

MORAL ALGORITHMS: NEGOTIATING THE ETHICAL COMPASS OF MUSLIM YOUTH IN THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

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Abstract. Digital transformation has shifted the arena of value formation from physical spaces to algorithmically curated digital ecosystems. This study examines the role of social media algorithms in shaping the ethical compass of Muslim youth through a netnographic approach. The research aims to: (1) analyze the operational mechanisms of social media algorithms in shaping ethical discourse, (2) map the dynamics of value negotiation between Islamic teachings and global influences in digital spaces, and (3) formulate a digital ethics literacy model based on Islamic values. The study uses a qualitative approach with a netnographic design, involving in-depth interviews with 10 Muslim adolescents (15–23 years), content observation on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Telegram over three months, and screen time analysis. Findings reveal an average social media usage of 4.2 hours per day, creating intensive exposure to algorithmic curation that forms a hybrid moral ecosystem. All participants experienced value conflicts and developed negotiation strategies through selective hybridization and the construction of hybrid religious authority. Most participants possessed basic algorithmic literacy, but its effectiveness was limited by system complexity. The study concludes that transformation of Islamic Religious Education is required through the integration of critical algorithmic literacy, strengthening of digital parenting, and multi-stakeholder collaboration so that Muslim youth can wisely navigate digital ecosystems based on Islamic values

Keywords: Algorithms, Digital Ethics, Muslim Youth, Islamic Religious Education, Netnography

I. INTRODUCTION

The massive digital transformation has fundamentally changed the social and cultural landscape in which Muslim adolescents grow and interact today. Digital spaces are no longer merely entertainment media; rather, they have become the primary arena where values, identities, and moral understandings are shaped and negotiated [1]. This phenomenon has become increasingly crucial considering that data shows Indonesian adolescents spend an average of more than five hours each day on various digital platforms, a critical period for the development of their ethical perceptions [1]. Within this ecosystem, social media algorithms function like invisible curators, filtering and presenting content that serves as the basis for shaping their perspectives and attitudes. This reality highlights the urgency of understanding how algorithms influence the moral direction of Muslim adolescents, particularly when Islamic religious education is often considered less optimal in responding to the overwhelming flow of digital information.

Recent literature reviews demonstrate various perspectives regarding the relationship between Islam, adolescents, and the digital world. Globally, the study by Zaid et al. highlights how Muslim influencers on social media reconstruct religious authority and Islamic practices among millennials, forming new modes of religious authentication [2]. On the other hand, Nasir analyzes the rise of Islamic revivalism reflected through Muslim consumption ethics, where new media plays an

important role in shaping popular culture oriented toward identity and halal market morality [3]. In the field of digital literacy in Islamic education, Saputra et al. offer concrete strategies for teachers in fostering character development in the social media era through an integrative and critical approach [4]. In the context of digital ethics, Setiawan et al. specifically develop the concept of digital ethics from the perspective of Islamic Religious Education, emphasizing moral principles in digital media engagement [5]. Narratives related to digital da'wah in the algorithmic era are also discussed by Nuriana & Salwa, who highlight the potential of digital media for moderate and inclusive communication. Nevertheless, a significant research gap remains, particularly in comprehensive and integrated analyses of how digital platform algorithms specifically shape the process of value negotiation and the construction of ethical compasses among Muslim adolescents in their daily lives [6].

Based on the identification of this knowledge gap, this study is designed with three interrelated primary objectives. First, to critically analyze the operational mechanisms of social media algorithms in shaping ethical discourses among Muslim adolescents. Second, to comprehensively map the dynamics of negotiation occurring between the Islamic values embraced by adolescents and the various global influences present within the contemporary digital ecosystem. Third, to formulate a digital ethical literacy model grounded in Islamic values that is responsive and adaptive to the complexities of

algorithmic realities. To achieve these objectives, a netnographic approach was selected to explore the authentic experiences of adolescents in their daily digital interactions, while in-depth interviews will be conducted to complement and enrich observational data in understanding the process of value internalization [7].

