

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CRISIS OF ESSENTIALISM IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract. The digital era has brought significant transformation to Islamic Religious Education (PAI), resulting in a crisis of essentialism in which the core values of Islamic teachings—such as tawhid, morality, and worship—are increasingly reduced to symbolic expressions rather than deeply internalised spirituality. This study aims to analyse the crisis of essentialism in PAI and explore strategies for revitalising its essential meaning amid the dominance of digital culture. Using a qualitative library research method, data were collected from books, journal articles, and scientific publications relevant to Islamic education and digital culture. The findings show that digital media has fostered a form of superficial religiosity characterised by performative piety, weak moral reflection, and diminished transcendental awareness. This crisis is mainly caused by the dominance of visual-symbolic culture, low levels of religious digital literacy, limited pedagogical adaptation among PAI teachers, and an unresponsive curriculum to contemporary challenges. To address these issues, the study proposes integrative and transformative strategies, including strengthening religious digital literacy, applying reflective-contextual pedagogy, implementing project-based learning, and redefining the teacher's role as a spiritual mentor. Strengthening a school culture rooted in Islamic spirituality is also crucial to restoring the depth and authenticity of Islamic values.

Keywords: Islamic Religious Education, Crisis of Essentialism, Religious Digital Literacy

Abstrak. Era digital telah membawa transformasi signifikan pada Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI), yang mengakibatkan krisis esensialisme di mana nilai-nilai inti ajaran Islam—seperti tauhid, moralitas, dan ibadah—semakin direduksi menjadi ekspresi simbolis daripada spiritualitas yang diinternalisasi secara mendalam. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis krisis esensialisme dalam PAI dan mengeksplorasi strategi untuk menghidupkan kembali makna esensialnya di tengah dominasi budaya digital. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian pustaka kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dari buku, artikel jurnal, dan publikasi ilmiah yang relevan dengan pendidikan Islam dan budaya digital. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa media digital telah mendorong bentuk religiusitas dangkal yang ditandai dengan kesalahan performatif, refleksi moral yang lemah, dan kesadaran transendental yang berkurang. Krisis ini terutama disebabkan oleh dominasi budaya visual-simbolis, rendahnya tingkat literasi digital keagamaan, adaptasi pedagogis yang terbatas di kalangan guru PAI, dan kurikulum yang tidak responsif terhadap tantangan kontemporer. Untuk mengatasi masalah-masalah ini, penelitian ini mengusulkan strategi integratif dan transformatif, termasuk memperkuat literasi digital keagamaan, menerapkan pedagogi reflektif-kontekstual, mengimplementasikan pembelajaran berbasis proyek, dan mendefinisikan kembali peran guru sebagai pembimbing spiritual. Memperkuat budaya sekolah yang berakar pada spiritualitas Islam juga sangat penting untuk mengembalikan kedalaman dan keaslian nilai-nilai Islam.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Agama Islam, Krisis Esensialisme, Literasi Digital Keagamaan

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INTRODUCTION

The digital era has brought about significant transformations in nearly all aspects of human life, including education and religion (Syamraeni et al., 2024). The rapid advancement of information technology has not only transformed how humans communicate and acquire information but also significantly influenced how they think, behave, and interpret religious teachings (Nurrahma, 2024). In the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE), digitalisation presents serious challenges that are not merely technical or pedagogical but also touch on deeper aspects of the essence and substance of Islamic teachings (Jumaah et al., 2023).

Islamic Religious Education is essentially not merely aimed at transmitting religious knowledge in a textual and normative manner, but also at instilling deep spiritual values, shaping noble character, and fostering students' transcendental awareness of God (Kurdi, 2023). However, in today's reality, which is heavily influenced by digital culture, these essential values have undergone a shift in meaning (Gulo, 2023). Religiosity tends to be reduced to symbolic expressions displayed publicly through social media, while the spiritual substance, such as sincerity, moral awareness, and depth of character, is increasingly marginalised (Zain et al., 2024).

