



Calibrating Moral Judgment in Digital Environments: Toward an Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory

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Abstract

The growing complexity of digital environments requires Muslim children to make contextual moral judgments that cannot be addressed through explicit religious rules alone. Although previous research has advanced understanding of moral cognition, digital literacy, parental mediation, and Islamic education, these perspectives remain fragmented in explaining how children develop autonomous digital moral discernment in morally ambiguous situations. This conceptual paper addresses this theoretical gap by proposing Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory (IDMCT), a middle-range theory explaining how Islamic moral referents are progressively integrated into contextual digital judgment. Drawing on Social Domain Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Meta-Moral Cognition, the paper develops an integrative framework in which guided value-content comparison, meta-moral reflection, and digital moral threshold calibration recursively cultivate autonomous digital moral discernment. The proposed theory contributes to moral development research by introducing digital moral threshold calibration as a novel explanatory mechanism, differentiates moral from epistemic discernment within digital literacy research, and reconceptualizes parental mediation and Islamic education as developmental scaffolds for independent moral judgment. The paper concludes by outlining implications for future empirical validation and theory development across diverse digital and educational contexts.

Keywords

Islamic digital moral calibration theory; digital moral discernment; moral development; islamic moral education; parental mediation; digital literacy

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the moral environments in which children and adolescents develop. Digital platforms are no longer merely channels for communication or entertainment; they have become pervasive social spaces where young people continuously encounter information, social norms, commercial influences, and value-laden interactions. For Muslim children, these environments present not only explicit moral violations but also an increasing number of morally ambiguous digital situations, including viral humor that normalizes humiliation, influencer cultures that blur commercial and religious messages, algorithmically amplified lifestyles, and online interactions whose moral implications are highly contextual. Unlike traditional moral education, where behavioral expectations were often communicated through relatively stable norms and explicit prohibitions, digital environments require children to repeatedly interpret unfamiliar situations whose moral meanings cannot be resolved solely through predefined rules (Livingstone, 2014; Valle *et al.*, 2025).

This transformation creates a new educational challenge. The central issue is no longer whether children know what is prohibited, but whether they can independently determine what deserves moral concern when digital encounters contain competing values, uncertain intentions, or conflicting social cues. Contemporary digital experiences require continuous micro-level moral judgments rather than occasional compliance with explicit behavioral norms. Consequently, moral education must increasingly prepare children to distinguish morally appropriate from morally inappropriate digital engagement under conditions of uncertainty rather than simply transmitting lists of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors (Bandura, 1991; Reynolds, 2006, 2008).

Existing scholarship has generated substantial knowledge regarding the cognitive and psychological foundations of moral judgment. Research on moral awareness and moral attentiveness demonstrates that ethical behavior depends first on an individual's capacity to recognize that a situation possesses moral significance before any evaluation or action can occur (Reynolds, 2006, 2008). Similarly, studies of moral identity argue that moral values become behaviorally influential when they are integrated into one's self-concept rather than remaining abstract principles (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Complementing these perspectives, meta-moral cognition emphasizes the importance of reflective processes that connect moral thoughts, emotions, and actions through conscious evaluation of one's own moral reasoning (Bajovic & Rizzo, 2021). Together, these perspectives explain important dimensions of moral development but provide limited explanation of how young people progressively learn to interpret morally ambiguous digital content across changing technological contexts.

A parallel stream of research has examined the failure of moral self-regulation in online environments. Building on Social Cognitive Theory, Bandura (1999) proposed that individuals may disengage moral self-sanctions through cognitive mechanisms that justify harmful behavior, diffuse responsibility, or minimize consequences. Subsequent studies consistently demonstrate that moral disengagement predicts cyberbullying, cyberaggression, and other forms of unethical online behavior among adolescents (Lee & Jun, 2024; Runions & Bak, 2015; Zhao & Yu, 2021). While this literature successfully explains why morally inappropriate digital behavior occurs, its primary concern lies in the deactivation of moral self-regulation after individuals have already interpreted a situation. It provides comparatively less insight into the developmental process through which children initially learn to classify ambiguous digital encounters as morally relevant before disengagement becomes possible.

Research on digital literacy and social media literacy has likewise advanced considerably. Recent scholarship increasingly conceptualizes digital literacy as extending beyond technical competence toward critical evaluation of online information, algorithmic awareness, and misinformation discernment (Valle *et al.*, 2025). Experimental evidence further demonstrates that media literacy interventions improve individuals' ability to distinguish

reliable from misleading information and strengthen resilience against misinformation (Guess *et al.*, 2020; Lu *et al.*, 2025). However, these contributions predominantly address epistemic judgment—that is, evaluating whether information is true, credible, or authentic. They do not sufficiently explain how individuals determine whether engagement with accurate or socially accepted digital content is morally appropriate. Epistemic discernment and moral discernment therefore represent theoretically distinct capacities, and improvements in one cannot be assumed to automatically generate the other.

Another influential body of literature emphasizes parental mediation as a strategy for reducing digital risks. Active mediation, restrictive mediation, and co-use have been shown to shape children's online experiences and digital behaviors (Clark, 2011; Li *et al.*, 2022; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Nevertheless, parental mediation primarily explains how adults interpret digital experiences on behalf of children or regulate children's media exposure. It offers a less developed explanation of how children gradually become autonomous moral interpreters capable of independently evaluating novel digital situations after external guidance becomes unavailable. This limitation is particularly important because digital environments expose children to countless encounters that cannot realistically be anticipated or explicitly regulated by parents or educators.