Based on the established theoretical framework, this study proposes several working hypotheses to be tested empirically. The first hypothesis suggests that social media algorithms function as significant agents of moral socialization, particularly through mechanisms of content amplification and the formation of echo chambers that narrow the diversity of perspectives, a phenomenon mentioned in the study by Nuriana & Salwa. The second hypothesis states that the strength and resilience of a Muslim adolescent's ethical compass are directly proportional to the level of Islamic digital literacy they possess [6], as emphasized in studies on digital ethics based on Islamic Religious Education [5]. Furthermore, it is assumed that the strong internalization of Islamic spiritual values can serve as a crucial moderating factor in facing exposure to negative online content, an aspect also identified in studies on digital parenting within Muslim families (Douglass et al., 2022). The validity of these hypotheses will be tested through a series of comprehensive field data analyses.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a netnographic (digital ethnography) design to deeply explore the role of digital spaces and algorithms in shaping the ethical compass of Muslim adolescents. A qualitative approach was chosen because it focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of socio-cultural phenomena within their natural context, where the meanings and experiences of the research subjects become the primary focus (Creswell, 2019). The research was conducted over a period of three months, with the primary locus situated in digital spaces (social media platforms) accessed by Muslim adolescents in the city of Cirebon. The subjects of this study consisted of 10 (ten) Muslim adolescents aged 15 to 23 years who were active users of Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and/or Telegram. The participants were selected purposively based on the following criteria: (1) being Muslim, (2) actively using at least two of the mentioned social media platforms, (3) willing to participate in in-depth interviews, and (4) having owned social media accounts for at least one year. The recruitment process was conducted through youth religious community networks and recommendations from Islamic Religious Education teachers using a snowball sampling technique [8].

The research procedure began with a one-month passive digital observation phase to map platforms and types of content relevant to moral issues among Muslim adolescents. Subsequently, active participant observation was conducted over two months to document interaction patterns, content curation, and algorithmic dynamics within comment sections, feeds, and discussion groups. The primary data collection instrument was the researcher as the key instrument, supported by digital observation guidelines, semi-

structured interview protocols, and documentation sheets to record screen time and screenshots of significant content. In-depth interviews were conducted offline, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes for each participant, in order to explore their experiences, value conflicts, negotiation strategies, and awareness of algorithms. Additional data collected included digital field notes and archives of online interactions.

The data analysis technique followed the thematic analysis model developed by Braun & Clarke (2006), adapted to the context of digital data. The analysis stages began with data transcription and familiarization, followed by the creation of initial codes inductively derived from interview and observation data. These codes were then grouped to form potential themes representing patterns related to algorithmic mechanisms, value negotiation, and digital literacy. Data interpretation was carried out by understanding the emerging themes within relevant theoretical frameworks, such as the concept of the filter bubble (Pariser, 2011) and hybrid religious authority in the digital era (Zaid et al., 2022). To ensure data validity, method triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation, as well as conducting member checks with two participants to confirm the preliminary findings. This analysis was directed toward answering the research objectives concerning algorithmic mechanisms, the dynamics of value negotiation, and the formulation of a digital ethical literacy model based on Islamic values.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Digital Ecosystem as an Arena of Moral Construction: Patterns of Exposure and Algorithmic Curation

Quantitative screen-time data reveal a significant picture of the intensity of Muslim adolescents' engagement within the digital ecosystem. On average, participants spent 4.2 hours per day on digital platforms (ranging from 2 to 7 hours), meaning that nearly one-quarter of their waking hours (assuming 16 hours awake) were devoted to digital interaction. This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Douglass et al. which states that Muslim adolescents spend an average of 4–6 hours daily on digital platforms, with variations based on age and gender. Female adolescents tended to use social media more intensively; for instance, EL (female, 23 years old) reported spending up to 7 hours per day online, while male participants ranged between 3 and 5 hours [9]. This difference aligns with the research of Marpuah concerning gender differences in social media usage among Muslim adolescents, where females were found to engage more frequently with relational and motivational content [10].

Qualitative analysis of algorithmically displayed content demonstrates that the moral ecosystem within the digital sphere is highly complex. Observations identified mixed curation patterns in which Islamic values coexist alongside global secular content. For example, motivational messages such as "Self-confidence is merely

repetition” meaning that one should not fear or hesitate because the activity being undertaken is simply repeated practice—appeared alongside advertisements for teaching vacancies or discussions concerning marriage age. Such patterns create what the researcher refers to as algorithmic moral bricolage, a process through which algorithms combine fragmented values into a seemingly coherent moral narrative for each user [11]. This phenomenon reflects the findings of Zaid et al. regarding how digital platforms reconstruct religious practices through disconnected yet meaningful content [2].

The mechanism of the echo chamber, or informational spaces that repeatedly display similar content, was also confirmed through participants’ testimonies. EL (female, 23 years old) stated, “Once I watch Islamic content, the same type of content keeps appearing repeatedly.” However, observations further demonstrated that these echo chambers are not entirely closed. Several participants reported encountering unexpected content, such as LGBT-related material or hedonistic lifestyles, which often caused confusion and moral discomfort. These findings support Pariser’s theory of the filter bubble while also extending it by suggesting that algorithmic logic is shaped not only by user preferences but also by platform imperatives to maximize engagement [12].

