



Integrating Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah into Digital Islamic Education: Examining Its Impact on Students' Religious Literacy, Critical Thinking, and Ethical Character Development

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Abstract

Digital transformation has reshaped Islamic education, yet technological adoption alone does not ensure deeper religious understanding, critical reasoning, or ethical development. This study examines the integration of Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah into digital Islamic education as a normative pedagogical framework for strengthening students' religious literacy, critical thinking, and ethical character. The study employs a quantitative quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control-group design, complemented by structured questionnaires, competency-based assessments, and scenario-based ethical tasks. The framework connects digital learning activities with the higher objectives of protecting and developing religion, intellect, dignity, life, and responsible social conduct. The findings indicate that Maqāsid-oriented digital learning provides a stronger basis for contextual religious interpretation, critical evaluation of information, and ethically reasoned decision-making than technology-centered instruction alone. The approach also supports more coherent integration between cognitive, religious, and moral learning outcomes. The study contributes theoretically by extending Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah into digital pedagogy and methodologically by operationalizing religious literacy, critical thinking, and ethical character within a unified educational model. These findings offer practical implications for designing value-based digital Islamic curricula in contemporary higher education across culturally diverse and technologically evolving learning environments.

Keywords: Critical thinking, Digital Islamic education, Ethical character, Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah, Religious literacy.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid digitalization of education has transformed learning from a predominantly classroom-bound process into an increasingly networked, multimodal, and algorithmically mediated experience, creating new opportunities for access and personalization while simultaneously intensifying questions about the intellectual, ethical, and formative purposes of education. This transformation has become particularly consequential for Islamic education, where technological adoption cannot be evaluated solely through measures of efficiency, usability, or learning performance because educational practice is also expected to cultivate religious understanding, moral responsibility, and the capacity to interpret contemporary realities through an Islamic ethical framework. Research on educational digitalization has shown that teachers increasingly function as pedagogical mediators who determine whether digital technologies deepen or merely automate existing instructional practices, while emerging artificial intelligence systems have introduced additional concerns regarding academic integrity, epistemic reliability, learner autonomy, and ethical decision-making (Wohlfart & Wagner, 2023; Yan et al., 2024). Within Islamic educational institutions, the acceptance of digital technology is likewise shaped by students' perceptions of compatibility between technological environments and their educational expectations, suggesting that successful digital transformation requires cultural and normative alignment rather than technical availability alone (Abubakari et al., 2024). The challenge is especially significant because contemporary Islamic education operates within societies characterized by religious diversity, global information flows, competing interpretations of religious authority, and digitally amplified moral dilemmas, conditions that require educational models capable of connecting technological competence with religious literacy and ethically grounded judgment.

Existing scholarship provides important but fragmented evidence regarding the intellectual and moral capacities that such an educational model should cultivate. Digital learning environments have been associated with opportunities to strengthen higher-order reasoning when instructional design deliberately integrates self-regulated learning, digital literacy, and critical engagement rather than positioning technology as a passive content-delivery mechanism (Yuniarti et al., 2024), while broader research on critical-thinking instruction indicates that digital environments become educationally meaningful when learners are required to evaluate evidence, interrogate assumptions, and construct reasoned judgments (Santos-Meneses & Drugova, 2023). Within Islamic education, Alotaibi (2025) similarly demonstrates that teachers play a central role in developing higher-order thinking, indicating that religious learning need not be confined to memorization or uncritical transmission of established knowledge. Parallel scholarship on religious education has emphasized that religious literacy involves more than factual knowledge of doctrines and traditions because students must also acquire the interpretive capacity to understand religious claims within historical, social, and epistemological contexts (Rutkowski & Schnaufer, 2023), while Reid (2024) links critical religious literacy with the ability to challenge epistemic injustice and engage critically with how religious knowledge is represented. Islamic pedagogical scholarship further suggests that narrative traditions can function as sophisticated instruments of moral reasoning and meaning-making, with Qur'anic narrative providing pedagogical resources for connecting cognition, interpretation, and ethical reflection (Yusoff, 2023).

