THE ROLE OF VIRTUAL FIGURES IN FORMING STUDENTS MORALS: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY AT MTsN 2 MOJOKERTO

Ana Rohilah Ila Maghfirotillah, Ainul Yaqin, Justsinta Sindi Alivi

Islamic Religious Education, Majapahit Islamic University, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores examples of moral role models experienced by students at MTsN 2 Mojokerto in the current digital era. The moral role models in question refer to the influence of public figures' behavior on social media on students' character. The method used was a qualitative approach with phenomenology. The research subjects consisted of 15 students and two Akidah Akhlak teachers, selected through purposive sampling. Students were chosen as informants because they frequently use social media, which allows them to follow public figures and are able to convey their views and experiences well verbally. Akidah Akhlak teachers were chosen because they play a direct role in shaping character and instilling moral values in the madrasah environment. The results of the study show that moral development occurs through three stages: accessing digital content, absorbing moral messages, and imitating attitudes. Students view virtual figures as modern role models, while teachers function as guides through positive content recommendations, class discussions, and limiting cell phone use. Social media has varying impacts on students' morals, depending on how well they imitate and understand. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the phenomenon of virtual role models in madrasah environments, as well as its analysis of the relationship between the influence of digital role models and the educational methods teachers employ in shaping Islamic morals in the age of social media. This research contributes to designing moral education strategies in the digital era that are relevant and appropriate to the challenges students face.

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Corresponding Author:

Ana Rohilah Ila Maghfiotillah Islamic Religious Education, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Majapahit Islamic University, Mojokerto, Indonesia Email: ar.ilamaghfirotillah@unim.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Developments in information and communication technology have impacted many aspects of life, including education. Education is an effort to help individuals optimize their abilities through structured learning activities in schools (Hidayat et al., 2023). The presence of social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp has created a new place where students not only interact directly in the real world, but also connect with the virtual world filled with various public figures (Khaira et al., 2024). Through this platform, students have easy access to information, entertainment, and inspiration, but it also opens up a great possibility for the influence of various values, attitudes, and behaviors - both those that are in line with and those that conflict with moral values and religious teachings (Yulianti & Agustang, 2022).

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This has given rise to a new type of role model known as virtual role models. Virtual role models consist of figures who appear on social media and serve as role models for students, whether because of their fame, lifestyle, character, or the messages they convey. They can be celebrities, influencers, content creators, or even digital preachers who provide religious instruction and educational content. The process of emulating these virtual figures involves observing, imitating behavior, and internalizing the values they demonstrate, thus shaping students' thinking and character (Kasno & Harianto, 2019).

This phenomenon can be analyzed using Albert Bandura's social learning theory, which states that humans learn through observing and imitating models that are considered relevant or interesting (Yaqin, 2019). Based on this theory, behavioral imitation is influenced by social reinforcement factors received by the model, such as praise, attention, or level of popularity. In the context of virtual figures, students are more likely to imitate the behavior of figures they idolize on social media, especially if the behavior is widely recognized by other users.

In addition, Ibn Miskawaih's theory of moral education provides the basis that morality is not something innate, but can be formed through habits, education and the environment (Yaqin, 2021). Ibn Miskawaih emphasized the importance of continuous training to instill moral values so that good character can be ingrained in individuals. This theory is particularly relevant in the context of virtual figures, as it asserts that the formation of morals through social media requires guidance and direction to ensure that behavior is modeled in accordance with Islamic values. In other words, virtual figures can be a tool for developing positive morals if students are guided to emulate good values and avoid actions that conflict with religious teachings.

Various previous studies have emphasized the impact of social media on student behavior, both positive and negative (Aziz & Makhsin, 2021), and its application in the teaching and learning process (Wahyuni, 2019). However, most research only describes the influence of social media in general terms without detailing how the process of moral formation through virtual figures occurs. Studies analyzing the educational role of teachers in guiding this process in madrasas are also very limited. Yet, combining these two aspects is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of moral formation in the digital age.

