

Transformation of Islamic Religious Education in Building the Character of the Millennial Generation

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ABSTRACT

Millennial generation grows amidst rapid technological advancement and globalization that threaten their moral stability and Islamic identity. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is required to transform in order to serve as both a shield and a guide in character formation for this generation. This study aims to examine the transformation process of PAI encompassing curriculum, methodology, and technology dimensions in building the character of the millennial generation to be noble, tolerant, and imbued with moderate Islamic values. The research employs a qualitative approach using library research technique through content analysis of relevant primary and secondary sources published between 2018 and 2024. Results: The findings indicate that effective PAI transformation encompasses integration of digital literacy in learning, application of contextual and active approaches, and cultivation of religious moderation values. These three aspects are proven to enhance student engagement and strengthen their Islamic character in the digital era. PAI transformation is not merely a technical renewal, but a strategic effort in responding to the demands of the times while adhering to universal Islamic values. The synergy among educators, educational institutions, families, and technology is the key to successfully building a generation of millennials with strong character.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The millennial generation, commonly defined as individuals born between 1981 and 1996, represents the first cohort in human history to grow alongside the massive development of the internet and digital technology. In Indonesia, this population encompasses more than 69 million people, making it the largest demographic group currently driving the economic, social, and

cultural wheels of the nation (Anwar & Salim, 2018). Yet behind this enormous potential lie serious challenges threatening their moral integrity and Islamic identity: unrestricted access to unfiltered digital content, weakening of social filters due to online anonymity, and the relentless infiltration of foreign cultural values that frequently contradict Islamic principles. This situation urgently demands that educational institutions, particularly those engaged in Islamic Religious Education (PAI), reform and transform themselves. If PAI continues to be implemented through conventional approaches centered on textual memorization, one-directional lectures, and evaluation that only measures cognitive aspects, it will be unable to reach a generation accustomed to learning interactively, visually, and through direct experience. Consequently, Islamic values are not deeply internalized but remain merely formal knowledge without the transformative power to influence behavior (Sukari & Haerullah, 2024).

The rapid expansion of digital communication has also transformed the way young Muslims construct their religious understanding. Religious knowledge is no longer obtained solely from formal educational institutions or religious scholars, but increasingly through social media platforms, online videos, podcasts, and digital communities. This condition creates both opportunities and risks. While students gain broader access to Islamic knowledge, they are simultaneously exposed to misinformation, superficial religious interpretations, and radical narratives circulating freely in cyberspace. Therefore, Islamic Religious Education must strengthen its role not only as a medium for knowledge transmission but also as a foundation for critical awareness and moral guidance in navigating digital life. The transformation referred to in this study is not simply a matter of introducing gadgets into classrooms or redesigning the appearance of textbooks. PAI transformation is a paradigmatic change that touches at least three main dimensions: (1) a curriculum responsive to contemporary issues and relevant to the millennial context of life; (2) an active, contextual, and participatory learning methodology; and (3) a critical and value-based use of digital technology. These three dimensions must work synergistically so that PAI does not merely become a subject to be 'attended,' but truly becomes a formative experience that shapes character.

Several previous studies have highlighted partial aspects of this transformation. Anwar and Salim (2018) assert that Islamic education must be capable of integrating character values into all aspects of students' intellectual lives, rather than being taught as a separate subject. Meanwhile, Sukari and Haerullah (2024) identified structural barriers in building millennial character through PAI, including limited digital competence among teachers and curricula that have not fully accommodated the needs of the times. On the other hand, Yahya (2024) found that the implementation of digital literacy in PAI learning in certain regions has proven to significantly

increase learning motivation and understanding of Islamic values. In addition, the transformation of PAI cannot be separated from the changing psychological characteristics of millennial learners. Millennials generally prefer interactive learning environments, open discussion, collaborative activities, and practical experiences rather than one-way instruction. This tendency indicates that conventional learning models emphasizing memorization and passive participation are becoming less effective in shaping students' character. As a result, teachers are challenged to create learning experiences that are meaningful, contextual, and emotionally engaging so that Islamic values can be internalized more deeply in students' daily lives.

This study departs from the need to synthesize these various findings into a comprehensive analytical framework. By mapping the challenges faced by the millennial generation, identifying the dimensions of PAI transformation that have been and need to be undertaken, and exploring concrete strategies that can be implemented, this research is expected to contribute theoretically and practically to Islamic education stakeholders in Indonesia. The urgency of transforming Islamic Religious Education also emerges from the growing complexity of moral issues faced by young people in modern society. Cases related to cybercrime, online harassment, intolerance, declining social ethics, and excessive consumerism indicate that technological progress is not always accompanied by moral maturity. These conditions strengthen the argument that educational institutions should not only prioritize academic achievement but also place serious attention on the development of students' moral and spiritual character through relevant and adaptive Islamic education.