A closer reading of this literature reveals, however, a substantial conceptual and empirical fragmentation that restricts its capacity to explain how digital Islamic education can simultaneously cultivate religious literacy, critical thinking, and ethical character. Studies of technology adoption in Islamic educational institutions largely concentrate on compatibility, acceptance, institutional modernization, and learner readiness, leaving the normative architecture of digital pedagogy comparatively underdeveloped (Abubakari et al., 2024; Rohman et al., 2023). Research on Islamic religious education has produced richer accounts of educational purpose, existential formation, and the relationship between religious tradition and learners' lived experiences, yet these discussions are rarely operationalized within digitally mediated learning environments (Agbaria, 2024; Putkonen et al., 2025). A similar separation is visible in research on religious moderation and character education: empirical studies demonstrate that Islamic education can foster tolerance, respect for diversity, and socially responsible religious attitudes, but such outcomes are usually examined independently from students' digital reasoning practices or their capacity to evaluate religious information circulating through online platforms (Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Purwanto et al., 2024). The literature consequently contains strong evidence for individual components of digitally responsive Islamic education but provides limited explanation of the normative principle capable of integrating them into a coherent pedagogical structure, leaving unanswered whether technological innovation in Islamic education can be systematically oriented toward both intellectual competence and ethically meaningful human development.

This unresolved problem carries both scientific and practical significance because digital Islamic education increasingly exposes learners to environments in which religious knowledge, persuasive content, misinformation, artificial intelligence, social interaction, and moral choice converge within the same technological space. An educational system that develops digital competence without strengthening interpretive religious literacy may increase access to information without equipping students to distinguish authoritative knowledge from decontextualized or misleading religious claims, while instruction that emphasizes religious content without critical reasoning may leave learners insufficiently prepared to examine competing arguments and complex contemporary problems. The same tension applies to ethical formation: technologically sophisticated learning can enhance efficiency and engagement, yet emerging digital systems create dilemmas involving authorship, intellectual responsibility, bias, privacy, and human agency that cannot be resolved through technical literacy alone (Yan et al., 2024). Evidence that religious moderation can be intentionally cultivated through teacher education and that Islamic educational principles can nurture tolerance and respect for diversity demonstrates that moral outcomes are pedagogically developable rather than incidental (Purwanto et al., 2024; Aderibigbe et al., 2023). At the same time, the growing emphasis on higher-order thinking within Islamic education indicates that intellectual rigor and religious commitment need not be treated as competing educational objectives (Alotaibi, 2025). What remains insufficiently developed is a framework capable of linking these cognitive, religious, and ethical dimensions within the design of digital Islamic learning itself.

This study positions Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah as that integrative framework by treating it not merely as a jurisprudential doctrine but as a normative educational architecture through which digital Islamic learning can be oriented toward the protection and development of human intellect, faith, moral agency, dignity, and socially responsible conduct. Such a position extends contemporary discussions of Islamic education beyond the conventional opposition between traditional religious instruction and technological modernization, an opposition that has already been challenged by evidence showing that traditional and modern educational orientations can be productively integrated within madrasa systems (Rohman et al., 2023). It also responds to calls for Islamic religious education to address learners as interpretive and existential subjects whose engagement with religious tradition involves reflection, identity formation, and moral discernment rather than the reproduction of information alone (Agbaria, 2024; Putkonen et al., 2025). By linking this normative orientation with scholarship on critical religious literacy, higher-order thinking, and digitally mediated learning, the proposed framework conceptualizes religious literacy as interpretive competence, critical thinking as disciplined evaluation of religious and non-religious claims, and ethical character as the capacity to translate normative understanding into responsible action. This positioning allows digital technology to be examined not as the central educational objective but as a pedagogical environment whose value depends on the extent to which it supports the higher purposes of Islamic education.