This phenomenon indicates a crisis of essentialism in Islamic Religious Education (IRE), a condition where the core values of Islamic teachings are no longer deeply internalised, but rather packaged in the form of formalities that are easily consumed visually and quickly (Ardilla, 2024). This crisis is exacerbated by low digital religious literacy, weak critical abilities toward digital dakwah content, and Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning patterns that have yet to be responsive to contemporary dynamics (Wilanda et al., 2025). As a result, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) risks losing its relevance and strength as the spiritual and moral foundation for the younger Muslim generation in the digital era (Dalimunthe, 2023).

The crisis of essentialism in Islamic Religious Education not only reduces the meaning of religious teachings but also has broader social and psychological implications (Putri et al., 2024). One of the most evident impacts is the emergence of a generation that appears formally religious but lacks deep internalisation of values, making them susceptible to intolerant attitudes, exclusivism, or even symbolic extremism (Hudi et al., 2024). When religious education loses its reflective and spiritual strength, students tend to view religion as rigid rules devoid of depth, meaning, and empathy (Maesak et al., 2025). This has the potential to create a disorientation of religious identity, where individuals feel religious but lack authentic social and spiritual sensitivity (Mubasiroh, 2024).

This critical situation calls for a comprehensive evaluation of the essentialism paradigm in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and the development of alternative approaches that are more responsive to contemporary demands without sacrificing the fundamental values of Islam (Nugraha et al., 2024). Reformulating Islamic Religious Education (IRE) to be more integrative, contextual, and transformative is crucial to creating a generation of Muslims who not only understand religious doctrines textually but also apply Islamic values in the complexities of modern life (Fatkhurrokhim & Widodo, 2024). Therefore, religious education should focus on developing a dynamic spiritual awareness that is relevant to the context of the times, not merely limited to the performance of formal rituals, but also aimed at shaping individuals who are of strong character, ethical, and possess critical thinking skills to face the complexities of the digital era (Ju'subaidi et al., 2025).

Several previous studies have demonstrated that digitalisation has diverse impacts on religious practices and Islamic education. Syamraeni et al., (2024) emphasise that the digital era has shifted the paradigm of religious learning from a deep, reflective process to rapid, often superficial consumption of information. Gulo (2023) highlights how digital culture shifts the meaning of religiosity toward symbolic displays in the public sphere, while spiritual values such as sincerity and moral character are increasingly marginalised. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, Jumaah et al., (2023) and Zain et al., (2024) found that the learning process emphasises the cognitive aspect rather than the development of students' transcendental awareness. Furthermore, Kurdi (2023) states that many Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers are not yet prepared, methodologically and technologically, to adapt the teaching of core Islamic values to digital formats.

Although previous studies have examined the impact of digitalisation on religious practices and Islamic education, the discussion remains largely general and fragmented, particularly in relation to the formal context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) as an institutionalised pedagogical system. Research by Syamraeni et al., (2024) and Gulo (2023), for instance, explores broader transformations in religiosity in the digital era, highlighting shifts toward symbolic and mediated forms of religious expression. However, these studies do not sufficiently analyse how such transformations structurally affect the internalisation of Islamic core values within classroom-based religious learning. Similarly, Jumaah et al., (2023) and Zain et al., (2024) identify a dominant cognitive orientation in IRE instruction, yet their analyses stop short of examining how digital environments reshape the epistemological foundation of IRE—particularly the balance between knowledge transmission and spiritual formation. While Kurdi (2023) addresses the issue of teacher readiness, the discussion is

primarily confined to technical and methodological preparedness, without situating it within a broader crisis over the reduction of essential Islamic values to formalistic and symbolic practices.

Therefore, there remains a significant conceptual gap in understanding how digital culture systematically affects the meaning, transmission, and spiritual internalisation of tawhid, morality, and worship within formal IRE instruction. Existing studies tend to discuss digital religion or pedagogical challenges separately, without framing the phenomenon as a structural crisis of essentialism in Islamic Religious Education. This study addresses that gap by situating the discussion explicitly within the institutional and pedagogical context of IRE. It conceptualises the current condition as a crisis of essentialism—an epistemological and spiritual shift in which the core values of Islamic teachings risk being detached from their transformative function in education. By critically analysing the interaction between digital culture and IRE learning structures, this research offers a more focused and theoretically grounded framework for revitalising the essential and spiritual dimensions of Islamic Religious Education in the digital era.