Within Islamic education, existing studies have increasingly recognized the importance of integrating digital literacy, character education, and religious values into learning environments (Hasan & Juhannis, 2024; Malla *et al.*, 2026). However, this literature has largely focused on pedagogical practices, teacher competencies, or value integration rather than explaining the developmental mechanism through which Islamic moral principles become contextually applicable in complex digital environments. Consequently, the literature remains fragmented across moral cognition, digital literacy, parental mediation, and Islamic education without offering an integrated explanation of how Muslim children progressively acquire the capacity for independent digital moral discernment.

Addressing this gap, this paper proposes Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory (IDMCT) as a middle-range theory explaining how young Muslims develop the capacity to evaluate morally ambiguous digital content through recursive processes of Islamic moral referent activation, guided value–content comparison, meta-moral reflection, and progressive adjustment of digital moral judgment thresholds. Rather than conceptualizing Islamic moral education primarily as the transmission of prohibitions or behavioral rules, the proposed theory reconceptualizes it as a developmental process of moral calibration that enables children to exercise contextually appropriate and autonomous digital moral discernment across diverse digital environments. In doing so, the paper contributes to moral development theory by introducing moral threshold calibration as a distinct explanatory mechanism, extends digital literacy research by differentiating epistemic and moral discernment, enriches parental mediation theory by shifting attention from external regulation to autonomous moral judgment, and advances Islamic education by positioning Islamic moral referents as dynamic interpretive resources for navigating morally ambiguous digital realities.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Integrative Gap

2.1 Moral Cognition and Moral Awareness

The development of moral judgment has long been explained through theories emphasizing how individuals recognize, evaluate, and respond to morally significant situations. A foundational premise of this literature is that moral behavior is preceded by moral awareness, namely the ability to recognize that a particular situation contains moral implications requiring ethical consideration (Reynolds, 2006). Extending this argument, Reynolds (2008) introduced the concept of moral attentiveness, referring to the extent to which individuals habitually perceive and reflect upon the moral dimensions of everyday experiences. Individuals with higher moral attentiveness are more likely to identify morally relevant cues before making behavioral decisions.

However, recognizing moral issues alone does not ensure consistent moral judgment. Research on moral identity argues that moral values influence behavior only when they become central components of an individual's self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). As moral identity develops, individuals become increasingly motivated to behave consistently with their internalized moral standards rather than merely complying with external expectations (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Meanwhile, the Social Intuitionist perspective suggests that moral judgments are often shaped by intuitive responses before deliberate reasoning occurs, highlighting the dynamic interaction between cognition and emotion during moral evaluation (Haidt, 2001).

Although these perspectives collectively explain how individuals recognize moral issues and internalize moral values, they remain largely context-neutral. They do not adequately explain how young people repeatedly interpret novel and morally ambiguous digital encounters where competing social, emotional, and normative cues coexist. Consequently, existing moral cognition theories provide an essential foundation for understanding moral judgment but offer limited explanation regarding the developmental adjustment of moral judgment across continuously changing digital environments.

2.2 Digital Moral Judgment Beyond Media Literacy

The rapid diffusion of social media has stimulated extensive scholarship on digital literacy and critical social media literacy. Contemporary perspectives increasingly conceptualize digital literacy as the ability to critically evaluate online information, recognize algorithmic influences, understand media affordances, and distinguish credible information from misinformation (Valle *et al.*, 2025). Similarly, media literacy interventions have consistently demonstrated positive effects in improving misinformation detection and strengthening individuals' epistemic discernment across different cultural contexts (Guess *et al.*, 2020; Lu *et al.*, 2025).

These developments represent important advances in preparing citizens for increasingly complex information ecosystems. Nevertheless, their primary concern remains epistemic evaluation: determining whether digital information is accurate, reliable, or manipulated. Kozyreva *et al.* (2020) argue that contemporary digital competence requires cognitive tools enabling individuals to evaluate information quality under conditions of information overload. While such competence is indispensable, it addresses only one dimension of digital judgment.

For Islamic moral education, however, evaluating the truthfulness of information does not necessarily resolve questions of moral appropriateness. Authentic, factual, and socially accepted content may still encourage behaviors that normalize humiliation, excessive self-promotion, materialism, or moral desensitization. Consequently, determining whether digital engagement is morally appropriate requires evaluative criteria extending beyond epistemic accuracy alone. This distinction suggests that epistemic discernment and moral discernment constitute theoretically different capacities. Existing digital literacy research provides robust explanations for the former but remains comparatively underdeveloped in explaining the latter, thereby leaving an important conceptual space for a theory of digital moral calibration.

2.3 Parental Mediation and Islamic Moral Education

Another influential body of literature explains children's digital behavior through parental mediation. Existing models distinguish restrictive mediation, active mediation, and co-use as strategies through which parents regulate children's interaction with digital media (Clark, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). These approaches consistently demonstrate that parental guidance can reduce digital risks, encourage safer online behavior, and facilitate children's understanding of digital environments.

Within Islamic education, scholarship similarly emphasizes integrating religious values, character formation, and digital competence into educational practices. Recent studies

highlight teachers' digital literacy, Islamic pedagogy, and value-oriented learning as essential foundations for preparing Muslim youth to navigate digital society (Hasan & Juhannis, 2024; Malla *et al.*, 2026). Islamic pedagogical concepts such as *tazkiyah* and *ta'aruf* further reinforce the importance of character formation, ethical responsibility, and peaceful social interaction within contemporary educational contexts (Qasserras, 2024).

Despite these contributions, both parental mediation and Islamic pedagogy primarily conceptualize adults as the principal interpreters of children's digital experiences. Moral interpretation remains externally scaffolded through parental supervision, teacher instruction, or institutional guidance. Such perspectives explain how moral values are transmitted, but they offer limited explanation of how children progressively become autonomous moral interpreters capable of independently evaluating unfamiliar digital situations after external guidance is no longer immediately available. This developmental transition from externally guided interpretation to internally calibrated moral discernment remains theoretically insufficiently explained.