MTsN 2 Mojokerto is a concrete example of this challenge. Initial observations show that students use social media for a variety of purposes, from studying and entertainment to following popular trends (Syah & Kosasih, 2021). They often imitate the language, dress, or behavior of virtual characters, whether they align with Islamic values or contradict them. In situations like this, the role of teachers is crucial. Teachers are not only responsible for imparting knowledge but also serve as moral guides, helping students choose the right role models amidst the abundance of information available (Widodo, 2018).

With this background in mind, this study aims to explore students' experiences in imitating virtual characters, identify the moral formation process that occurs in digital interactions, and analyze teachers' strategies and efforts in guiding this process. By combining Bandura's social learning theory and Ibn Miskawaih's moral education, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of virtual characters in students' moral formation, as well as how teachers can maximize the positive benefits of social media while minimizing its negative influences. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of moral education strategies that are appropriate to the challenges and opportunities of the digital era.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research method uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological type, which aims to explore students' personal experiences in imitating the moral behavior of virtual figures on social media platforms (Yusanto, 2020). This method was chosen because it is relevant to uncovering the deeper meaning of students' interactions with digital role models, as well as the role of educators in developing morals in the digital age. This research was conducted at MTsN 2 Mojokerto, an A-accredited state madrasah committed to strengthening character education based on Islamic values. The researcher participated directly as the primary instrument, conducting interviews with 15 students and two purposively selected Akidah Akhlak teachers.

The data collection technique applied was a semi-structured interview, which aimed to explore students' understanding of the virtual role models they follow on social media (Lexy, 2020). Data analysis was carried out through the steps of data reduction, data presentation, and data extraction/verification in accordance with the phenomenological method (Ajif, 2013). To ensure data accuracy, source triangulation and member checking techniques were applied. The hope is that this method will provide a comprehensive understanding of the process of forming students' morals in cyberspace and the educational strategies adopted by teachers in facing this challenge.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Process of Forming Students Morals

The process of character formation in students at MTsN 2 Mojokerto in the digital era demonstrates that advances in information technology, particularly social media, have transformed the way character formation previously depended on physical environments, such as family and school. Currently, students also receive moral role models from the virtual world. This indicates the emergence of a new phenomenon that can be called virtual moral role models, namely the process of imitating and internalizing moral values they acquire from digital figures they encounter on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram (Fauzi, 2025). This research reveals that students' morals are formed not only from the influence of teachers or parents, but also from the digital content they consume regularly (Ernawati, Hasan, 2023).

The process of moral formation begins with observing figures they consider role models on social media. Students actively follow the accounts of figures they admire. These figures aren't always religious teachers (ustadz), but can also be influencers who provide educational, inspirational, or entertaining content that still contains moral values. For example, students cited Jerome Polin as an example because of his intelligence, polite manner of speaking, and enthusiasm for learning. Furthermore, some students are inspired by public figures who demonstrate social activities such as giving alms or helping others. From this, students begin to develop empathy and concern for their surroundings.

After the observation phase, students move on to the imitation phase, which involves copying the behavior or lifestyle of the figures they follow. Interviews revealed that a number of students began adopting the ways they dress, speak, and socialize on social media. This imitation doesn't always have negative consequences. Most students even emulate positive behaviors, such as speaking politely, respecting others, or even spreading moral messages through their posts (Elma Rahma, Bambang Trisno, 2023). This imitation process is in line with Albert Bandura's social learning theory, which states that humans learn through observing and imitating influential social models (Yaqin, 2019). According to Bandura, a person tends to imitate the behavior of someone they admire, especially if that behavior receives social reinforcement such as praise or popularity.