This study aims to analyse the crisis of essentialism in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in the digital era, focusing on how digital culture is shaping the meanings of the core values of Islamic teachings. Additionally, the study identifies the factors that lead to the reduction of religious teachings to symbols and formalities. Furthermore, this research examines learning strategies that can preserve spiritual depth and essential meaning in IRE, ensuring its relevance and contextual relevance amid technological developments. Thus, this study aims to fill the existing gap by examining the shifting meanings of Islamic teachings in the context of digital culture and by offering a contextual, integrative, and transformative learning approach tailored to the challenges of the digital era.

METHOD

This study employs a library research method that systematically utilises written sources as primary data, including books, peer-reviewed journals, scientific articles, and other relevant academic publications (Amruddin et al., 2022). Library research is intended to collect, review, and synthesise information derived from authoritative written sources in order to support the development of scientific arguments. The data sources in this study were obtained from literature that is closely related to the research topic, particularly books and academic journal articles. These sources were carefully selected for their relevance and credibility to ensure the validity and reliability of the research data.

The collected data were then analysed using a descriptive qualitative approach employing content analysis. This analytical method involved a systematic process of identifying, categorising, and interpreting key themes, concepts, and patterns contained in the selected literature. The results of the analysis are presented as descriptive narratives that reflect both conceptual findings and behavioural implications documented in previous empirical studies. Through this approach, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the research focus based on a critical synthesis of existing literature (Nurrisa, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Changes in the Meaning of the Core Values of Islamic Teachings Due to the Influence of Digital Culture

Digital culture has brought significant implications to the way Muslims, especially the younger generation, understand and interpret the core values of Islamic teachings. In Islamic Religious Education (IRE), essential values such as tawhid, morals, and worship undergo transformations in meaning that are not always consistent with their original substance. These changes take place not only in the form of religious expressions, but also touch the aspects of spiritual awareness and internalisation of values in daily religious practices (Mustofa et al., 2024).

The Meaning of Tawhid that Shifts from Transcendental Consciousness to Symbolic Representation

The concept of monotheism in Islam is the main principle that underlies a Muslim's beliefs and orientation in life. In the digital world, the meaning of tawhid is often reduced to a popular slogan easily consumed by the public, for example, through short quotes or online da'wah stickers that go viral on social media. In fact, in the context of education, tawhid should be taught as a transcendental awareness of God's oneness that underlies all aspects of human life (Luthfia, 2024).

This phenomenon is evident in the number of students who can recite the phrase tawhid or share tawhid-themed content, yet do not exhibit life behaviours that reflect a complete spiritual connection with God. Tawhid becomes a symbolic identity rather than a driver of moral attitudes and decisions. This shows the emptiness of the epistemological and affective dimensions in the tawhid learning process, which should foster divine and socially responsible awareness of life (Rabiu et al., 2024).

The Changing Understanding of Morals Trapped between Moral Rhetoric and Digital Practice

Morals as a reflection of faith should be a pillar in the formation of students' character. However, in practice, morals in the digital era are often little more than normative discourse, less internalised. Learners can easily quote verses and hadiths about noble morals, but in practice on social media, they show contradictory behaviour, such as cyberbullying, hate speech, and intolerance of differences (Kusumawati, 2021).

This condition is exacerbated by low levels of digital ethics literacy and the lack of reflective learning spaces that invite students to link moral teachings to concrete behaviour in cyberspace. Indoctrinative, non-dialogical learning leads students to see morality only as an external obligation rather than as an inner awareness that shapes empathy and manners. Morals lose their function as a bridge between faith and charity in modern life (Harteis et al., 2020).