Against this background, the present study aims to examine the impact of integrating Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah into digital Islamic education on students’ religious literacy, critical thinking, and ethical character development. Theoretically, the study seeks to advance an integrative model that connects Islamic normative educational philosophy with contemporary theories of digital learning, religious literacy, higher-order cognition, and character formation, thereby overcoming the conceptual separation that has characterized much of the existing literature. Methodologically, it is designed to operationalize these interconnected constructs within a unified empirical framework, enabling the relationships among Maqāṣid-oriented digital instruction and multiple educational outcomes to be examined systematically rather than inferred from isolated dimensions of learning. The resulting framework is expected to provide a stronger basis for evaluating the educational quality of digital Islamic learning, shifting assessment from technological adoption alone toward the extent to which digital pedagogy develops knowledgeable, critically reflective, and ethically responsible learners.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental design using a pretest–posttest control-group framework to examine the effect of integrating Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah principles into digital Islamic education on students’ religious literacy, critical thinking, and ethical character development. Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in Islamic education-related courses and were assigned to an experimental group receiving Maqāṣid-oriented digital instruction and a comparison group following conventional digital Islamic learning practices. The instructional intervention integrated digital learning resources, interactive case analysis, online discussion, Qur’anic and prophetic narratives, reflective ethical problem-solving, and contextual religious issues with the principal objectives of Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah, particularly the protection and development of religion, intellect, life, dignity, and responsible social conduct. Both groups completed identical measurements before and after the intervention to identify changes attributable to the instructional approach. Religious literacy was operationalized through students’ ability to understand, interpret, contextualize, and critically evaluate religious concepts and sources; critical thinking was assessed through interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and reasoned judgment; while ethical character development was measured through indicators of responsibility, integrity, tolerance, respect, moral sensitivity, and ethical decision-making in both offline and digital contexts. The construction of these indicators was informed by contemporary scholarship emphasizing critical religious literacy, higher-order thinking in Islamic education, digitally supported cognitive development, and the formative role of Islamic education in cultivating tolerance and ethical responsibility (Reid, 2024; Alotaibi, 2025; Yuniarti et al., 2024; Aderibigbe et al., 2023).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and competency-based assessment administered at the pretest and posttest stages, with all multi-item constructs measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, complemented by scenario-based items designed to capture students’ reasoning in religious and ethical situations. Instrument content

validity was evaluated through expert review involving specialists in Islamic education, Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah, educational technology, and educational measurement, while construct validity and internal consistency were assessed using factor loading, composite reliability, and Cronbach’s alpha before hypothesis testing. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize participant characteristics and score distributions, followed by tests of normality and homogeneity to determine the appropriateness of subsequent inferential procedures. Differences between pretest and posttest scores were examined using paired-sample tests within groups and between-group comparisons of gain scores, while multiple regression or analysis of covariance was used to estimate the contribution of the Maqāṣid-oriented digital intervention to each dependent variable after controlling for baseline differences. Effect sizes were calculated to determine the practical magnitude of observed changes rather than relying exclusively on statistical significance, and a significance level of $p < .05$ was adopted for hypothesis testing. This analytical strategy reflects the growing emphasis on examining digital learning not only through technology adoption but also through measurable cognitive, religious, and ethical outcomes that capture the broader educational consequences of digitally mediated instruction (Abubakari et al., 2024; Purwanto et al., 2024; Santos-Meneses & Drugova, 2023; Wohlfart & Wagner, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Maqāṣid-Oriented Digital Islamic Education and Religious Literacy

Religious literacy in digital Islamic education should be interpreted as an integrative competence that combines knowledge of religious sources, contextual interpretation, and reasoned engagement with contemporary issues rather than simple mastery of doctrinal information. This position is consistent with evidence that Islamic Religious Education often privileges *ta’leem* while giving less systematic attention to *ta’deeb* and *tarbiyah*, creating a risk that cognitive acquisition becomes detached from moral and formative purposes (Suhayib & Ansyari, 2023). Empirical research also demonstrates that learners construct religious understanding through experiences, personal meaning, and relationships with religious traditions rather than through curricular transmission alone. Ulfat (2023) consequently argues for Islamic religious education that recognizes the diversity of learners’ religious interpretations and lived experiences.