Moreover, the role of Islamic education in shaping millennial character becomes increasingly important because this generation will become future leaders in various sectors of society. The values instilled through education today will influence how they respond to social diversity, technological development, environmental problems, and humanitarian issues in the future. Therefore, transforming PAI is not merely an educational agenda, but also part of a long-term investment in building a civilized and morally responsible society.

2. METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach with a library research design. The library research method was chosen because the research objective is analytical-synthetic in nature, namely to integrate various findings from existing literature to construct a more complete understanding of PAI transformation in the context of millennial character education (Darmalaksana, 2020). The library research approach was considered appropriate because this study focuses on conceptual analysis and theoretical synthesis related to the transformation of

Islamic Religious Education in contemporary society. Through this method, the researcher was able to explore various perspectives from previous studies and integrate them into a comprehensive framework for understanding the challenges and strategies of character education among the millennial generation.

The research data sources consist of two categories. First, primary sources in the form of scientific articles published in reputable journals, particularly journals focusing on Islamic education and character education indexed in SINTA and Google Scholar databases, within the period of 2018 to 2024. Second, secondary sources in the form of reference books written by experts in Islamic education and developmental psychology, with direct relevance to the research theme. Data collection was conducted through systematic searches using keywords 'PAI transformation,' 'millennial character education,' 'PAI digital literacy,' and 'Islamic education in the digital era.' Each source found was then assessed for relevance using the following inclusion criteria: (1) published within the period of 2018–2024; (2) having a study object relevant to PAI or Islam-based character education; and (3) containing arguments or empirical findings that can strengthen the analysis in this study.

To ensure the credibility of the collected data, the researcher carefully selected sources that were closely related to Islamic education, character education, educational technology, and religious moderation. The selected literature was then reviewed critically to identify recurring themes and conceptual relationships relevant to the objectives of this study. This process enabled the researcher to develop a more in-depth interpretation of the transformation of PAI in the digital era. Data analysis was conducted through a descriptive-interpretive content analysis technique. The analytical stages included: identification of main themes from each source, grouping of themes into analytical categories (challenges, dimensions of transformation, and implementation strategies), and cross-source interpretation to identify consistent patterns as well as contradictions that need to be discussed. The validity of the analysis was maintained through source triangulation, namely confirming each main claim with at least two different sources.

In conducting the analysis, the researcher also emphasized contextual interpretation by considering the social and educational conditions surrounding the millennial generation in Indonesia. This contextual approach was important to ensure that the findings were not understood merely as theoretical concepts, but as practical insights relevant to current educational realities. Consequently, the study seeks to bridge conceptual discussions with practical challenges faced by Islamic educational institutions in implementing character education in the digital era.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Millennial Generation and the Challenges of Character Formation

Understanding who the millennial generation is constitutes an indispensable initial step before designing targeted educational strategies. Sociologically, the millennial generation is distinguished from previous generations not only by their birth year range, but also by how they think, communicate, and give meaning to the world. They are a generation that has grown up with mobile phones as an extension of themselves, social media as the public sphere, and search engines as the authoritative source of knowledge (Lalo, 2018). This characteristic brings dual consequences for character education. On one hand, the openness of information enjoyed by the millennial generation potentially broadens their Islamic knowledge across cultures and schools of thought, nurturing tolerance and critical thinking toward complex religious issues. On the other hand, the same openness also exposes them to problematic content: religiously-nuanced hoaxes, radicalism narratives packaged in youth-friendly language, pornography, and various forms of destructive behavior normalized by social media algorithms (Sukari & Haerullah, 2024).

The failure of Islam-based character education to respond to this challenge impacts not only the spiritual realm but also social and national life. Anwar and Salim (2018) note that the character crisis afflicting Indonesian youth is reflected in rising rates of juvenile delinquency, consumerism, and the erosion of ethics in digital interaction—clear evidence that character education as currently practiced has yet to meet the demands of the times. PAI, which inherently holds the mandate to form individuals of noble character (*insan kamil*), urgently needs to be fundamentally evaluated and transformed. Another important issue affecting millennial character formation is the increasing dependence on virtual interaction. The intensity of communication through digital platforms has gradually shifted social behavior patterns among young people. Many millennials spend more time interacting in online environments than participating in direct social activities within their communities. As a consequence, values such as empathy, respect, social sensitivity, and responsibility may weaken if not balanced with proper character education. In this context, PAI plays a crucial role in restoring the balance between technological advancement and humanitarian values rooted in Islamic teachings.