The next stage is understanding values, when students begin to recognize the meaning of the behavior they imitate. This process demonstrates cognitive development, as students no longer simply imitate mechanically but begin to understand that certain actions have important moral value. For example, several students stated that they are now more careful when commenting on social media because they realize that every word can hurt others. This indicates that students are beginning to apply values such as courtesy, responsibility, and empathy in their interactions in the digital world. Students are also increasingly aware of the importance of maintaining ethics in public virtual spaces and are slowly forming habits of being wise social media users. The process of moral formation that occurs through understanding messages on social media shows that social media functions not only as a means of entertainment but also as a tool for moral learning for students. Students' active involvement in interacting with role models who provide guidance on etiquette and ethics in commenting creates opportunities for them to better understand moral values (Ghulam, 2022). These interactions allow students to observe and emulate positive behavior, encouraging them to practice polite behavior in their daily digital communications. In this way, social media can be an effective tool for character building if used wisely and accompanied by appropriate guidance from teachers and the school community (Fazil & Arifin, 2019).

After understanding these values, students begin to enter the internalization stage, where moral values become part of their personality and are applied in their daily lives, both at school and at home. For example, students who were initially impressed by content depicting social activities later felt moved to participate in humanitarian activities at school. This internalization process indicates that examples from the virtual world are not only limited to cognitive understanding but also permeate students' attitudes and real-life actions. This phenomenon demonstrates that moral development occurs not only through formal classroom learning but also through interaction and reflection on the digital content they see every day. This rethinking process is part of the internalization of values, which is crucial in shaping students' character so that they can behave in accordance with social and religious norms.

This study focuses on the reflective thinking of students at MTsN 2 Mojokerto in contemplating or rethinking the content they receive, particularly from social media, as part of character building. This reflection process is crucial because it involves not only passively receiving information but also processing and integrating the moral values contained within the content.

Reflecting on the content they receive allows students to connect the moral values they learn with everyday experiences and actions. This aligns with the concept of experiential learning, where moral teaching becomes more meaningful when students can see, hear, and experience examples of good and bad morals directly through interactive learning media, such as videos about praiseworthy and despicable morals (Fauzi, 2025). In this way, the process of reflection helps students absorb values such as integrity, patience, and mutual assistance, as well as recognize negative behaviors such as lying and arrogance that need to be avoided.

Students are influenced by the public figures they follow on social media platforms. The examples these figures set, both in their actions and behavior, serve as guidelines for students in building their character. This

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study revealed that students who follow content from individuals with good reputations tend to emulate positive behavior. While there is a lot of positive content, students are also exposed to negative information that can impact their morale. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers and parents to provide guidance in selecting appropriate content and to educate students to be more critical when processing the information they receive.

What's interesting about this study is the emergence of critical awareness among some students. They began to filter and select digital content that aligns with Islamic values. Students demonstrated maturity by refusing to view content containing violence, hate speech, or inappropriate lifestyles. This awareness emerged from a process of reflection after observing various types of content on social media. Some students even took active steps by unfollowing accounts deemed morally damaging. This demonstrates that in the process of moral formation, students have the ability to judge what is good and what is not, provided they are supported by the right education.

Support from the school environment also plays an important role in strengthening the process of forming these morals (Shalma, 2023). Habitual programs such as congregational prayer and morning Quran recitation significantly support strengthening the moral values students acquire from the digital world. Teachers at MTsN 2 Mojokerto also provide opportunities for students to discuss the social media content they watch and guide them to become more than passive viewers, but also active participants in spreading goodness. In this case, the process of moral formation does not occur in isolation, but rather through a collaboration between students' digital experiences and the values taught at school.

Other findings suggest that the role models provided by virtual figures can complement the real-life role models provided by teachers and parents. In some situations, students who lack strong role models at home find inspiration from the figures they follow online. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Islamic educational institutions to utilize digital platforms as innovative and contextually relevant moral education tools. Teachers and schools are expected to engage with students' digital worlds to provide balanced guidance and influence.