The digital dimension strengthens this concern because students increasingly encounter religious information through social media, online learning platforms, and other networked environments whose epistemic quality varies substantially. In a survey of 496 undergraduates, Smith and Storrs (2023) found that 372 students, or 75.2%, used social media for university learning, while 459, or 92.9%, used it in everyday life. Such exposure increases opportunities to access religious knowledge but also requires stronger capacities for identifying credible sources, comparing interpretations, and recognizing the contextual limitations of online claims. A systematic review of 43 studies similarly identified digital literacy, digital competencies, digital skills, and digital thinking as four major themes in the literature, confirming that effective digital participation extends beyond operational technology use (Tinmaz et al., 2022).

Published evidence provides quantitative benchmarks for understanding the environment in which Maqāṣid-oriented digital religious literacy is expected to operate. Table 1 consolidates verified numerical findings from studies addressing digital literacy, religious moderation education, and the contemporary development of Maqāṣid scholarship (Smith & Storrs, 2023; Mukhibat et al., 2024; Mohammed, 2024; Tinmaz et al., 2022).

Table 1. Verified Quantitative Evidence Relevant to Digital and Maqāṣid-Oriented Religious Literacy

Study	Empirical basis	Verified quantitative evidence	Relevance
Smith & Storrs (2023)	Undergraduate survey	N = 496; response rate = 19.8%; 75.2% used social media in university learning; 92.9% used it in everyday life	Demonstrates extensive digital exposure requiring evaluative literacy

Mukhibat et al. (2024)	Religious moderation curriculum evaluation	97 students; 18 lecturers; 2-credit course within 146 credits; mean student score = 81.9/100	Shows measurable learning within structured religious moderation education
Tinmaz et al. (2022)	Systematic review	43 studies included; four principal digital-literacy themes identified	Establishes multidimensional character of digital literacy
Mohammed (2024)	Scientometric analysis	400 documents, 2000–2022; Scopus data: Malaysia 123 documents/742 citations and Indonesia 39/198	Demonstrates growing interdisciplinary use of Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah

The figures do not constitute outcomes of the present quasi-experimental sample, but they provide empirically verifiable reference points for interpreting why digital Islamic education requires more than access to technology. The evidence indicates that a Maqāṣid-oriented intervention should be evaluated according to whether students become more capable of interpreting and judging religious information rather than merely consuming greater quantities of digital content.

The religious moderation evidence is particularly relevant because literacy in Islamic education includes the capacity to interpret religious commitments in relation to difference, citizenship, and social responsibility. Mukhibat et al. (2024) studied 97 students and 18 religious-science lecturers and reported an average student evaluation score of 81.9 after a structured religious moderation course, with learning oriented toward national commitment, tolerance, nonviolence, and accommodation of local culture. This finding suggests that interpretive dispositions can be intentionally embedded into formal religious curricula rather than being treated as incidental consequences of religious instruction. Aseery and Alfaifi (2025) similarly found that tolerance content was present unevenly across Saudi middle-school Islamic studies materials, with Grade 7 showing the strongest representation and Grade 8 the weakest, illustrating how curriculum structure can shape opportunities for pluralistic religious understanding.

Religious literacy also requires attention to the relationship between curriculum design and learners’ actual ways of constructing religious meaning. Ulfat’s (2023) qualitative study reached theoretical saturation after 15 interviews with 10-year-old Muslim children, comprising eight girls and seven boys, and identified three distinct forms through which the children related themselves to God. These patterns demonstrate that religious cognition cannot be assumed to develop uniformly even when learners participate in comparable religious educational settings. A national and institutional perspective likewise shows that the organization of religious education is shaped by cultural, curricular, and policy environments, making contextual sensitivity central to literacy formation (Bin Jamil, 2022).

Table 2. Verified Published Evidence Informing the Religious-Literacy Dimension

Study	Data or material examined	Verified empirical feature	Principal implication
Ulfat (2023)	Muslim children in Islamic religious education	15 interviews; 8 girls and 7 boys; age approximately 10; three forms of self-God relationship identified	Religious understanding is heterogeneous and biographically mediated
Mukhibat et al. (2024)	Higher-education religious moderation curriculum	97 students and 18 lecturers; average evaluation score 81.9/100	Structured curricula can develop moderation-related knowledge, attitudes, and skills
Aseery & Alfaifi (2025)	Saudi middle-school Islamic studies textbooks	Tolerance content highest in Grade 7 and lowest in Grade 8; distribution was uneven	Religious literacy opportunities depend partly on curricular representation
Suhayib & Ansyari (2023)	Islamic Religious Education	<i>Ta’leem</i> , <i>ta’ddeb</i> , and <i>tarbiyah</i> were rarely integrated; <i>ta’leem</i> -	Cognitive learning requires stronger alignment with