The study conducted by Nuriana & Salwa on digital da’wah in the algorithmic era found that platforms often sacrifice content homogeneity in favor of diversity capable of increasing interaction. The impact of such intensive exposure is profound. On average, Muslim adolescents spent 4.1 hours per day exposed to algorithmically curated content, amounting to more than 1,200 hours annually—equivalent to approximately 50 full working days [6]. This scale of exposure shifts the balance of influence away from traditional institutions such as families, schools, and mosques toward digital algorithms. The concept of digital habitus, developed by Hepp, is particularly relevant here: through repeated exposure, algorithms gradually shape the thinking patterns, values, and even personalities of Muslim adolescents in digital contexts [13]. Nevertheless, the findings also indicate that participants are not passive recipients; rather, they develop critical awareness and adaptive strategies, as will be further discussed in the section on algorithmic literacy [14].

Value Negotiation and Religious Authority in the Era of Digital Influencers

All participants (100%) acknowledged experiencing conflicts between the Islamic values they uphold and the digital trends and content they consume. These conflicts emerged across multiple dimensions: normative (dating versus chastity values), visual (modesty and hijab), economic (consumerism versus simplicity), and linguistic (hate speech versus ethical communication). AP (female, 20 years old) firmly stated: “Many Muslim influencers I follow still display romantic dating relationships, even though such practices are prohibited in Islamic teachings.” Meanwhile, AJ (female, 17 years old) questioned social bias by asking: “Why are women wearing niqab who dance on TikTok criticized more harshly

than ordinary hijab wearers, even though both are doing the same thing and are considered inappropriate?”

The process of value negotiation carried out by participants demonstrates remarkable complexity. Rather than adopting binary approaches of complete acceptance or rejection, participants engaged in what may be termed selective hybridization, selectively adopting elements from multiple sources of authority [12]. This pattern is reflected in the influencers they followed: a combination of traditional religious authorities such as Adi Hidayat and Buya Yahya, educational influencers such as Jerome Polin, and entertainment creators such as Raditya Dika. This practice supports the findings of Zaid et al regarding the reimagining of religious authority in the digital age, where authority becomes distributed, fluid, and personalized. Muslim adolescents develop what can be described as hybrid authority autonomy the ability to assemble authority from multiple sources according to contextual relevance [2].

Content observations further revealed the transformation of Islamic values into digital formats. Content such as “Appropriate Age for Marriage”, which discusses Islamic regulations concerning marriage, was presented using modern visual designs and narratives easily understood by younger generations. Likewise, social-action content depicting mosque-cleaning activities and food-sharing campaigns not only conveyed messages of cleanliness and generosity but also framed them as aspirational lifestyle practices. However, algorithms simultaneously presented contradictory narratives: luxurious lifestyles, premarital relationships, and content blurring gender norms. Within this context, value negotiation occurred through three primary mechanisms: compartmentalization of digital identity, reframing of content within Islamic contexts, and resistance toward inappropriate content.

This phenomenon supports Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity [15], later applied within digital religion studies by Campbell & Evolvi. Islamic values are no longer static or singular; instead, they become flexible, adapting to digital contexts while attempting to preserve their core teachings [16]. This negotiation process demonstrates that the formation of ethical guidance among Muslim adolescents is not a linear process moving from socialization to internalization, but rather a cyclical interaction between external influences and internal reflection [17]. These findings reinforce Nasir’s research on consumption ethics among Muslims, emphasizing how religious values are negotiated within everyday consumption practices, including digital content consumption [3].

Algorithmic Literacy as a Strategy of Moral Resilience: Between Awareness and Agency

Most participants (9 out of 10) stated that they were aware of how algorithms determine the content they encounter. They understood that algorithms operate based on interaction histories such as searches, likes, watch duration, and even usage time. RA (male, 19 years old) explained his strategy: “I often skip content I dislike so the algorithm can understand my preferences.” This practice indicates the presence of algorithmic literacy the ability to understand,

critique, and influence algorithmic systems. However, levels of understanding varied among participants. SR (male, 17 years old), for example, admitted that he was unaware of algorithmic curation, indicating the existence of digital literacy gaps among Muslim adolescents [18].