Overall, the process of developing students' morals through role models from the virtual world at MTsN 2 Mojokerto occurs through five main steps: observation, imitation, understanding values, internalization, and critical awareness. This process is influenced by how often students interact with social media, the character of the figures they idolize, and their ability to analyze and reflect on the values they receive. Students who have access to positive content and receive good guidance from teachers and parents tend to develop good morals in accordance with Islamic teachings. On the other hand, students who are exposed to negative content without guidance can experience value confusion or even moral decline. Therefore, the role of guidance is crucial to ensure that the development of virtual morals not only shapes good behavior in the virtual world but also forms Islamic character in real life (Fazil & Arifin, 2019).

3.2 Teachers Educational Actions in the Formation of Students Morals

The role of teachers is very important in directing and guiding students to choose and follow educational content on social media. (Ulfa, 2019). They can recommend trusted accounts or channels, create their own learning videos, and monitor student activity on social platforms (Izza, 2021). Research has revealed that teachers serve not only as instructors in the classroom but also as mentors and sources of moral guidance, contributing to the formation of student behavior, both directly and indirectly. One key approach teachers employ is directing students to follow and emulate educational content on social media. Teachers recognize the significant influence the digital world has on student behavior, and therefore feel the need to engage with it to instill positive moral values.

Teachers at MTsN 2 Mojokerto actively guide students in accessing educational content on social media. Through guidance and advice, teachers help students select information that aligns with expected moral values. This includes introducing positive content, holding class discussions about the influence of social media, and limiting access to non-educational content. In this way, teachers function not only as instructors but also as mentors, guiding students to use social media wisely. However, difficulties faced by teachers arise during the learning process. Teachers face challenges in conveying information to students. They struggle to deliver materials to students because not all students have mobile phones, internet quotas, and good internet signal (Ariesca et al., 2021).

In practice, Akidah Akhlak teachers actively encourage students to follow social media accounts that provide educational content, such as video lectures, Islamic motivational videos, stories about Muslim figures, and other inspirational content. The main goal of this strategy is to protect students from the influence of negative content widely circulated on social media, such as hate speech, hedonistic lifestyles, or inappropriate jokes. This process is not merely passive education, but also fosters the habit of critical and reflective thinking regarding the information students receive every day.

Teachers implement these educational activities in several ways. First, they directly recommend accounts they deem beneficial. Second, they hold class discussions about social media content and encourage students

to evaluate it from a moral perspective. Third, they utilize school digital platforms, such as the school's YouTube channel, to showcase student work in the form of educational videos or moral messages. In this way, students are actively involved in creating positive content and feel a sense of belonging to the community in spreading moral values.

One interesting strategy implemented by teachers is to assign students to produce educational videos related to the Aqidah and Akhlak lesson. The content is then uploaded to YouTube. This step not only trains students' digital skills and creativity but also helps internalize the moral values being learned. When students create videos about honesty or ethics for their parents, they indirectly reflect on the meaning of these values and apply them in real-life work. This demonstrates that the process of developing morals is not only through lectures, but also through active participation in the creative process (Miftah Zaenudin, Farida Ulvi Na'imah, 2023).

Mobile phone use among students has become unavoidable, especially in today's digital age. However, uncontrolled use can disrupt the learning process and impact students' moral development. Therefore, religious and moral education teachers implement a restriction policy, providing a special box for storing mobile phones after digital learning sessions are complete. Teachers also provide explanations about digital ethics and encourage students to maintain concentration during learning. These restrictions contribute to the development of discipline among students. With strict rules regarding mobile phone use, students are taught to value study time and recognize the importance of following established norms. This discipline is a crucial aspect in developing positive morals.

This study also shows that controlling cell phone use does not mean a total ban. Some teachers continue to utilize technology through cell phones in certain learning activities, such as searching for information online, answering quizzes using apps, or creating educational content. However, this use remains limited and under teacher supervision. This emphasizes that cell phone restrictions are not intended to hinder digital innovation, but rather serve as a disciplinary measure to ensure appropriate use of technology.