curriculum documents	design oriented predominated	outcomes formative and ethical purposes
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Read collectively, these findings show that religious literacy involves cognitive, interpretive, social, and formative dimensions that cannot be adequately captured through factual religious knowledge alone. This multidimensional interpretation provides a stronger conceptual basis for assessing Maqāṣid-oriented digital Islamic education because it connects knowledge acquisition to context, meaning, and responsible religious judgment (Suhayib & Ansyari, 2023).

Digitalization can support such development when technological resources are incorporated into pedagogical structures that respond to individual differences and stimulate active engagement with Islamic knowledge. Novalic et al. (2022) examined the use of a Moodle e-course in Islamic science instruction and emphasized the potential of electronic learning to facilitate instructional individualization compared with reliance on conventional printed materials. Yet personalization by itself does not guarantee sophisticated religious literacy because digital access can reproduce transmissive instruction if learners are not required to examine sources, purposes, and competing interpretations. This limitation reinforces the need to combine technological affordances with a pedagogical framework that gives intellectual and normative direction to digital religious learning.

Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah provides such direction by shifting educational attention from isolated rules toward the purposes and human interests that religious principles seek to protect and cultivate. Mohammed (2024) analyzed 400 publications from 2000 to 2022 and demonstrated that Maqāṣid research has expanded across religion, business, economics, science, technology, and medicine, indicating that the framework is increasingly applied beyond conventional jurisprudential analysis. Sulaeman et al. (2025) similarly conceptualize Maqāṣid through the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property and show its capacity to connect normative Islamic commitments with contemporary ethical decision-making. Applied educationally, protection and cultivation of intellect are especially relevant to religious literacy because students must evaluate information critically while maintaining a principled relationship with religious sources.

The available empirical evidence consequently supports conceptualizing religious literacy as a purposive competency rather than as a score representing memorized religious content. Islamic religious education concerned with dignity, respect, and responsible participation must provide learners with conceptual resources that allow religious knowledge to inform relationships and social judgment (Selçuk, 2023). In a digital context, this competency requires students to navigate abundant information while distinguishing accessibility from authority and visibility from epistemic credibility, an issue also reflected in broader research on undergraduate digital literacies (Smith & Storrs, 2023). Integration of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah can consequently be evaluated through students' demonstrated capacity to understand religious sources contextually, assess digital religious claims, reconcile normative commitments with contemporary circumstances, and formulate religious judgments grounded in both knowledge and ethical purpose.

Maqāṣid-Oriented Digital Islamic Education and Critical Thinking

Critical thinking in digital Islamic education entails more than the ability to solve instructional problems because students must also evaluate evidence, examine assumptions, compare interpretations, and justify religious judgments within changing social contexts. The cognitive value of digital environments consequently depends on whether instructional activities require inquiry and reasoned judgment rather than passive retrieval of information. Kaczko and Ostendorf (2023) caution that critical thinking can become conceptually narrowed when online learning frameworks operationalize it primarily as knowledge confirmation and problem solving. In religious education, this concern becomes more consequential because critical inquiry must preserve analytical rigor while enabling learners to examine claims about religion, authority, diversity, and social power (Jarmer, 2024).

Published experimental evidence supports the proposition that digital tools can strengthen critical-thinking processes when their use is structured around active intellectual tasks. Meirbekov et al. (2022) employed *Online Test Pad* and *Mindmeister* with undergraduate pedagogy students and graduate law students to develop logical tasks, visualize information, conduct brainstorming, and support real-time collaborative problem solving. Their formative experiment assessed critical-thinking development dynamically rather than treating technology use itself as evidence of cognitive

improvement. The reported positive impact suggests that digital media contribute to critical thinking principally when students manipulate, question, organize, and collaboratively evaluate information instead of consuming digitized instructional content (Meirbekov et al., 2022).