2.4 Integrative Gap

The preceding discussions indicate that no single theoretical tradition adequately explains how young Muslims develop independent moral discernment within digitally mediated environments. Social Domain Theory explains how individuals classify social situations into different normative domains, thereby providing an important basis for recognizing morally relevant situations. Social Cognitive Theory explains how moral self-regulation governs ethical behavior and how mechanisms such as moral disengagement may deactivate moral self-sanctions (Bandura, 1991, 1999). Meta-moral cognition extends this perspective by emphasizing reflective evaluation of one's own moral thoughts, emotions, and intended actions as a bridge between moral cognition and behavior (Bajovic & Rizzo, 2021).

Although these perspectives complement one another, they remain insufficient without specifying the normative framework through which Muslim children repeatedly interpret morally ambiguous digital encounters. Existing theories explain moral classification, self-regulation, and reflective evaluation separately, but none explicitly theorizes how Islamic moral referents become cognitively activated, compared with contextual digital cues, and progressively recalibrated through repeated reflection. This missing developmental mechanism represents the central integrative gap addressed in this paper.

Accordingly, this study proposes Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory (IDMCT), which integrates Social Domain Theory as the foundation for moral classification, Social Cognitive Theory as the basis of moral self-regulation, Meta-Moral Cognition as the reflective mechanism, and Islamic moral referents as the normative architecture guiding contextual evaluation. Through this integration, IDMCT explains how recursive value-content comparison gradually recalibrates children's moral judgment thresholds, enabling autonomous digital moral discernment across increasingly diverse and morally ambiguous digital contexts.

To synthesize the fragmented theoretical perspectives reviewed above, Table 1 compares the explanatory scope, principal strengths, remaining limitations, and specific contributions of each literature stream to the development of IDMCT.

Table 1. Comparison of Existing Theories and Remaining Gaps

Theory	Explains	Cannot Explain	Contribution to IDMCT
Social Domain Theory	Moral classification and recognition of social situations	Progressive moral judgment across ambiguous digital contexts	Provides the foundation for digital moral classification
Social Cognitive Theory	Moral self-regulation and moral disengagement	Development of independent moral discernment before self-regulatory failure	Explains moral self-regulation within the calibration process

Theory	Explains	Cannot Explain	Contribution to IDMCT
Meta-Moral Cognition	Reflection linking moral thought, emotion, and action	Context-specific recalibration of moral judgment thresholds	Explains reflective recalibration of moral evaluation
Digital Literacy Theory	Information evaluation and epistemic discernment	Moral appropriateness of digital engagement	Clarifies the distinction between epistemic and moral discernment
Parental Mediation and Islamic Education	External guidance, value transmission, and moral instruction	Transition from guided interpretation to autonomous moral judgment	Motivates the development of Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory

Source: Developed by the authors based on the reviewed literature.

Table 1 demonstrates that existing theories provide valuable but partial explanations of digital moral development. While each perspective clarifies specific dimensions of moral cognition or digital behavior, none adequately explains how Islamic moral referents are progressively calibrated into autonomous digital moral discernment. This unresolved gap provides the theoretical rationale for developing IDMCT.

To clarify the proposed theoretical integration, the conceptual framework below illustrates how complementary theoretical perspectives collectively establish the explanatory foundation of Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory and its central developmental mechanism.

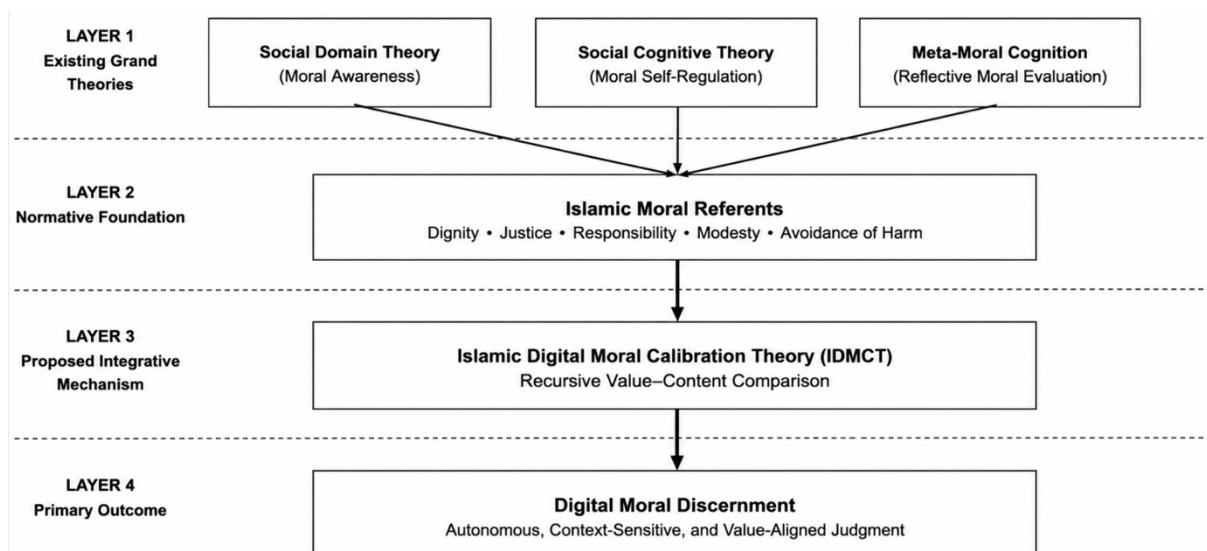


Figure 1. Integrative Architecture of Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory (IDMCT)

Source: Developed by the authors.