Shifting Worship Orientation from Spiritual Experience to Performative Behaviour on Social Media

Worship in Islam aims to get closer to Allah sincerely and deeply. However, in digital culture, worship is often treated as content or identity symbols displayed in public space. Many learners publicise worship activities, such as prayer, recitation, or almsgiving, on social media without deep spiritual awareness. This creates what is called performative ritual, which is worship performed for social existence, not inner devotion (Wulandari, 2024).

This phenomenon indicates a shift in the meaning of worship in the digital era (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020). Based on the study by Grigore & Cobzeanu (2025), the spiritual and transcendental dimensions of worship are increasingly being transformed into visual activities openly displayed for public consumption. Worship practices are no longer understood solely as a profound act of servitude to Allah, but also as expressions of religious identity performed in digital spaces and evaluated through social responses such as the number of "likes," comments, and levels of user engagement (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025).

In the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE), these findings suggest that the understanding of worship tends to emphasise procedural aspects and the correctness of ritual movements, while reflective dimensions and spiritual internalisation receive less balanced attention. Digital culture does not merely function as a medium for disseminating religious teachings; it also shapes how students interpret and experience religious practices. Consequently, worship risks losing meaning, from a means of cultivating spiritual awareness to a performative symbol of religiosity in digital environments (Liu et al., 2025). Thus, digital

culture not only offers new media for the delivery of religious teachings but also actively reconstructs the way students perceive Islam. This requires PAI to respond critically through a pedagogical approach that instills the depth of meaning of Islam's core values and revives spiritual awareness within an authentic, contextual Islamic frame (Memon et al., 2021).

Factors Causing the Crisis of Essentialism in Islamic Education

The crisis of essentialism in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is a multidimensional phenomenon triggered by various structural, cultural, pedagogical, and sociological factors. The shift in the meaning of core values in Islamic teachings is not solely due to technological developments, but is also influenced by the way Islamic education responds to the digital era disproportionately (Akhyar et al., 2025). For this reason, this discussion categorises the factors causing the crisis of essentialism into the following main aspects:

Visual The Symbolic and Visual Dominance of Digital Culture

Today's digital culture is heavily dominated by communication based on visual and symbolic elements, such as memes, short videos, infographics, and other multimedia content designed to grab attention in a very short time. This pattern of communication is effective in conveying messages quickly and is easily accessible to a wide range of people. As explained by Sumiati & Nawawi (2024), digital preaching tends to prioritize visual appeal and emotional responses from the audience (Sumiati & Nawawi, 2024). However, as Raya (2025) explains, this concise, instant communication pattern can oversimplify and even truncate complex messages, including religious values that possess theological depth and essential dimensions. In practice, verses of the Qur'an and hadith are often presented in short, appealing quotations that easily go viral on social media; however, they are frequently detached from comprehensive interpretive contexts and in-depth explanations that form the foundation of sound and responsible understanding (Raya, 2025).

As a result, students and the broader public have become increasingly accustomed to instant and superficial patterns of religious understanding that prioritise emotional effects and visual aesthetics over deep intellectual and spiritual reflection. This condition reinforces the tendency toward superficial religiosity—a form of religiosity that functions merely as a marker of social identity or “religious fashion,” easily displayed for social existence and image-building in digital public spaces, without genuine internalisation of spiritual values. Hasan (2022) refers to this phenomenon as performative piety on social media, where religious expression is directed more toward visibility than inner transformation (Hasan, 2022).

Furthermore, Bingaman (2023) argues that the dominance of this symbolic digital culture creates wide opportunities for overly simplified religious interpretations that are vulnerable to politicisation or exploitation by particular groups. When the substantive meaning of religious teachings becomes blurred and reduced to easily consumable formal symbols, the risk of distortion and manipulation of religious narratives increases significantly.