Participants' algorithmic literacy was not merely cognitive but also operational. They developed various strategies to "teach" the algorithm, including intentional searching, selective engagement, and digital detox practices. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these strategies remained limited. Several participants complained that unwanted content continued to appear despite efforts to "clean" their content feeds. This demonstrates the limitations of individual agency when confronting complex and often opaque algorithmic systems. These findings align with the study by Risfaisal & Firdaus, which emphasizes that digital literacy must extend beyond technical skills toward a more critical understanding of how technology shapes social reality [19].

Observations of digital interactions also showed that algorithmic literacy develops collectively. In one screenshot, users discussed content-production methods: "Wow, what did you use to record this? The quality is so clear," to which another user replied, "I used a DJI Mini 3." Such interactions create epistemic communities in which knowledge regarding algorithms and content creation is collectively shared. Participants also reported discussing morally controversial content with peers. EL, for example, stated: "We discussed in our WhatsApp group about LGBT content that suddenly appeared." These collective processes transform algorithmic literacy from an individual competence into a social practice that strengthens communal resilience [20].

When asked about appropriate regulation of algorithms for Muslim adolescents, participants suggested a framework of "ethical algorithms by design." They recommended prioritizing educational, motivational, and socially conscious content while limiting hoaxes, hate speech, and exploitative material [21]. Nevertheless, tensions remained between the desire for morally "safe" digital spaces and the need for exploration and entertainment. Participants' recommendations reflect aspirations for technological sovereignty the capacity of Muslim communities to shape technology according to their values. These findings are consistent with Setiawan et al concerning digital ethics within Islamic Religious Education, which emphasizes educational rather than restrictive approaches [5].

An Integrative Model of Islamic Religious Education in the Algorithmic Era: From Response to Transformation

Messages from participants directed toward Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers revealed dissatisfaction with traditional methods of religious instruction. AI (male, 20 years old) offered constructive criticism: "Don't just say something is haram; instead, guide us toward what content is good to watch, follow, and useful according to our age." This criticism indicates the need for educational approaches that are dialogical, contextual, and empowering rather than merely normative. Such perspectives are consistent with the findings of Risfaisal & Firdaus regarding the effectiveness of

humanistic approaches in character education within the digital era [19].

Based on the findings, the researcher proposes a model termed "Algorithmic Literacy-Based Islamic Religious Education" (PAI-AL) consisting of three core pillars. First, critical-algorithmic understanding, which educates adolescents about how algorithms function, their inherent biases, and their influence on value formation. Second, digital value negotiation competence, which equips adolescents with ethical frameworks for addressing value contradictions in digital spaces [22]. Third, positive content production opportunities, encouraging adolescents to become creators of content reflecting Islamic values in creative and contextual ways [23].

The implementation of the PAI-AL model requires transformation at curricular, pedagogical, and ecosystemic levels. Curricula should incorporate algorithmic literacy as a core competency rather than a supplementary topic. Teaching methods must shift from one-way lectures toward participatory approaches utilizing digital media as learning tools [24]. Educational ecosystems should also strengthen collaboration with parents, digital communities, and social media platforms. Research conducted by Nuriana & Salwa on digital da'wah highlights the potential collaboration between educators and Muslim content creators in building educational digital ecosystems [6].

Within this model, the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers changes from transmitters of knowledge into critical facilitators and learning companions. Teachers are no longer the sole religious authorities but instead become facilitators helping adolescents navigate multiple authorities within digital environments [25]. This transformation requires improving teachers' digital literacy and participatory pedagogical competencies. The research conducted by Afroo & Yudita regarding moral education in preventing cyberbullying emphasizes the importance of teacher training in implementing educational approaches responsive to digital-era challenges [26].

Digital Parenting and the Family's Role in Building Moral Resilience in Digital Spaces

Research findings indicate that although adolescents spend substantial amounts of time in digital environments, communication with parents regarding digital experiences remains limited. Only 3 out of 10 participants reported regularly discussing digital content with their parents. This finding reinforces the research conducted by Douglass et al. (2022) concerning the digital generation gap within Muslim families. Parents often lack awareness of the complexities of the digital ecosystems experienced by their children, while adolescents perceive their parents as lacking sufficient understanding to provide guidance.

Despite this limitation, participants recognized the importance of family roles. FA (female, 18 years old) expressed the hope that "Parents can educate children about the use of social media and maintaining modesty." This expectation reflects a desire for educational rather than restrictive digital parenting. Digital parenting within Muslim contexts must integrate Islamic values with understandings of

digital development. Nasir's study on Muslim consumption ethics emphasizes the significance of families as the first environment for value internalization, including within digital consumption practices [3].