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical architecture underlying the proposed model. Rather than replacing existing theories, IDMCT integrates Social Domain Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Meta-Moral Cognition through Islamic moral referents to explain how recursive value–content comparison generates autonomous digital moral discernment. The figure highlights the article's primary theoretical contribution as an integrative middle-range framework.

3. Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory

3.1 Domain Specification

Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory (IDMCT) is proposed to explain how young Muslims progressively develop the capacity to make independent moral judgments when encountering digitally mediated situations characterized by moral ambiguity. The theory is situated within the domain of moral development rather than digital literacy, emphasizing

the developmental processes through which children learn to interpret digital experiences by integrating Islamic moral referents with contextual evaluation. Accordingly, the phenomenon addressed by the theory is not digital technology itself, but the growing complexity of moral decision-making within contemporary digital environments.

The unit of analysis is the developing young Muslim as a digital moral evaluator. Although parents, teachers, peers, religious institutions, and digital platforms all influence children's moral development, IDMCT does not position these actors as the primary explanatory focus. Instead, they are conceptualized as contextual conditions that facilitate or constrain children's internal developmental processes. The theory therefore shifts analytical attention from external behavioral regulation toward the cognitive and reflective mechanisms through which children become capable of exercising autonomous moral discernment across increasingly diverse digital contexts.

The theory applies specifically to situations involving digital moral ambiguity, where multiple interpretations remain plausible because intentions, consequences, and contextual cues do not clearly indicate whether a particular digital behavior is morally appropriate. Such ambiguity frequently appears in social media interactions, influencer culture, online humor, digital self-presentation, content sharing, and participatory online practices. In these situations, explicit religious rules alone often provide insufficient guidance because children must determine not only whether digital content is factually accurate or socially acceptable but also whether engaging with, amplifying, or normalizing such content is ethically appropriate within an Islamic moral framework.

Conversely, IDMCT does not primarily explain behaviors governed by explicit prohibitions, problematic internet use, or misinformation detection. These phenomena involve different theoretical mechanisms that have been extensively addressed by research on moral disengagement, digital addiction, or media literacy. Rather, IDMCT seeks to explain how repeated encounters with morally ambiguous digital situations gradually cultivate children's capacity to recognize morally relevant cues, activate appropriate Islamic moral referents, and produce contextually proportionate moral judgments. Consequently, the theory occupies a distinct conceptual space between moral cognition, digital literacy, and Islamic moral education.

3.2 Core Constructs

The central proposition of IDMCT is that digital moral discernment develops through a recursive process of calibration rather than through the accumulation of religious rules or technical digital competencies. Existing theories explain moral awareness, moral identity, digital literacy, or parental mediation as relatively independent constructs, yet they do not sufficiently explain how children progressively learn to apply internalized Islamic values to unfamiliar digital situations. IDMCT addresses this omission by introducing digital moral calibration as the developmental mechanism connecting moral knowledge with context-sensitive moral judgment.

The process begins when children encounter digitally ambiguous situations that simultaneously present competing social, emotional, and moral cues. Such situations create uncertainty because popularity, entertainment, peer approval, or technological affordances frequently coexist with concerns regarding dignity, privacy, justice, modesty, or social responsibility. Following Social Domain Theory, ambiguity requires individuals to classify situations before deciding which normative principles should govern their responses (Yoo & Smetana, 2022). Moral judgment therefore begins not with behavior but with classification.

However, classification cannot occur unless children first recognize that a digital encounter possesses moral significance. Research on moral awareness and moral attentiveness demonstrates that individuals differ substantially in their tendency to notice moral dimensions embedded within everyday experiences (Reynolds, 2006, 2008). Some children immediately recognize that online ridicule, public humiliation, or privacy violations involve ethical concerns, whereas others perceive identical situations merely as entertainment or

social interaction. IDMCT therefore adopts moral awareness as the entry point of digital moral evaluation while arguing that recognition alone remains insufficient for explaining contextual moral judgment.

Once moral significance has been recognized, children must activate relevant Islamic moral referents capable of guiding interpretation. Importantly, referent accessibility should not be equated with religiosity or simple knowledge of religious teachings. A child may possess considerable religious knowledge while still experiencing difficulty identifying which Islamic moral principles are relevant to novel digital situations. Within IDMCT, Islamic moral referents function as cognitively accessible ethical resources that frame subsequent evaluation. Principles such as dignity, justice, trustworthiness, responsibility, modesty, and avoidance of harm become interpretive lenses through which contextual digital cues acquire moral meaning. Moral judgment therefore depends not only upon possessing moral values but also upon activating appropriate values when confronting specific digital experiences.

The developmental mechanism of the theory emerges through guided value–content comparison. Rather than transmitting ready-made answers, parents, teachers, or mentors facilitate reflective dialogue that encourages children to compare observable characteristics of digital content with relevant Islamic moral referents. Instead of asking whether particular content is simply permissible or prohibited, guided comparison encourages questions concerning whose dignity is affected, what forms of harm may occur, whether popularity legitimizes behavior, or how digital participation influences individual and collective moral responsibility. This dialogical process transforms Islamic values from abstract doctrinal knowledge into practical interpretive resources applicable to changing digital environments.