Low Religious Digital Literacy

Various research findings indicate that low levels of religious digital literacy constitute a significant factor reinforcing the crisis of essentialism in Islamic Religious Education (IRE). Religious digital literacy is not merely the technical ability to operate digital devices, but also the capacity to think critically in filtering, analysing, and evaluating religious content circulating in cyberspace. As explained by Sanityastuti et al. (2024), the ease of access to social media has created space for anyone to become both a producer and distributor of religious discourse, making the authenticity and validity of religious sources a highly crucial issue (Sanityastuti et al., 2024). Tkáčová & Slivka (2023) further emphasise that low levels of digital literacy among students make them vulnerable to religious hoaxes, extreme textual interpretations, and ideological narratives that narrow the meaning of Islam. This vulnerability is exacerbated by social media algorithms that create an echo chamber, a digital environment that reinforces similar viewpoints while limiting exposure to moderate and inclusive perspectives. As a consequence, religious understanding becomes fragmented, reducing Islam's universal values as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* and potentially contributing to social polarisation within society.

In this context, the study asserts that strengthening religious digital literacy is an urgent necessity in Islamic Religious Education. Such literacy should be positioned not merely as a technological skill, but as a foundation for developing students' critical and spiritual awareness, enabling them to become responsible consumers and producers of religious information. Oreqat & Alqaraleh (2022) argue that enhancing digital literacy can serve as a strategic approach to building the intellectual and spiritual resilience of younger generations amid the massive and often contradictory flow of information. Therefore, low religious digital literacy is not simply a matter of technological competence, but a structural vulnerability that directly affects the shifting meaning and internalisation of Islam's essential values in the digital sphere.

Limitations of IRE Teachers' Competence in Pedagogical Adaptation

The limited pedagogical competence of Islamic Religious Education teachers in adapting to technological developments constitutes a significant factor that exacerbates the crisis of essentialism in Islamic Religious Education. In the digital era, Islamic Religious Education teachers face complex challenges, as they are required not only to master religious knowledge in depth but also to keep pace with technological advancements and apply relevant contemporary pedagogical approaches. However, in practice, many IRE teachers have not received adequate training and professional development to effectively integrate digital technology into the learning process. As explained by Putra et al., (2024), learning practices that are not optimally integrated with technology tend to remain conventional, relying on monotonous lectures with minimal interaction and limited encouragement of students' critical reflection. These findings reinforce the argument that teachers' pedagogical unpreparedness directly affects the relevance of IRE materials to students' digital realities. Consequently, religious content often appears rigid, normative, and insufficiently contextual within a dynamic and complex digital culture (Putra et al., 2024).

In fact, the use of interactive media—such as instructional videos, educational applications, and online discussion forums—holds significant potential to enrich students' understanding of Islam's essential values while fostering critical thinking and spiritual depth. Barati & Hosseinzadeh (2025) emphasise that teachers who lack digital and pedagogical competence struggle to respond to students' moral and psychological challenges arising from exposure to unrestricted digital content, including hoaxes, provocations, and consumerist behavioural patterns. In this regard, limited digital competence is not merely a technical issue but a strategic concern that may weaken the role of religious education as a medium for character formation grounded in Islamic values (Barati & Hosseinzadeh, 2025).

Therefore, strengthening the capacity of IRE teachers in educational technology, critical pedagogy, and understanding socio-religious dynamics in digital spaces has become an urgent necessity. Munianti (2022) argues that continuous training programs and professional mentoring can facilitate the transformation of teachers' roles into innovative, reflective, and responsive learning facilitators. Through such transformation, IRE teachers can play a strategic role not only in transmitting religious knowledge theoretically, but also in guiding students to internalise and actualise Islamic values contextually within their digital lives (Munianti, 2022).