Besides social and moral challenges, millennials also experience psychological pressure caused by the fast-paced digital environment. Continuous exposure to social comparison on social media platforms often influences self-esteem, emotional stability, and mental well-being among young people. In some cases, excessive dependence on digital interaction may lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and reduced social connectedness. These conditions demonstrate that character education through PAI should also pay attention to students' emotional and

psychological development by promoting values of gratitude, self-control, empathy, and emotional balance from an Islamic perspective.

Dimensions of Islamic Religious Education Transformation

Comprehensive PAI transformation must address at least three interrelated and inseparable dimensions.

First Dimension: Curriculum

The existing PAI curriculum still largely focuses on the transmission of normative knowledge—Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic history, and Quranic recitation—with very little allocation for developing critical thinking skills, cross-cultural empathy, and Islam-based digital literacy. Aldyandra and Sirozi (2024) argue that the adaptation of the PAI curriculum to millennial needs must include the addition of material relevant to contemporary issues, such as social media ethics, religious moderation in a pluralistic context, and Islam's contribution to global challenges such as climate change and economic injustice.

Second Dimension: Methodology

The shift from a teacher-centered approach toward a student-centered approach is a necessity in the context of PAI learning for the millennial generation. The Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach, which integrates the digital realities of student life into PAI material, has proven capable of creating more meaningful learning experiences. Through CTL, students are invited to discuss real cases—for example, how Islam views the phenomenon of hate speech on social media—so that Islamic values no longer feel abstract and distant from their lives (Hidayat & Syahidin, 2019).

Third Dimension: Technology

Integrating technology in PAI learning does not merely mean moving lectures from the classroom to an online platform. It encompasses the use of creative media—animated videos, da'wah podcasts, interactive quizzes, and value-based online discussions—that enable students to learn according to their individual styles and pace. More importantly, technology must be positioned both as an object of study and as a tool: PAI teachers need to teach students how to use technology responsibly, critically, and ethically from an Islamic perspective (Yahya, 2024).

Furthermore, the integration of technology in PAI learning should not merely focus on technical skills, but also emphasize ethical awareness in digital engagement. Students need to understand that every activity in cyberspace carries moral consequences. Islamic values such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and self-control must remain the foundation of online interaction. Therefore, digital literacy within PAI should include guidance on ethical

communication, verification of information, and the avoidance of harmful online behavior such as cyberbullying, hate speech, and the spread of misinformation.

The transformation of the curriculum should also encourage interdisciplinary learning that connects Islamic teachings with contemporary scientific and social issues. Through this approach, students can understand that Islam is not separated from modern life but provides ethical guidance for dealing with various global challenges. Discussions concerning environmental preservation, social justice, economic inequality, and responsible technological development can become important parts of contextual Islamic learning for the millennial generation.

Concrete Strategies for PAI Transformation in Building Character

Based on the synthesis of various studies reviewed, several concrete strategies can be implemented to realize PAI transformation with a genuine impact on millennial character formation. The first strategy is value internalization through narrative and reflection. Islamic character values are insufficient if taught only deductively (from definition to application); they need to be conveyed through a narrative approach that invites reflection. The use of exemplary stories from the Qur'an, hadith, and contemporary Islamic figures relevant to millennial life—packaged in visually and emotionally engaging formats—has proven more effective in deeply inculcating these values (Mucharomah & Miftah, 2017).

The second strategy is project-based learning grounded in Islamic social values. Character is not only formed through knowledge but also through the experience of acting. Islamic value-based service learning programs—such as social activities in the surrounding community linked to the concepts of zakat, infak, and sadaqah, or student-designed digital campaigns for religious moderation—provide millennials with space to internalize Islamic values through concrete action. This approach aligns with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which grants PAI teachers greater freedom to design creative and adaptive learning experiences.

Another strategic effort involves strengthening reflective learning activities in Islamic education. Reflection allows students to connect Islamic teachings with their personal experiences and social realities. Through reflective discussions, students are encouraged not only to understand religious concepts theoretically but also to evaluate their own attitudes and behavior critically. This approach is important because character formation requires continuous self-awareness and personal commitment rather than mere cognitive understanding.

Collaborative learning activities can also contribute significantly to character formation among millennials. Group discussions, collaborative projects, and problem-solving activities encourage students to develop communication skills, mutual respect, responsibility, and

teamwork. In Islamic education, these collaborative values align closely with the principles of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* and social solidarity. Therefore, learning activities that promote cooperation rather than competition alone should become an important component of transformed PAI learning.