Guided comparison subsequently stimulates meta-moral reflection, whereby children critically examine their own judgments rather than merely evaluating digital content itself. Meta-moral cognition emphasizes reflection upon one's own moral thoughts, emotions, and intended actions as an essential bridge linking cognition and behavior (Bajovic & Rizzo, 2021). Through repeated reflection, children begin to recognize why initial impressions were shaped by popularity, emotional appeal, peer influence, or habitual digital practices. Reflection thus generates cognitive revision, enabling moral judgments to become increasingly deliberate, context-sensitive, and internally regulated.

These recursive experiences gradually produce digital moral threshold calibration, the central explanatory construct of IDMCT. Calibration refers to the progressive adjustment of the sensitivity and consistency with which digital cues activate moral evaluation. Children who initially overlook morally significant digital situations gradually become more responsive to subtle ethical implications, whereas those who indiscriminately classify most digital activities as morally problematic learn to differentiate between genuinely harmful and morally neutral encounters. Calibration therefore represents proportional moral sensitivity rather than increasing moral restrictiveness. The objective is not maximal prohibition but accurate contextual judgment.

As calibration continues across heterogeneous digital experiences, children become increasingly capable of transferring previously developed interpretive principles to unfamiliar situations. Rather than depending upon explicit parental instructions, they learn to recognize recurring moral structures embedded within different forms of digital interaction. The outcome of this recursive developmental process is digital moral discernment, namely the autonomous capacity to consistently distinguish morally appropriate from morally inappropriate digital engagement across novel contexts. Unlike behavioral compliance, which depends upon external supervision, digital moral discernment reflects internally calibrated judgment capable of guiding ethical decision-making even in the absence of immediate guidance.

3.3 Recursive Calibration Mechanism

The theoretical contribution of IDMCT lies in explaining how moral discernment develops rather than merely identifying factors associated with ethical digital behavior. Existing

theories separately explain moral awareness, moral self-regulation, media literacy, and parental guidance, yet none explicitly theorizes the recursive developmental process through which Islamic moral referents become progressively integrated into children's contextual digital judgments. IDMCT argues that moral discernment emerges through repeated cycles of moral ambiguity, cue recognition, referent activation, guided comparison, reflective evaluation, and threshold adjustment. Every new digital encounter provides opportunities for recalibration, enabling children to refine both the sensitivity and proportionality of their moral evaluations.

The proposed theory operates through a recursive developmental mechanism linking moral interpretation, reflective learning, and contextual judgment. The following conceptual process summarizes the theory's causal logic in a unified framework.

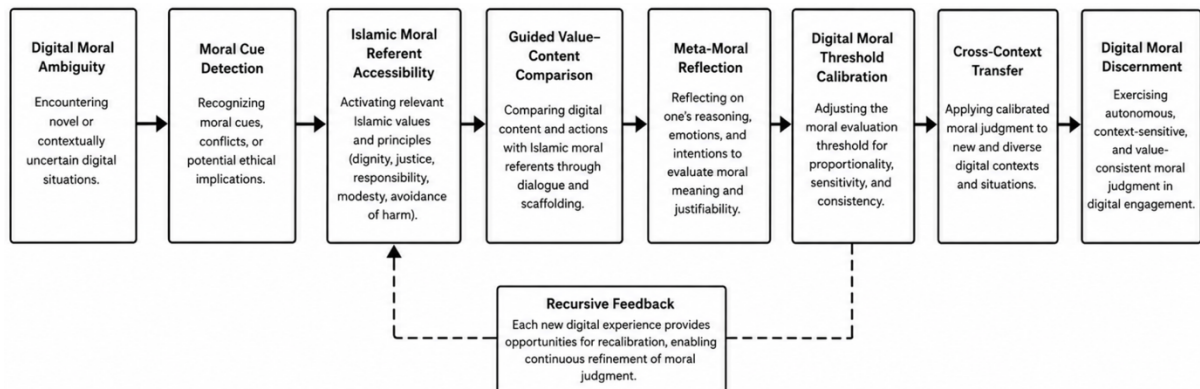


Figure 2. Recursive Mechanism of Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory

Source: Developed by the authors.

Figure 2 illustrates the recursive causal mechanism proposed by IDMCT. Moral discernment develops through repeated interactions among moral ambiguity, referent activation, guided comparison, reflective evaluation, and threshold calibration, with recursive feedback continuously refining subsequent judgments. This process explains how Islamic moral referents become progressively transferable across diverse digital situations, resulting in increasingly autonomous and context-sensitive digital moral discernment.

Accordingly, digital moral discernment should be understood not as a fixed individual characteristic but as an evolving developmental capability continuously shaped through recursive interaction between digital experiences, reflective dialogue, and Islamic moral reasoning. This perspective fundamentally reorients Islamic digital moral education from emphasizing the transmission of prohibitions toward cultivating the capacity for contextual moral interpretation. Consequently, the proposed theory positions digital moral threshold calibration as the missing explanatory mechanism linking Islamic moral values with autonomous digital moral discernment, thereby extending existing theories of moral development, digital literacy, and Islamic education into a coherent middle-range theoretical framework.

4. Proposition Development

The preceding section established Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory (IDMCT) as a recursive developmental mechanism through which young Muslims progressively cultivate autonomous digital moral discernment. Rather than assuming that moral judgment develops simply through greater religiosity, increased digital competence, or stronger parental control, IDMCT argues that discernment emerges through repeated calibration of moral judgment across morally ambiguous digital experiences. Building upon this theoretical logic, the following propositions specify the expected relationships among the central constructs of the proposed theory.

4.1 Digital Moral Ambiguity and the Need for Calibration

Digital environments increasingly expose children to situations in which moral evaluation cannot be resolved through direct application of explicit religious rules. Social media interactions, influencer practices, viral entertainment, and participatory online cultures frequently combine multiple, and sometimes competing, moral cues. Such complexity requires children to classify situations before deciding which moral principles should guide their responses. Social Domain Theory suggests that moral judgment begins with categorizing social situations into appropriate normative domains rather than immediately selecting behavioral responses (Yoo & Smetana, 2022). Consequently, increasing levels of digital moral ambiguity intensify children's need to develop more refined mechanisms for contextual moral evaluation.