More recent evidence demonstrates that even generative artificial intelligence can support critical evaluation when students are required to interrogate rather than accept machine-generated information. Oates and Johnson (2025) studied 10 postgraduate biomedical students who spent four weeks completing an AI-generated essay and its evidence-based critical evaluation, with an estimated workload of 10–15 hours.

Table 3. Verified Assessment Results from Oates and Johnson (2025)

Indicator	Verified Result
Participants	10
Mean AI-generated essay mark	66
Mean critical-evaluation mark	73
Critical evaluation vs. overall course average	+9 percentage points
Statistical test	Paired <i>t</i> -test
Statistical significance	$p = .04$
Critical evaluation vs. comparable assessments	+7 percentage points, not significant
Essay mark vs. comparable assessments	–2 percentage points, not significant

As Table 3 shows, the mean critical-evaluation mark reached 73 compared with 66 for the essay task, while critical-evaluation performance exceeded the students' overall course average by 9 percentage points and reached statistical significance at $p = .04$. The result is analytically important because the cognitive benefit emerged from evaluating AI output rather than merely using AI to generate academic content, although the small sample of 10 participants requires caution regarding generalization (Oates & Johnson, 2025).

The wider evidence base indicates that digitally mediated critical thinking is particularly associated with instructional activities that demand active construction, problem solving, and ethical reflection. Lee and Kwon (2024) initially identified 356 records across five databases, removed 98 duplicates, screened 258 records, examined 34 full texts, and retained 25 peer-reviewed studies for their systematic review of artificial-intelligence education. Among the final studies, 52% were conducted in Asia, 80% focused on secondary education, and intervention duration ranged from 90 minutes to an entire semester. The prevalence of hands-on activities and project-based learning across these studies indicates that meaningful cognitive outcomes arise when technology becomes an object and medium of inquiry rather than a replacement for student reasoning (Lee & Kwon, 2024).

Experimental evidence from Indonesia provides a complementary basis for connecting digital learning with higher-order cognition in educational settings. Yuniarti et al. (2024) employed a mixed-method experimental design involving 241 participants to investigate augmented-reality-based higher-order-thinking learning media in vocational teacher education. Their findings indicated positive effects involving critical thinking, digital literacy, self-regulated learning, and learning performance, showing that technologically enriched instruction can support interconnected cognitive competencies. This relationship is important for digital Islamic education because critical thinking is unlikely to emerge from technological sophistication alone unless digital activities require students to interpret, compare, question, and justify information (Yuniarti et al., 2024).

The numerical evidence across published studies also reveals substantial variation in research scale, educational level, intervention type, and measurement strategy. Table 4 summarizes verified empirical characteristics that are directly relevant to designing critical-thinking activities within Maqāṣid-oriented digital Islamic education.

Table 4. Verified Published Evidence on Digital Learning and Critical Thinking

Study	Research Evidence	Verified Data	Main Finding Relevant to Critical Thinking
Meirbekov et al. (2022)	Formative experiment	Undergraduate pedagogy and graduate law students; two principal digital tools	Digital problem solving, brainstorming, visualization, and collaboration supported critical-thinking development
Oates & Johnson (2025)	Postgraduate AI assessment project	$n = 10$; critical evaluation +9 percentage points vs. course mean; $p = .04$	Evaluating AI-generated material produced stronger evidence of cognitive benefit than generating essays
Lee & Kwon (2024)	Systematic review	356 records → 25 included studies; 52% Asian; 80% secondary education	Hands-on and project-based AI learning supported problem solving and ethical reflection
Yuniarti et al. (2024)	Mixed-method experiment	$n = 241$	AR-HOTS learning positively supported critical thinking and related learning capacities

The comparison indicates that positive critical-thinking outcomes are repeatedly associated with cognitively demanding uses of technology, despite major differences in samples and digital platforms. These published findings cannot substitute for treatment-effect estimates from the present study's own pretest–posttest dataset, but they provide defensible empirical benchmarks for interpreting the cognitive mechanisms expected from structured digital learning (Meirbekov et al., 2022; Oates & Johnson, 2025).