The third strategy is strengthening the digital competence of PAI teachers. Transformation cannot proceed without competent human resources. PAI teachers need to be equipped with Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK)—the ability to pedagogically integrate technology in the context of PAI content. Ritonga, Sumanti, and Anas (2023) found that the majority of PAI teachers still have limited TPACK ability, which represents a significant obstacle in efforts to transform digital-based learning. The fourth strategy is building a synergistic character education ecosystem. Schools or madrasas cannot work in isolation. The character formation of the millennial generation requires collaboration among educational institutions, families, and communities. Parents need to be involved in Islamic digital literacy programs, so that values taught at school are reinforced at home. Religious communities such as *majelis ta'lim*, Islamic youth organizations, and *pesantren* can serve as character formation laboratories that complement the function of schools.

In addition, educational institutions should create a school culture that consistently reflects Islamic values in everyday activities. Character education will be more effective when values such as discipline, honesty, mutual respect, and social responsibility are practiced collectively within the school environment. Teachers, administrators, and students must become part of an educational ecosystem that supports the implementation of Islamic character values not only inside classrooms but also through daily interaction and institutional culture. Equally important is the role of extracurricular activities in supporting Islamic character education. Religious organizations, Islamic discussion forums, social service programs, and youth community activities provide opportunities for students to practice Islamic values directly in real-life situations. Through these experiences, students learn that Islamic teachings are not limited to classroom discussions but are closely connected to social responsibility and community engagement.

Religious Moderation as a Pillar of Millennial Character

One aspect receiving particular emphasis in this study is the importance of religious moderation (*wasatiyyah Islam*) as the primary pillar of millennial character formation through PAI. Amid increasing religious polarization in the form of both extremism and excessive secularism—the millennial generation needs a solid yet inclusive Islamic understanding as its foundation.

A transformed PAI must be capable of instilling at least four characteristics of religious moderation: *tawassuth* (a middle stance that avoids extremism), *tawazun* (balance in considering various perspectives), *ta'adul* (justice that is non-discriminatory toward any group) and *tasamuh* (tolerance of differences within the framework of universal values). These four values need to be taught explicitly while being consistently modeled by educators in every classroom interaction (Inayatillah, 2021). Interestingly, social media—often viewed as a threat to moderation—can actually be repurposed into a vehicle for internalizing moderating values. Islam-based media literacy programs that teach students how to identify extremism-laden content, produce courteous *da'wah* content, and interact civilly in the digital space can become an integral part of a transformed PAI curriculum.

The strengthening of religious moderation among millennials is particularly important in multicultural societies such as Indonesia, where diversity in ethnicity, culture, and religious understanding is unavoidable. Through moderate Islamic education, students can develop attitudes of openness and mutual respect without losing their Islamic identity. Such values are essential for maintaining social harmony and preventing conflicts caused by intolerance or extremism. Therefore, PAI transformation should continuously emphasize moderation as an integral part of Islamic character education in the digital era.

Religious moderation education should also encourage students to develop critical thinking when encountering differences in religious opinions and practices. In the digital era, young people are frequently exposed to polarizing debates and provocative narratives that may create confusion and hostility. By strengthening moderate Islamic perspectives, PAI can help students understand diversity wisely, avoid extreme attitudes, and maintain respectful dialogue in both online and offline interactions.

4. CONCLUSION

The transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is essential for strengthening the character of the millennial generation in response to the challenges of the digital era. This transformation should be holistic, encompassing a relevant curriculum, active and participatory learning methods, and the integration of technology grounded in Islamic values. Rather than simply reforming curricula or adopting digital tools, PAI must prepare young Muslims who are intellectually competent, spiritually grounded, socially responsible, and capable of contributing positively to society. Millennials should be viewed as strategic partners in promoting Islam as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* through education that is adaptive, innovative, and value-oriented.

To achieve this goal, several strategic steps are recommended: revising the PAI curriculum to address contemporary issues, strengthening teachers' competencies in TPACK and student-

centered pedagogy, developing a collaborative character education ecosystem involving families and communities, and conducting further empirical research to evaluate the effectiveness of transformational practices. Educational policies should also provide sustained support for digital learning innovation, teacher professional development, and character-based curriculum implementation. Ultimately, the transformation of PAI is a continuous process that must evolve alongside social change while preserving the moral and spiritual foundations of Islam. Through a balanced integration of Islamic values, technological literacy, and character education, PAI can cultivate a generation that is morally resilient, socially responsible, and prepared to face the complexities of modern society.

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