Unlike situations governed by explicit prohibitions, ambiguous digital encounters demand continual interpretation, making moral calibration a developmental necessity rather than an optional educational outcome.

Proposition 1 (P1).

Greater digital moral ambiguity increases the need for digital moral calibration because direct rule application becomes insufficient for contextual moral judgment.

4.2 Islamic Moral Referent Accessibility and Normative Interpretation

Recognizing that a situation contains moral significance does not automatically determine how it should be interpreted. Children must also activate appropriate Islamic moral referents capable of framing digital experiences through ethical rather than purely emotional or social considerations. Existing research on moral identity suggests that internalized moral values become behaviorally influential only when they are cognitively accessible during decision making (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Within digital environments, accessible Islamic moral referents provide the normative architecture that allows children to evaluate dignity, responsibility, justice, trustworthiness, and potential harm beyond immediate social rewards or peer approval.

Accordingly, children possessing greater accessibility to relevant Islamic moral referents are expected to rely less on popularity, entertainment value, or algorithmic visibility when interpreting digital situations.

Proposition 2 (P2).

Greater accessibility of Islamic moral referents increases the likelihood that morally ambiguous digital situations are interpreted through normative ethical evaluation rather than through hedonic or popularity-based considerations.

4.3 Value–Content Comparison as the Developmental Mechanism

The principal contribution of IDMCT lies in proposing that moral discernment develops through guided comparison between contextual digital cues and Islamic moral referents. Rather than transmitting predetermined answers, educators facilitate reflective dialogue that enables children to identify tensions between surface characteristics of digital content and their broader ethical implications. This comparison process encourages children to move beyond binary judgments of permissible versus prohibited behavior toward deeper evaluation of dignity, justice, responsibility, and social consequences.

Repeated value–content comparison gradually restructures children's interpretive frameworks by making morally relevant discrepancies increasingly salient across different digital contexts. Consequently, comparison functions as the primary developmental mechanism responsible for recalibrating moral judgment.

Proposition 3 (P3).

Guided value–content comparison positively influences digital moral threshold calibration by increasing children's awareness of discrepancies between contextual digital cues and relevant Islamic moral referents.

4.4 Meta-Moral Reflection and Threshold Calibration

Although guided comparison initiates moral learning, enduring developmental change requires children to critically examine their own judgments. Meta-moral cognition emphasizes reflective awareness of one's moral thoughts, emotional reactions, and intended actions as an essential process connecting cognition and behavior (Bajovic & Rizzo, 2021). Reflection enables children to reconsider why they initially evaluated digital content in particular ways and whether alternative interpretations provide more ethically appropriate responses.

Within IDMCT, reflective evaluation strengthens the calibration process by allowing previous judgments to be revised through recursive learning. Over time, this reflective process improves both the sensitivity and proportionality of children's moral thresholds, reducing tendencies toward either moral neglect or excessive moralization.

Proposition 4 (P4).

Meta-moral reflection mediates the positive relationship between guided value–content comparison and digital moral threshold calibration by promoting critical re-evaluation of children's initial moral interpretations.

4.5 Digital Moral Threshold Calibration and Moral Discernment

The central explanatory mechanism of IDMCT is digital moral threshold calibration. Calibration refers to the progressive adjustment of the level at which contextual digital cues activate moral evaluation. Rather than encouraging uniformly stricter judgments, calibration enables children to distinguish morally significant situations from those that merely appear socially unusual or emotionally provocative. Consequently, calibrated individuals develop contextually proportionate moral sensitivity that can be transferred across diverse digital situations.

As repeated calibration occurs, children become less dependent on external supervision because they increasingly recognize recurring moral structures embedded within unfamiliar digital experiences. Autonomous digital moral discernment therefore emerges as the developmental consequence of successful calibration rather than as a direct outcome of religious instruction or digital literacy alone.

Proposition 5 (P5).

Higher levels of digital moral threshold calibration positively influence digital moral discernment by improving the consistency and contextual proportionality of children's moral judgments across diverse digital environments.

4.6 Moral Disengagement as a Boundary Condition

Finally, IDMCT acknowledges that accurate moral discernment does not necessarily guarantee morally consistent behavior. Social Cognitive Theory demonstrates that individuals may cognitively deactivate moral self-regulation through mechanisms such as moral justification, diffusion of responsibility, or minimization of harmful consequences (Bandura, 1999). Thus, children may correctly recognize that particular digital behavior is morally inappropriate while nevertheless participating because of peer pressure, anonymity, or perceived social rewards.

Rather than treating moral disengagement as an alternative explanation, IDMCT conceptualizes it as a boundary condition operating after moral discernment has been achieved. This distinction preserves the theoretical focus of the proposed model while establishing constructive dialogue with the established literature on moral self-regulation.

Proposition 6 (P6).

Moral disengagement weakens the positive relationship between digital moral discernment and morally consistent digital behavior by reducing the influence of calibrated moral judgments on subsequent behavioral decisions.

To operationalize the proposed theoretical framework, the following propositions summarize the expected relationships among the core constructs comprising Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory.

