2023), who emphasize that the high use of digital media among adolescents should be balanced with digital citizenship education to enable them to use technology responsibly and ethically.

Forms of Negative Behavior in Social Media Interactions

This study found that negative behaviors on social media manifest in the form of mockery, the use of offensive language, and comments that demean others. Interestingly, some students perceived such actions as jokes and therefore did not recognize the potential harm they could cause. This finding indicates a gap between students' perceptions of digital behavior and the actual impact experienced by others.

The findings are consistent with the study of Anjani (2024), which states that mocking and degrading others through digital media constitutes a form of cyberbullying that is often perceived by perpetrators as a joke. In practice, however, such actions can have real psychological consequences for victims. These findings also support the study of Sorokowski et al (2024), which explains that anonymity in digital spaces tends to make individuals feel freer to express negative comments due to the lack of direct social control. Similarly, Myers et al (2025) found that anonymity is one of the primary factors driving cyberbullying across various social media platforms because perpetrators perceive their identities as protected, thereby reducing the risk of social accountability.

Furthermore, Chan (2025) explains that cyberbullying is no longer viewed merely as an individual behavior but rather as a social phenomenon influenced by digital communication culture, peer group norms, and the characteristics of social

media platforms. Therefore, the negative behaviors identified in this study should be understood as part of the challenges of character education in the digital era, requiring continuous educational and preventive approaches.

From the perspective of Islamic education, such behaviors contradict the principles of *akhlakul karimah*, which emphasize respect for human dignity, careful speech, and the avoidance of actions that may harm others. Rahma et al (2024) affirm that Islamic Religious Education plays an important role in strengthening students' spiritual and moral values, enabling them to face various ethical challenges in the digital era. Therefore, strengthening character education based on Islamic values has become an urgent necessity in response to the rapid development of digital technology.

The Impact of Negative Comments on Students' Social Relationships

The findings reveal that negative comments on social media can lead to feelings of offense, conflicts among friends, and the deterioration of social relationships. These results reinforce the studies of Putra (2024) and Indriyana & Mesra (2025), which found that negative interactions on social media have direct effects on adolescents' emotional well-being and the quality of their social relationships.

During adolescence, peer relationships constitute an essential aspect of identity formation. Therefore, continuous exposure to negative comments may affect students' self-confidence, self-esteem, and even mental health. These findings also support the study of Suhendra & Pratiwi (2024), which emphasizes that social media cannot be separated from real social life because interactions occurring in digital spaces inevitably influence interpersonal relationships within the school environment.

The findings are also consistent with the study of Marengo et al (2024), which demonstrated that exposure to cyberbullying through social media is associated with increased internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety, loneliness, depression, and negative thoughts among adolescents. Furthermore, Giumetti & Kowalski (2022) explain that the effects of cyberbullying are not limited to the short term but can also influence adolescents' psychological well-being and quality of life in the long run. Therefore, negative comments on social media should be regarded as both educational and mental health concerns that require collective attention from schools, families, and society.

The Role of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Instilling *Akhlakul Karimah*

The findings indicate that Islamic Religious Education teachers serve as educators, mentors, role models, and moral supervisors in students' use of social media. The strategies employed include role modeling, providing advice, integrating Islamic values into learning activities, utilizing educational media, and engaging in

personal communication. These findings are consistent with the study of Sutrisno and Wahyudi (2022), which states that Islamic Religious Education teachers function not only as instructors but also as exemplary figures in students' character development.

From the perspective of Social Learning Theory developed by Bandura, students tend to imitate behaviors demonstrated by individuals they consider important in their lives, including teachers. Therefore, teacher role modeling becomes a highly effective strategy for instilling *akhlakul karimah*. These findings are also supported by Murniasih et al (2025), who explain that the integration of digital ethics into Islamic Religious Education learning helps students understand their moral responsibilities in the use of technology and social media.

In addition, teachers integrate the concept of *tabayyun* into classroom learning. These findings support the studies of Fitri et al (2025) and Ahsya et al (2026), which emphasize that the ability to verify information is an essential moral competency in responding to the increasingly complex flow of digital information. The concept of *tabayyun* functions not only to prevent the spread of misinformation but also to cultivate critical, responsible, and wise communication in digital spaces.

Strategies for Fostering Akhlakul Karimah in the Digital Era

This study found that the cultivation of *akhlakul karimah* is carried out not only through lectures but also through more contextual approaches, such as the use of educational videos, exemplary stories, case discussions, and personal communication with students. These findings reinforce the study of Munif (2017), which states that character development requires continuous habituation and the active involvement of learners.

The use of visual media in learning has proven effective in helping students understand moral values more concretely and in ways that are relevant to their daily lives. These findings are also consistent with Choi & Park (2023), who emphasize that effective digital citizenship education should connect moral values with students' real experiences in using digital technology. Therefore, strategies for fostering *akhlakul karimah* need to be adapted to the characteristics of the digital generation so that moral messages can be conveyed more effectively.

Challenges in Fostering Akhlakul Karimah

The findings indicate that the limited ability of teachers to supervise students outside school and the lack of cooperation between schools and parents constitute the main obstacles to fostering students' *akhlakul karimah*. These findings are consistent with the study of Sutrisno et al (2024), which states that monitoring students' digital activities cannot be carried out optimally by schools alone.

Furthermore, Daheri & Warsah (2019) emphasize that character education becomes more effective when there is synergy between families and schools. The findings of this study demonstrate that the success of fostering *akhlakul karimah* in the

digital era depends heavily on collaboration among various stakeholders, particularly teachers and parents. Niu et al (2024) further explain that protecting adolescents from social media risks requires the active involvement of families, schools, and the broader social environment in promoting awareness of digital ethics, privacy, and online safety. Without effective collaboration, character-building efforts undertaken by schools will have limited impact on students' behavior on social media.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that social media use has become an important part of the daily lives of junior high school students. The high intensity of social media use has generated various forms of digital interaction, including anonymous behavior that has the potential to encourage negative comments, mockery, and forms of communication that are inconsistent with ethical values. In addressing this phenomenon, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers play a strategic role in fostering students' *akhlakul karimah* through various approaches, including role modeling, providing advice, integrating Islamic values into learning activities, utilizing relevant instructional media, and maintaining personal communication with students. In addition, this study found that the successful development of students' digital behavior requires synergy between schools and families through continuous cooperation in supervision and guidance.

This study contributes theoretically by enriching the body of knowledge in Islamic Religious Education regarding the implementation of the *tabayyun* principle and the cultivation of *akhlakul karimah* within the context of digital interactions. Practically, the findings may serve as a reference for Islamic Religious Education teachers, school principals, parents, and educational policymakers in designing character-building strategies that are more adaptive to the challenges of the digital era, particularly in addressing students' anonymous behavior on social media. Through appropriate character-development strategies, students are expected to use social media wisely, responsibly, and in accordance with Islamic values.

AI USE DECLARATION

The author declares that Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology was utilized during the preparation of this manuscript solely as an assistive tool for grammar improvement, language editing, and enhancing the readability of the text. All processes related to the conceptualization of the study, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, development of scientific arguments, and drawing of conclusions were conducted entirely by the author. The author assumes full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and scientific integrity of this manuscript.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the Principal of SMP Ma'arif 1 Metro City, the Islamic Religious Education teachers, the students, and all parties who provided permission, support, and participation throughout the research process. The author also extends appreciation to the academic supervisor and all individuals who offered valuable insights, guidance, and academic support, which greatly contributed to the successful completion of this study.

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