Based on the findings, the researcher proposes the implementation of a "Family Digital Literacy Circle" model—a structured discussion forum between parents and adolescents concerning digital experiences. This model consists of three components: first, shared learning, in which parents and adolescents exchange knowledge; second, value clarification, where Islamic values are discussed in relation to digital challenges; and third, collective regulation, where families collaboratively formulate digital usage rules aligned with family values [15]. This approach is consistent with the study by Zuhra et al., which found parental involvement effective in strengthening character development during the digital era [27].

Theoretical Contributions: Toward a Theory of Algorithmic Moral Formation

This study contributes theoretically to understanding moral formation in the digital age through the development of the Algorithmic Moral Formation (AMF) framework. The AMF framework integrates three dimensions: algorithmic curation as a process of value selection and reinforcement, negotiation of agency as individuals' active responses to such curation, and interpretive communities as social environments where value meanings are negotiated. This framework moves beyond the dichotomy between technological determinism and human free will by emphasizing the dialogical relationship between technological systems and human agency [28].

Within Islamic studies, this research develops the concept of Digital Islamic Ethics as an extension of contemporary Islamic jurisprudence. Digital Islamic Ethics does not merely apply Islamic ethical principles to digital contexts but also formulates new principles emerging from interactions with algorithmic technologies [27]. This concept corresponds with the development of Islamic digital humanities, which examines relationships between Islamic traditions and digital transformations, as discussed by Bunt in his research on Islam and the internet [29].

This study also contributes to digital literacy scholarship by introducing the concept of Critical Algorithmic Literacy for Islamic Education (CAL-IE). CAL-IE is a literacy framework integrating critical understandings of algorithms with Islamic ethical principles. Unlike conventional digital literacy approaches, CAL-IE emphasizes values, purposes (maqasid), and cultural contextualization. This framework may serve as a reference for developing digital literacy approaches sensitive to specific religious and cultural contexts.

Practical Implications: Recommendations for Stakeholders

Based on the research findings, the researcher formulates recommendations for various stakeholders:

1. For the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs:

Integrate algorithmic literacy into Islamic Religious Education curricula at all educational levels; develop training programs for Islamic Religious Education teachers concerning value education in the digital era; and formulate digital ethics guidelines grounded in Islamic values for schools and madrasahs.

2. For Educational Institutions and Islamic Religious Education Teachers:
Utilize digital media as educational resources; collaborate with Muslim content creators to develop relevant educational materials; and establish discussion forums involving teachers, students, and parents regarding digital-world challenges.
3. For Parents and Muslim Families:
Improve digital parenting competencies balancing supervision with guidance; establish family digital habits such as discussing content and screen time together; and model wise social media usage.
4. For Social Media Platforms:
Implement more transparent and responsive curation mechanisms aligned with Muslim community values; collaborate with Islamic organizations in developing value-sensitive content labeling systems; and provide more advanced and user-friendly parental control tools.
5. For Muslim Content Creators:
Produce content that is not only entertaining but also educational and inspirational; foster follower communities that are critical and reflective rather than merely passive audiences; and collaborate with educators to connect digital spaces with formal education

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results and discussion, this study concludes that the digital ecosystem has become a highly influential new arena of moral construction for Muslim adolescents. Intensive exposure to algorithmic curation (averaging 4.2 hours per day) creates a phenomenon of algorithmic moral bricolage, in which Islamic values merge with global secular content within personalized narratives. In confronting this complexity, adolescents actively negotiate values and authority through strategies of selective hybridization, constructing fluid forms of hybrid authority autonomy between traditional religious scholars and digital influencers. They also develop algorithmic literacy as a form of resilience, encompassing critical awareness and operational strategies for influencing content flows, although these strategies remain limited when confronting platform logics. These findings affirm the inadequacy of conventional Islamic Religious Education approaches and highlight the need for transformation toward an integrative Algorithmic Literacy-Based Islamic Religious Education (PAI-AL) model that is dialogical, contextual, and empowering.

On the other hand, the study reveals that the roles of family and digital parenting remain limited, characterized by digital generation gaps and minimal open communication regarding online experiences, despite families being recognized as primary sources of values. Theoretically, this

research contributes to the development of the Algorithmic Moral Formation (AMF) framework and the concept of Digital Islamic Ethics, emphasizing dialogical interactions between human agency and technological systems, while also introducing the concept of Critical Algorithmic Literacy for Islamic Education (CAL-IE) as a contextual literacy framework. Practically, the findings emphasize the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in creating ethical digital ecosystems capable of strengthening the moral resilience of Muslim adolescents

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