Table 2. Summary of Propositions

Proposition	Theoretical Relationship
P1	Digital Moral Ambiguity → Need for Digital Moral Calibration
P2	Islamic Moral Referent Accessibility → Normative Interpretation of Digital Situations
P3	Guided Value–Content Comparison → Digital Moral Threshold Calibration
P4	Meta-Moral Reflection mediates the relationship between Guided Value–Content Comparison and Digital Moral Threshold Calibration
P5	Digital Moral Threshold Calibration → Digital Moral Discernment
P6	Moral Disengagement negatively moderates the relationship between Digital Moral Discernment and Morally Consistent Digital Behavior

Source: Developed by the authors.

Table 2 integrates the theoretical arguments into six logically connected propositions describing the recursive calibration process. Collectively, these propositions explain how digital moral ambiguity, Islamic moral referents, guided comparison, reflective evaluation, and threshold calibration interact to cultivate autonomous digital moral discernment while recognizing moral disengagement as a contextual boundary condition.

5. Discussion and Implications

The proposed Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory (IDMCT) contributes to the growing conversation on moral development in digitally mediated societies by shifting the explanatory focus from rule transmission to judgment formation. Existing studies have substantially advanced understanding of moral awareness, moral identity, moral disengagement, digital literacy, and parental mediation, yet these perspectives largely explain isolated stages of children's moral development. IDMCT integrates these theoretical traditions by identifying digital moral threshold calibration as the developmental mechanism through which Islamic moral referents become progressively applicable across morally ambiguous digital environments. Rather than treating moral judgment as a static outcome of religious instruction or cognitive maturity, the proposed theory conceptualizes it as a recursive process of contextual calibration that continuously evolves through repeated encounters with digital moral ambiguity.

From the perspective of moral development theory, IDMCT extends existing scholarship by introducing the concept of digital moral threshold calibration. Previous studies have convincingly demonstrated that individuals differ in moral awareness (Reynolds, 2006, 2008), moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy & Carlo, 2011), and susceptibility to moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). However, these perspectives offer limited explanation regarding how individuals progressively improve the proportionality and consistency of their moral judgments across unfamiliar digital situations. By positioning calibration as an adjustable developmental process rather than a fixed individual characteristic, IDMCT explains why two children possessing similar religious knowledge may nevertheless differ substantially in their ability to interpret complex digital experiences. The theory therefore complements, rather than replaces, established perspectives on moral cognition by introducing a mechanism that connects moral awareness with context-sensitive moral discernment.

The proposed theory also contributes to digital literacy research by distinguishing epistemic discernment from moral discernment. Contemporary digital literacy frameworks increasingly emphasize evaluating information credibility, recognizing misinformation, and understanding algorithmic influence (Kozyreva *et al.*, 2020; Valle *et al.*, 2025). Experimental studies similarly demonstrate that media literacy interventions strengthen individuals' capacity to distinguish authentic from misleading information (Guess *et al.*, 2020; Lu *et al.*, 2025). Nevertheless, determining whether digital content is factually accurate does not

necessarily establish whether engaging with, amplifying, or normalizing that content is morally appropriate. IDMCT therefore extends digital literacy scholarship by arguing that morally responsible participation in digital environments requires an additional layer of contextual moral evaluation that cannot be reduced to epistemic competence alone. This distinction broadens the theoretical scope of digital literacy beyond questions of truthfulness toward questions of ethical appropriateness.

A further contribution concerns parental mediation and Islamic education. Existing parental mediation models have consistently demonstrated the importance of restrictive, active, and interpretive mediation in reducing children's digital risks (Clark, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Likewise, Islamic education research has increasingly emphasized integrating religious values and digital competencies within contemporary educational settings (Hasan & Juhannis, 2024; Malla *et al.*, 2026). However, both traditions primarily position adults as the principal interpreters of children's digital experiences. IDMCT reconceptualizes this relationship by treating parents and educators as developmental facilitators whose primary role is to scaffold children's capacity for independent moral interpretation. Successful Islamic digital education is therefore indicated not by prolonged dependence on external guidance but by children's increasing ability to apply Islamic moral referents autonomously across novel digital contexts. This shift from external regulation to internal calibration represents an important theoretical extension of both parental mediation and Islamic pedagogical perspectives.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, IDMCT also offers several practical implications for Islamic education. For parents, the theory suggests that effective digital moral education should move beyond monitoring screen time or prohibiting undesirable applications toward sustained dialogue concerning the ethical dimensions of everyday digital experiences. Rather than immediately categorizing online content as permissible or forbidden, parents can facilitate guided value–content comparison that encourages children to articulate, question, and refine their own moral interpretations. Such dialogical engagement is expected to strengthen children's ability to transfer moral reasoning across diverse digital situations after parental supervision becomes less immediate.

For schools and Islamic educational institutions, IDMCT highlights the importance of embedding digital moral discernment within character education rather than treating digital literacy solely as a technical competency. Learning activities may therefore encourage students to analyze authentic digital scenarios, compare competing interpretations, and evaluate the ethical implications of online participation through Islamic moral referents. By repeatedly engaging students in reflective moral dialogue, educational institutions may cultivate context-sensitive moral discernment rather than simple compliance with externally imposed behavioral rules. Such an approach aligns with the broader objective of Islamic education to develop morally responsible individuals capable of exercising sound judgment in changing social environments.

Although IDMCT offers a coherent explanation of digital moral development, its explanatory scope is bounded by several theoretical conditions. First, the proposed mechanism assumes sufficient cognitive maturity to engage in abstract comparison and reflective moral reasoning. The theory is therefore expected to be most applicable during late childhood and adolescence, when developmental capacities for perspective-taking and metacognition become increasingly established. Second, the theory presumes that Islamic moral referents are accessible through prior religious socialization. Without meaningful exposure to Islamic ethical principles, the calibration process cannot operate as proposed because the normative framework necessary for contextual comparison remains unavailable. Third, IDMCT focuses specifically on morally ambiguous digital situations rather than explicit religious prohibitions, misinformation detection, or problematic internet use, each of which may require different explanatory mechanisms. Finally, although the theory explains the development of digital moral discernment, it does not assume that discernment inevitably produces morally consistent behavior because moral disengagement and situational pressures may still interrupt the translation of judgment into action.