For Islamic education, the central issue is not simply whether students think critically but what forms of reasoning are educationally appropriate when religious claims possess theological, historical, and social dimensions. Jarmer (2024) shows that engagement with critique of religion can promote more accurate understandings of religious diversity, scholarly differentiation, and reflection on how religious legitimation and power operate. A pluralistic conception of Islamic religious education likewise requires learners to encounter difference through intellectual openness without reducing religious commitment to relativism or uncritical accommodation (Mu'ti, 2023). A Maqāsid-oriented digital environment can support this balance by asking students to test claims against evidence, examine contextual consequences, and distinguish reasoned disagreement from unsupported judgment (Jarmer, 2024; Mu'ti, 2023).

Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah strengthens this cognitive orientation because it directs reasoning toward the purposes, consequences, and human interests underlying normative judgments rather than toward mechanical acceptance of isolated propositions. The contemporary Maqāsid literature has expanded across multiple disciplinary fields, illustrating the framework's capacity to mediate between normative Islamic principles and complex modern problems (Mohammed, 2024). Its higher ethical orientation also emphasizes protection of intellect and responsible decision-making, which are conceptually compatible with the evaluative and inferential dimensions of critical thinking (Sulaeman et al., 2025). Critical inquiry within digital Islamic education can consequently remain normatively grounded while requiring learners to compare evidence, identify weak reasoning, anticipate consequences, and defend conclusions through transparent arguments.

Taken together, the verified evidence suggests that technology contributes most effectively to critical thinking when learners are positioned as evaluators of information rather than recipients of technologically generated answers. Digital tools, augmented reality, project-based AI education, and generative-AI evaluation differ technically, yet each becomes cognitively meaningful when learning tasks require active scrutiny, problem solving, reflection, and justification (Lee & Kwon, 2024; Meirbekov et al., 2022). In Maqāsid-oriented Islamic education, this pattern supports an assessment model centered on interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, source verification, and ethically reasoned judgment rather than digital proficiency alone. Such an approach also addresses Kaczko and Ostendorf's (2023) warning against reducing critical thinking to narrow indicators of cognitive presence by preserving the broader role of judgment, argumentation, and reflective evaluation.

Maqāsid-Oriented Digital Islamic Education and Ethical Character Development

Ethical character development in digital Islamic education concerns the capacity to translate religious understanding into responsible conduct when learners encounter interpersonal, informational, and technological dilemmas. This outcome cannot be reduced to knowledge of moral rules because digital environments require judgment concerning privacy, fairness, accountability, respect, and the consequences of online behavior. Religious education has long been associated with the cultivation of moral virtues, although the mechanisms through which such virtues are explicitly taught remain contested (Metcalf et al., 2024). A Maqāsid-oriented framework addresses this difficulty by connecting moral action with higher purposes involving human dignity, protection of intellect, social welfare, and responsible agency (Sulaeman et al., 2025).

Evidence from online moral decision-making research illustrates why ethical character should be treated as an explicit educational outcome rather than an assumed consequence of digital participation. Harrison and Polizzi (2022) surveyed 1,947 adolescents aged 13–16 in England and found that 74% selected morally engaged responses to an online-incivility scenario, whereas 26% selected morally disengaged responses. Among respondents choosing morally engaged reactions, 68% justified their decisions through virtue-oriented reasoning, compared with 21% using consequential reasoning and 11% using rule-oriented reasoning. This pattern indicates that character qualities such as compassion, honesty, and practical judgment may be particularly influential in the moral reasoning learners employ within digital contexts (Harrison & Polizzi, 2022).

The distribution of moral responses also shows that ethically preferable behavior cannot be inferred simply from students' familiarity with digital technologies. Harrison and Polizzi (2022) reported that the single most frequent reaction to an abusive social-media post was to do nothing, selected by 21% of participants, while 19% would send a supportive message to the person targeted and 14% would inform parents or teachers. Table 5 summarizes the published evidence and demonstrates that morally engaged responses were common while passive and disengaged reactions remained educationally significant. Such results support the inclusion of scenario-based ethical tasks in digital Islamic education because students need opportunities to rehearse moral reasoning before confronting comparable situations in authentic online environments.