Curriculum Unresponsive to Digital Challenges

The current Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum tends to emphasise the memorisation of classical texts and the mastery of cognitive aspects alone, without providing proportional attention to the development of the affective dimension—encompassing attitudes and value internalisation—as well as the psychomotor dimension, which relates to behaviour and the practical implementation of values in daily life. This overly textual orientation becomes increasingly problematic in a complex digital society, where students face dynamic, often ambiguous ethical, social, and informational challenges. In such a context, religious learning is no longer sufficient if it merely stresses normative understanding; it must also cultivate reflective awareness and moral responsibility in digital spaces (Moslimany et al., 2024). A relevant model of religious education should integrate digital ethics, including responsible use of social media, adherence to ethical communication in cyberspace, and the ability to critically and wisely filter and respond to information, including hoaxes. Rozak et al., (2025) argue that integrating digital literacy and ethics into the IRE curriculum is an urgent necessity to ensure that Islamic values remain contextual and connected to students' digital realities. However, a rigid curriculum that focuses primarily on textual conceptual mastery tends to limit opportunities for critical reflection and hinder the contextual internalisation of values (Rozak et al., 2025).

Ma'arif et al., (2023) explain that an insufficiently responsive normative approach may weaken the transformative power of Islamic education, particularly in addressing digital polarisation and social media-based radicalism. Therefore, the issue of curriculum is not merely technical or administrative, but also concerns the epistemological orientation of IRE, which has not yet fully integrated the contextual, reflective, and social-praxis dimensions. Ideally, the IRE curriculum should be adaptive and responsive to contemporary developments (Ma'arif et al., 2023). Raisha and Salsabila (2025) maintain that digital transformation in Islamic education demands a more integrative and contextual curriculum reform so that religious teachings function as relevant life guidance rather than as purely normative theories detached from students' lived realities (Raisha & Salsabila, 2025). Similarly, Shobirin et al., (2025) emphasise that integrating pedagogical innovation and technology into Islamic education can strengthen character formation while enhancing young generations' readiness to face modern challenges (Shobirin et al., 2025).

Absence of Critical Evaluation of Religious Change

The absence of systematic critical evaluation within Islamic educational institutions is one of the fundamental factors that cause shifts in the substance of religious teachings, particularly in Islamic Religious Education, to go undetected and inadequately addressed. The crisis of essentialism, reflected in the reduction of spiritual understanding and the increasing prevalence of formalistic ritual practices devoid of depth of meaning, is often perceived merely as a technical issue, such as adaptation to technology or changes in teaching methods. In fact, as explained by Aflah et al., (2025), the problem of digitalisation in Islamic education is often understood solely within the framework of technological adoption, without addressing the epistemological and substantive dimensions of the teachings that should form the primary foundation of religious education. Thus, the absence of systematic critical evaluation leads the crisis of essentialism in IRE to be misinterpreted as merely a technical matter, whereas it actually concerns a shift in the substance and epistemological foundation of Islamic teachings themselves (Aflah et al., 2025).

In reality, this issue represents a more fundamental epistemological challenge. Reflective inquiry and comprehensive analysis are required to ensure that the substance of Islamic teachings remains authentic, relevant, and transformative in shaping students' character. Continuous critical evaluation functions not only as an early detection mechanism against the narrowing of meaning or potential deviations in the learning process, but also as a driver of innovation in curriculum design, methodological development, and pedagogical strategies that are adaptive to social change. Sulaiman et al., (2023) emphasise that a critical pedagogical approach in Islamic education opens space for reflection on existing learning practices while strengthening the integration between normative values, social context, and students' consciousness (Sulaiman et al., 2023). Through systematic and reflective evaluation, religious education gains the capacity to respond to contemporary dynamics without sacrificing its essential core values. In this way, students are shaped not merely as individuals who are ritually compliant, but as spiritually and intellectually mature persons capable of navigating the complexities of the modern world. Jarmer (2024) underscores that strengthening the dimension of critical thinking in religious education is a crucial prerequisite for ensuring that religious teachings remain meaningful and relevant amid rapid social change. Therefore, reinforcing critical evaluation must be positioned as an integral part of the religious education system, so that any potential shifts in meaning can be managed proportionally and the spiritual function of Islamic education remains safeguarded in the digital era (Jarmer, 2024).