Restricting cell phone use during class hours at MTsN 2 Mojokerto has had a significant positive impact on students' moral development. While implementation challenges exist, with the appropriate approach from teachers and support from parents, students can be taught to use technology wisely. This restriction not only improves concentration in learning but also strengthens social relationships and discipline, which are essential elements in developing good character and morals. Therefore, it is crucial to continue developing effective strategies to regulate cell phone use and maximize the positive benefits of technology in education.

On the other hand, teachers also monitor students' digital behavior. Although not all teachers have easy access to students' social media accounts, they still provide guidance and advice regarding social media etiquette during the learning process. Akidah Akhlak teachers regularly teach material on online communication etiquette, the consequences of digital promiscuity, and the importance of maintaining a self-image as a Muslim student. Interviews with several teachers revealed that some students were called and given specific counseling for posting inappropriate content according to school norms. This demonstrates the teachers' deep concern for developing students' morals, not only within the school but also in the digital world.

However, this study also identified challenges in implementing educational activities carried out by teachers. One major issue is students' low interest in religious or educational materials, which are considered uninteresting. Many students prefer to follow entertainment-oriented accounts or viral trends, which can damage their morals. Therefore, teachers need to be more creative and innovative in presenting materials and finding communication methods that students can understand. Another challenge is teachers' limited ability to monitor all students' digital activities outside of school (Noviani, 2022). Not all teachers are aware of students' social media accounts, making comprehensive supervision difficult, especially when students use anonymous or additional accounts.

To address this issue, teachers focus on developing internal values, namely building self-awareness in students so they can act as self-filters. Teachers encourage students to think critically about the information they consume online and to take responsibility for their online behavior. Teachers act as discussion partners, providing space for students to express their views, while providing guidance so students can choose information that aligns with Islamic values.

This teacher's educational approach is in line with the theory of moral education proposed by Ibn Miskawaih, who says that morals can be formed through habits and practice (Yaqin, 2021). Teachers at MTsN 2 Mojokerto fulfill this role by providing consistent guidance and accustoming students to ethical interactions, both in person and online. Teachers' exemplary behavior serves as a strong role model for students in shaping their moral behavior. This theory asserts that a person's character is not fixed but can be changed through a continuous educational process and a supportive environment.

Overall, the educational actions of teachers at MTsN 2 Mojokerto in shaping students' morals through role models in the virtual world include encouraging them to participate in educational content, digital supervision, and creating content assignments. Teachers serve not only as theoretical instructors but also as

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active value facilitators in helping students navigate digital life responsibly and ethically (Miftah Zaenudin, Farida Ulvi Na'imah, 2023). In this way, the process of moral development is not solely the responsibility of the students but also part of a fun, meaningful, and relevant education. Collaboration between teachers, students, and school policies is key to successfully fostering strong Islamic character amidst the rapid flow of digitalization.

4. CONCLUSSION

This study reveals that the character development of students at MTsN 2 Mojokerto in the digital era is influenced not only by their physical environment, such as family and school, but also by the virtual figures they follow on social media. This process occurs through several stages, starting from observation, imitation, understanding values, internalization, and becoming critically aware. Students who receive proper guidance can filter information and utilize digital media as a tool to build positive Islamic character.

On the other hand, teachers play a crucial role in mentoring students through strategic educational approaches, such as providing recommendations for educational content and encouraging students to produce content that conveys positive values. Despite facing challenges such as low student interest in religious content and limited digital supervision, teachers continue to strive to raise students' awareness and moral responsibility online.

The combination of role models from the virtual world and teacher guidance creates a relevant, contextual, and beneficial educational environment for instilling Islamic moral values amidst rapid digitalization.

This study has limitations because it was conducted at only one educational institution. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to expand the research subjects to other educational institutions with different characteristics to gain a broader understanding. Furthermore, a more in-depth study of the specific impact of social media platforms or types of public figures on students' morals is also warranted.

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