



EDITORIAL

Cultivating Digital Moral Agency

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The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, algorithmic recommendation systems, and ubiquitous digital platforms has fundamentally reshaped how knowledge is produced, circulated, and interpreted. Digital technologies are no longer passive communication tools but increasingly function as infrastructures that organize attention, prioritize information, and mediate social interaction. These transformations influence not only economic activities and institutional innovation but also the moral environments in which children develop. As digital ecosystems become more intelligent and personalized, moral learning can no longer be understood solely as the transmission of stable values from adults to younger generations. Instead, children continuously encounter competing interpretations, algorithmically amplified narratives, and context-dependent ethical dilemmas that require ongoing moral judgment. Consequently, understanding digital transformation demands greater attention to the human capabilities that enable individuals to navigate technologically mediated environments responsibly rather than merely efficiently (Vial, 2019; Dwivedi et al., 2023).

Within this broader transformation, research on digital education, parental mediation, moral development, religious socialization, and digital literacy has evolved rapidly, yet these streams have largely progressed independently. Digital literacy scholarship has concentrated on information evaluation and critical media competence, parental mediation research has emphasized regulatory strategies, moral psychology has examined cognitive and self-regulatory mechanisms, while religious education has continued to explore value transmission and character formation. Although each perspective offers important insights, their fragmentation limits our understanding of how children develop autonomous moral agency within increasingly complex digital environments. The articles assembled in this issue address this theoretical fragmentation by collectively repositioning Muslim children not as passive recipients of parental guidance or technological influence but as active moral agents whose ethical capacities emerge through recursive interactions among family relationships, religious values, and digitally mediated experiences.

From External Regulation to Autonomous Moral Agency

A central intellectual contribution emerging from this issue is a fundamental reconceptualization of digital parenting and Islamic education. Across diverse theoretical perspectives, the collected papers consistently challenge an assumption that has long characterized both parental mediation research and religious socialization—that effective moral development depends primarily upon successful external regulation. Traditional approaches have understandably focused on how parents establish rules, monitor behavior, restrict digital access, or communicate moral expectations. Such perspectives remain important, yet they become increasingly insufficient in environments where children routinely make morally consequential decisions beyond immediate adult supervision.

The articles collectively argue that contemporary digital environments require a developmental shift from externally imposed compliance toward internally regulated moral

agency. Rather than asking whether children simply obey parental rules, the issue asks how they learn to exercise moral judgment when explicit guidance is absent, digital situations are ambiguous, and competing normative influences coexist. This shift reflects broader developments within moral psychology, where autonomous moral functioning increasingly depends upon reflective self-regulation, internalized moral identity, and context-sensitive ethical reasoning rather than behavioral conformity alone (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Reynolds, 2008).

Importantly, the issue demonstrates that autonomous moral agency should not be interpreted as unrestricted individual autonomy detached from religious traditions. Instead, autonomy emerges through progressively internalized moral commitments that enable children to apply enduring Islamic values within novel digital contexts. This distinction represents an important theoretical advance because it avoids the false dichotomy between external authority and individual freedom. Moral independence is not conceptualized as freedom from guidance but as the capacity to exercise responsible judgment informed by deeply internalized ethical commitments. Such a perspective resonates closely with self-determination theory, which argues that enduring behavioral regulation depends not merely upon compliance but upon meaningful internalization of socially transmitted values (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 2008).

The issue further demonstrates that autonomous digital morality develops through multiple complementary mechanisms rather than a single causal pathway. Moral discernment requires children to distinguish moral from merely informational judgments; legitimacy depends upon the perceived credibility of parental guidance; internal governance develops through reflective accountability; and interpretive authority becomes negotiated within algorithmically mediated environments. Viewed collectively, these mechanisms reveal moral agency as a multidimensional developmental accomplishment rather than an isolated psychological trait. Consequently, digital moral education must increasingly cultivate capacities for reflection, interpretation, legitimacy evaluation, and ethical self-regulation rather than relying exclusively upon behavioral control.

This reconceptualization substantially enriches contemporary scholarship on digital parenting and Islamic education. Rather than positioning technology primarily as a source of risk requiring stronger parental surveillance, the issue reframes digital environments as developmental contexts within which children progressively acquire sophisticated capacities for moral interpretation. Such an approach aligns with emerging perspectives in digital transformation research that emphasize the importance of human capabilities and adaptive learning alongside technological innovation (Vial, 2019). It likewise complements recent calls for digital literacy frameworks that extend beyond technical competence toward reflective engagement with increasingly complex information ecologies (Livingstone, 2022). By integrating these perspectives with Islamic moral traditions, the issue establishes digital moral agency as the central educational objective for Muslim children navigating algorithmically mediated societies.

Legitimacy, Authority, and Moral Meaning in Algorithmic Environments

A second major contribution emerging from this issue concerns the changing nature of moral authority in digitally mediated societies. Digital transformation has fundamentally altered the ecology through which children encounter moral interpretations. Whereas moral socialization was traditionally understood as occurring primarily through families, schools, and religious institutions, contemporary digital environments expose children to a continuous flow of algorithmically curated content generated by influencers, online communities, commercial actors, and platform recommendation systems. This transformation does not diminish the importance of parents; rather, it situates parental guidance within an increasingly pluralistic landscape of competing interpretive authorities. Consequently, the central theoretical challenge is no longer whether children receive moral guidance, but how they determine which sources deserve legitimacy when multiple voices claim interpretive authority simultaneously.