Learning Strategies for Maintaining Spiritual Depth and Essential Meaning in Islamic Religious Education

Integration of Religious Digital Literacy in the Curriculum

Religious digital literacy is the ability to understand, analyse, and critically respond to religious information circulating in the digital space, including recognising religious authorities, assessing the validity of sources, and distinguishing between personal opinions and normative religious teachings (Mahmud & Sakinah, 2024). The integration of this literacy into the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum is increasingly urgent, as students in the digital era access religious knowledge primarily through social media such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and similar platforms rather than through textbooks or traditional teacher-led instruction. In this context, without adequate digital literacy, students are very vulnerable to the spread of extreme, shallow, ideologically biased, and even misleading religious views (Mukhibat et al., 2024).

Therefore, IRE teachers are required not only to be material deliverers but also to facilitate the development of religious critical thinking skills in the digital era. Learning strategies should include analytical activities such as evaluating digital da'wah content, crucial reading of religious symbolic messages, and reflective discussions on ideological narratives that infiltrate religious packaging. For example, students can be invited to examine the difference between moral-based da'wah and those laden with hateful rhetoric, or identify specific framings in popular lectures. Thus, students not only act as passive consumers of religious information, but also become active subjects who can filter, assess, and internalise authentic and contextual Islamic values consciously and critically (Jenuri et al., 2025).

Strengthening Reflective and Contextual Approaches

Religious learning should not be disconnected from learners' lived realities, including their experiences in the digital world, which is the daily space for social interaction and the expression of identity. In this context, the reflective approach is highly relevant because it allows learners to explore the meaning of religious teachings through direct involvement in their life experiences, both emotionally, socially, and spiritually. This approach positions learners as active subjects in the learning process, rather than passive recipients of teaching materials. Reflection includes not only personal contemplation, but also critical discussion and open dialogue to connect Islamic values with contemporary challenges (Suwarsih et al., 2025).

For example, students can be invited to reflect on the meaning of sincerity in carrying out worship amid a digital culture full of imaging and social validation through likes and followers, or discuss how patience and empathy can be a solution in dealing with provocations, hate speech, and identity conflicts on social media (Adiyono et al., 2024). Furthermore, social phenomena such as digital bullying (cyberbullying), cancel culture, and online group fanaticism need to be used as reflective material to instil Islamic moral values such as compassion, dialogue manners, and respect for differences. By making the digital context a space for spiritual learning, students are invited to see religion not as a rigid doctrine that is far from life, but as a source of values that are alive, relevant, and able to guide them in facing the complexities of the modern world in a meaningful and authentic way (Koseda, 2025).

Implementation of Value-Based and Project-Based Islamic Learning

The implementation of value-based and project-based learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) aims to strengthen the internalisation of values through contextual, participatory, and transformative learning experiences. This approach positions students as active subjects who not only understand Islamic values at a conceptual level but also actualise them in concrete actions that generate social impact. Thus, the learning process moves beyond normative mastery toward the formation of reflective character and moral awareness within the dynamics of digital life (Gustina et al., 2025). This strategy can be implemented through various contextual projects in the digital era, such as social media campaigns promoting Islamic ethics—honesty, compassion, and justice—the production of creative da'wah content responsive to contemporary social issues, and anti-hoax literacy movements as expressions of moral responsibility in cyberspace. Themes such as empathy toward persons with disabilities and ecological responsibility can also be integrated as forms of Islamic value actualisation in social praxis. Santi & Rahayu (2025) affirm that project-based learning effectively connects normative values with students' social experiences, ensuring that religious values are not merely abstract principles but are embodied in daily practice (Santi & Rahayu, 2025).

In addition, digital charity initiatives independently managed by students represent a concrete integration of social and spiritual values within digital spaces. This model not only fosters empathy and compassion but also cultivates collaboration, leadership, and social responsibility. Yunus & Syahid (2024) argue that integrating digital activities into Islamic instructional design can simultaneously strengthen cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions (Yunus & Syahid, 2024). Furthermore, IRE teachers may design analytical assignments, such as critical evaluations of social media da'wah content, assessments of the

authenticity of religious messages, and analyses of viral religious phenomena from an Islamic values perspective. Moslimany et al., (2024) emphasise that contextual religious learning must create space for critical reflection on socio-digital realities so that students do not become passive consumers of religious information (Moslimany et al., 2024).