These boundary conditions also provide a promising agenda for future research. An important priority is the empirical development and validation of measurement instruments capable of distinguishing digital moral calibration from related constructs such as religiosity, digital literacy, moral identity, and moral reasoning. Longitudinal studies would further strengthen understanding of how repeated guided value–content comparison influences changes in children's moral thresholds over time. Future research should also examine the theory across different educational settings, age groups, and cultural contexts to evaluate the generalizability of the proposed mechanism while identifying contextual variations in the accessibility and application of Islamic moral referents. Such investigations would not only provide empirical support for IDMCT but also contribute to broader theoretical conversations concerning moral development in increasingly complex digital societies.

To facilitate future empirical development, Table 3 outlines priority research directions that can validate, refine, and extend Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory across diverse educational, developmental, and digital contexts.

Table 3. Future Research Agenda for Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory

Research Priority	Key Research Question	Recommended Method	Expected Contribution
Construct validation	How can digital moral calibration be operationalized as a distinct construct?	Scale development (EFA–CFA–SEM)	Establishes construct validity and measurement reliability.
Recursive mechanism	Does guided value–content comparison improve digital moral calibration over time?	Longitudinal study	Tests the developmental mechanism proposed by IDMCT.
Developmental differences	How does digital moral calibration evolve across childhood and adolescence?	Cross-sectional or longitudinal	Identifies developmental stages of moral calibration.
Educational intervention	Which Islamic educational practices most effectively strengthen digital moral discernment?	Quasi-experiment	Evaluates instructional strategies derived from IDMCT.
Family socialization	How do parental mediation styles influence recursive moral calibration?	Structural Equation Modeling	Extends parental mediation theory within Islamic education.
Digital platform effects	Do different social media platforms produce different calibration processes?	Comparative study	Explores contextual boundary conditions.
Cross-cultural validation	Does IDMCT operate similarly across Muslim communities in different countries?	Multi-country comparative research	Examines cultural generalizability of the theory.
Behavioral consequences	Does digital moral discernment predict ethical online behavior after controlling for moral disengagement?	SEM or multilevel analysis	Tests the explanatory power of IDMCT beyond existing theories.

Source: Developed by the authors.

Table 3 translates the proposed theory into a structured research agenda by identifying priority areas for empirical validation and theoretical refinement. Collectively, these directions encourage future studies to operationalize IDMCT constructs, examine recursive developmental processes, evaluate educational interventions, and assess contextual boundary conditions, thereby strengthening both the explanatory precision and practical applicability of the proposed theory.

6. Conclusion

This paper proposed Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory (IDMCT) as a middle-range theory explaining how young Muslims progressively develop autonomous digital moral discernment within increasingly complex and morally ambiguous digital environments. While existing scholarship has substantially advanced understanding of moral cognition, digital literacy, parental mediation, and Islamic education, these perspectives have largely remained fragmented in explaining how children learn to apply internalized Islamic moral values to novel digital situations that cannot be adequately addressed through explicit rules or external supervision alone. By integrating insights from Social Domain Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Meta-Moral Cognition within an Islamic moral framework, this paper identified digital moral threshold calibration as the missing developmental mechanism linking moral knowledge with context-sensitive digital moral judgment.

The proposed theory advances current scholarship in several important ways. First, it reconceptualizes Islamic digital moral education from emphasizing the transmission of prohibitions toward cultivating children's capacity for contextual moral interpretation. Second, it distinguishes moral discernment from epistemic discernment, arguing that the ability to evaluate the credibility of digital information does not necessarily equip individuals to determine its moral appropriateness. Third, it extends parental mediation theory by shifting attention from external behavioral regulation to the developmental processes through which children gradually become independent moral evaluators. Collectively, these contributions position digital moral calibration as a dynamic developmental process through which repeated encounters with morally ambiguous digital experiences progressively refine children's moral judgment.

Beyond its theoretical significance, IDMCT also offers a broader conceptual lens for understanding moral education in contemporary digital societies. As digital environments continue to generate increasingly diverse and context-dependent moral challenges, effective Islamic education should move beyond compliance-oriented approaches toward pedagogical practices that encourage reflective dialogue, guided value-content comparison, and autonomous moral reasoning. Developing children's capacity to interpret morally ambiguous digital experiences may ultimately prove more sustainable than relying exclusively on monitoring, restriction, or rule transmission, particularly as digital technologies evolve more rapidly than formal educational guidance.

Nevertheless, IDMCT should be regarded as an initial theoretical framework requiring further empirical development. Future studies should validate the proposed constructs, examine the recursive calibration mechanism across different developmental stages and educational settings, and investigate how contextual factors such as family socialization, school environments, and digital platform characteristics influence the calibration process. Such empirical efforts will not only refine the explanatory power of the proposed theory but also contribute to broader conversations concerning moral development, digital citizenship, and Islamic education in an increasingly interconnected digital world.

Ultimately, the central argument of this paper is that preparing Muslim children for the digital age requires more than teaching them what should be avoided. It requires developing their capacity to understand why, when, and how Islamic moral values should guide digital engagement across diverse and evolving contexts. In this respect, Islamic Digital Moral Calibration Theory offers a theoretically grounded foundation for reimagining digital moral education as a developmental process of contextual moral discernment rather than merely a system of behavioral prohibition.

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