This insight significantly extends existing parental mediation scholarship. Classical models have largely conceptualized parents as regulators who restrict, explain, monitor, or co-use digital media with children (Clark, 2011; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Valkenburg et al., 2013). Although these strategies remain valuable, they explain media management more effectively than the construction of legitimacy itself. Across the articles in this issue, legitimacy emerges not as an automatic consequence of parental authority but as a relational and interpretive accomplishment. Children actively evaluate whether parental guidance is morally convincing, behaviorally authentic, and applicable to the digital situations they encounter. Such a perspective echoes broader organizational and institutional research suggesting that authority becomes influential only when perceived as legitimate by those expected to follow it (Suchman, 1995; Greenwood et al., 2011).

Equally important is the recognition that algorithms themselves should not be interpreted as moral educators. Rather, they function as infrastructures that amplify visibility, selectively prioritize certain narratives, and repeatedly expose children to particular moral frames. Visibility, however, is analytically distinct from legitimacy. Algorithmic recommendation systems can increase the salience of specific interpretations without determining whether those interpretations are ultimately accepted. The issue therefore offers an important corrective to technologically deterministic accounts by emphasizing children's interpretive agency. Digital platforms shape the informational environment within which moral judgments occur, but children remain active participants who compare, negotiate, synthesize, or reject competing moral claims through ongoing processes of sensemaking. This position resonates with emerging scholarship on algorithmic culture, which argues that users actively interpret and negotiate algorithmically organized environments rather than responding passively to technological outputs (Bucher, 2017; Seaver, 2017).

Within this broader process, parental credibility assumes renewed theoretical importance. Across several contributions, the legitimacy of digital rules depends not merely upon parental authority but upon the perceived consistency between parents' moral prescriptions and their own observable digital conduct. Children evaluate whether parents embody the standards they advocate, transforming behavioral congruence into judgments concerning moral authenticity and normative trustworthiness. Such reasoning extends behavioral integrity theory from organizational settings into intergenerational moral socialization (Simons, 2002; Simons et al., 2015). The implication is profound: effective digital parenting depends as much upon embodied moral credibility as upon communicative competence or technological expertise. Moral authority therefore becomes relationally earned through congruence between values and practices rather than inherited solely from family roles.

The issue similarly advances understanding of family boundaries by demonstrating that legitimacy depends upon the interaction between sacred commitments and meaningful participation. Faith-informed digital boundaries need not eliminate children's agency; instead, they distinguish between non-negotiable moral principles and negotiable forms of implementation. This differentiation enables families to preserve normative stability while simultaneously supporting children's developing autonomy through dialogue, explanation, and shared decision-making. Such an approach enriches self-determination theory by illustrating how autonomy-supportive parenting can coexist with enduring religious commitments rather than competing against them (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Collectively, these arguments reposition legitimacy as the indispensable bridge connecting religious authority, family relationships, and children's independent moral engagement within digitally mediated environments.

Toward an Integrated Theory of Islamic Digital Moral Formation

Taken together, the contributions published in this issue offer more than five independent conceptual models; they collectively establish the foundations of an emerging theoretical paradigm for Islamic digital moral formation. Rather than addressing isolated dimensions of digital parenting, each article illuminates a complementary mechanism within a broader developmental architecture. Moral discernment explains how children recognize ethically

relevant digital situations. Interpretive authority explains how competing normative claims are comparatively evaluated. Boundary legitimacy clarifies how family expectations become accepted as normatively valid. Digital credibility demonstrates why parental example strengthens or weakens moral influence. Finally, internalized responsibility explains how externally communicated values become enduring sources of self-regulation beyond parental supervision.

Viewed collectively, these mechanisms reveal that digital moral formation is fundamentally recursive rather than linear. Children do not simply receive values, internalize them once, and thereafter behave consistently. Instead, every encounter with digital content creates opportunities for renewed interpretation, legitimacy evaluation, reflective judgment, and moral recalibration. Development therefore emerges through repeated interactions between individual cognition, family relationships, religious traditions, and algorithmically structured digital environments. This dynamic perspective aligns with contemporary understandings of moral development as an adaptive process shaped by continuous interaction between personal agency and changing sociotechnical contexts (Bandura, 2001; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009).

The broader implication extends well beyond Islamic education. As artificial intelligence, recommender systems, and algorithmic governance continue to transform everyday life, societies increasingly require educational approaches that cultivate ethical reasoning alongside digital competence. Technical literacy alone cannot prepare young people for environments characterized by persuasive algorithms, synthetic media, competing authorities, and rapidly evolving normative challenges. Equally, moral education cannot remain confined to lists of prescribed or prohibited behaviors disconnected from the realities of digital participation. The future of education therefore depends upon integrating ethical reflection, contextual judgment, and responsible digital agency into coherent developmental frameworks capable of preparing learners for technologically mediated societies.

Advancing the Next Research Frontier

The intellectual significance of this special issue lies in its collective movement from regulation toward formation. Rather than asking how adults can exercise greater control over children's digital lives, the articles ask how children themselves become capable of exercising morally responsible freedom. This shift represents a substantive theoretical advance because it repositions the child as an active moral interpreter whose judgments emerge through interactions among faith, family, and digital technologies rather than through any single source of influence.

Future research should build upon this emerging paradigm through empirical validation of the proposed middle-range theories, comparative investigations across religious and cultural settings, and longitudinal studies examining how digital moral agency develops across childhood and adolescence. Equally important will be research exploring how artificial intelligence, generative media, immersive environments, and increasingly sophisticated algorithmic systems reshape moral learning while preserving children's capacity for reflective ethical judgment. Such work promises to deepen scholarly understanding of digital moral development while informing educational practices capable of sustaining human dignity, moral responsibility, and faith-informed wisdom in an increasingly intelligent digital world.

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