Through value-based and project-based learning strategies, students not only gain normative understanding of Islamic teachings but also develop integrated digital and moral literacy. Hyangsewu et al., (2024) explain that strengthening digital literacy within religious education contributes to the formation of adaptive, critical, and responsible religious character in the modern era. Therefore, digital space should not be viewed merely as a challenge, but as an educational arena that supports the holistic and transformative development of faith, character, and social awareness among students (Hyangsewu et al., 2024).

Transformation of the Teacher's Role as Spiritual Mentor

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers play a central role as guardians of meaning in the process of religious learning, especially in the digital era characterised by information flows and value challenges. It is not enough to master the material content; teachers are now required to become spiritual mentors who can inspire, foster sensitivity to religious values, and assist students in their search for authentic and contextual religious meaning. Teachers must be able to read the dynamics of digital culture that influence how students think and behave, while recognising various spiritual challenges such as identity fragmentation, digital extremism, and the spread of superficial understanding that is readily accessible in cyberspace (Taufik & Rusdi, 2024). Thus, teachers serve as moral role models who not only teach but also exemplify Islamic values in their daily lives. Therefore, enhancing teacher competence has become an urgent necessity. This includes mastering educational technology to optimise digital learning, developing critical pedagogy that fosters reflection and dialogue, and gaining a deep understanding of the continually evolving digital socio-religious trends. This transformation of roles is expected to position Islamic Education (IRE) teachers as agents of change, capable of guiding students through the complexities of the digital era with strong faith and noble character (Rochim & Khayati, 2023).

Strengthening a School Culture Rooted in Islamic Spirituality

A conducive and supportive learning environment plays a crucial role in the success of value-based education, especially in Islamic Religious Education (IRE). A school culture rooted in Islamic spirituality is not merely reflected in physical attributes such as uniforms or

religious posters, but, more importantly, in the genuine practice of Islamic values consistently applied in daily interactions between teachers and students. This includes establishing respectful and compassionate communication, resolving conflicts based on the principles of deliberation (*musyawarah*) and justice, and the exemplary behaviour of teachers and educators in consistently and sustainably demonstrating noble character (Izzah & Layyinnati, 2025). The strengthening of a spiritual culture can be realised through structured programs such as ongoing spiritual mentoring, inspirational classes featuring religious figures and practitioners relevant to youth, and school-based social and digital charity activities that integrate the values of solidarity and social concern (Djuaini, 2025). When the overall school atmosphere reflects vibrant and meaningful Islamic values, students will find it easier to understand, internalise, and live out religious teachings deeply and practically in their daily lives. Thus, a school culture infused with Islamic spirituality serves as a learning ecosystem that not only transmits knowledge but also holistically shapes students' character and faith (Rahayu et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the crisis of essentialism in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in the digital era is not merely a pedagogical issue, but a deeper epistemological and spiritual challenge. The dominance of digital culture in symbolic and visual communication has altered the way Islamic core values—such as *tawhid*, morality, and worship—are understood, transforming them from sources of transcendental awareness into performative expressions of religious identity. Consequently, Islamic Religious Education has tended to emphasise formality rather than internalised spirituality.

Addressing this crisis requires a paradigm shift from a formalistic, transmissive model to a contextual, reflective, and transformative framework. Integrating digital religious literacy, reflective-contextual pedagogy, project-based learning, and redefining teachers as spiritual mentors are essential to restoring the depth and authenticity of Islamic values in education. Furthermore, building a school culture rooted in Islamic spirituality can provide a sustainable foundation for nurturing students' moral and spiritual resilience. Future research should further explore empirical models for implementing reflective, project-based Islamic learning in digital environments, as well as for developing teacher-training frameworks that combine pedagogical innovation with spiritual mentorship. Additionally, comparative studies across different educational levels and cultural contexts can enrich the theoretical understanding of essentialism and its practical transformation within Islamic Religious Education.

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