Table 5. Verified Evidence on Adolescents' Moral Decision-Making in Digital Contexts

Indicator	Published Result
Valid participants	1,947 adolescents
Age range	13–16 years
Morally engaged reactions	74%
Morally disengaged reactions	26%
Virtue-based justification among morally engaged responses	68%
Consequence-based justification	21%
Rule-based justification	11%
“Do nothing” response to abusive post	21%
Send supportive message to victim	19%
Inform parents/teachers	14%

Source: Harrison and Polizzi (2022).

The prominence of virtue-oriented reasoning has direct implications for Maqāsid-oriented Islamic pedagogy because ethical development requires more than enforcing rules about acceptable technology use. Learners need to understand why particular choices preserve dignity, reduce harm, promote justice, or protect intellectual and social well-being, making ethical action connected to purpose rather than compliance alone. Selçuk (2023) similarly positions Islamic religious education within broader questions of responsibility, participation, and human formation rather than narrowly doctrinal instruction. Framing digital dilemmas through Maqāsid can consequently encourage students to connect personal decisions with their wider moral effects on other individuals and communities.

Religious education research provides additional support for treating character formation as a deliberate curricular responsibility. Metcalf et al. (2024) conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 Religious Education teachers in state-funded non-faith secondary schools in England, and almost all

participants believed that Religious Education contributes to character development, virtue literacy, and moral, intellectual, and performance virtues. Respect, empathy, and tolerance emerged prominently, yet teachers differed over whether moral virtues should constitute explicit curriculum aims, directly taught content, or implicit by-products of classroom experience. The disagreement is analytically important because ethical character may remain pedagogically inconsistent when educators endorse its value without specifying how learning activities are expected to cultivate it (Metcalf et al., 2024).

Digital education complicates this challenge because students must exercise character within technological systems whose structures themselves carry ethical risks. Nguyen et al. (2023) examined six major international policy and guideline sources concerning artificial intelligence in education, generated 39 thematic codes, and consolidated them into seven overarching ethical principles. Mouta et al. (2024) independently screened a large interdisciplinary body of AIED ethics literature, retaining 107 papers after successive eligibility and quality procedures. Table 6 shows that contemporary digital-education ethics increasingly emphasizes governance, transparency, responsibility, human agency, cultural responsiveness, inclusion, and related dimensions that require ethical capacities from both institutions and individual learners.

Table 6. Verified Published Evidence Informing Ethical Character in Digital Education

Study	Evidence Base	Verified Quantitative Feature	Ethical Relevance
Metcalf et al. (2024)	Semi-structured interviews with RE teachers	$n = 30$	Character, virtue literacy, respect, empathy, and tolerance
Nguyen et al. (2023)	International AIED policies and guidelines	6 major sources; 39 codes; 7 ethical principles	Governance, transparency, accountability, privacy, fairness, human-centered AI
Mouta et al. (2024)	Systematic literature review	250 Scopus + 249 WoS records; 410 after deduplication; 156 preliminary; 83 quality-qualified; 107 final papers	Cultural inclusion, emotions, ethical capacity building, AI governance
Harrison & Polizzi (2022)	Adolescent online moral-decision survey	$n = 1,947$; 74% morally engaged; 68% virtue-based justification	Digital citizenship and character-based moral decision-making

Sources: Harrison and Polizzi (2022); Metcalf et al. (2024); Nguyen et al. (2023); Mouta et al. (2024).

The ethical principles identified in artificial-intelligence research widen the meaning of character development beyond interpersonal politeness or compliance with religious norms. Nguyen et al. (2023) derived seven principles from 39 thematic codes and stressed that responsible educational technology requires transparency, accountability, privacy protection, fairness, human agency, and trustworthy governance. These concerns make ethical character particularly relevant to students using AI-supported religious resources because learners increasingly need to decide what information to disclose, whether generated content is trustworthy, and how technology should be used without undermining personal responsibility. Ethical formation within digital Islamic education should consequently include the capacity to recognize technological risks and to make choices that protect both individual rights and collective welfare (Nguyen et al., 2023).

The systematic evidence also warns against treating formal ethical guidelines as sufficient proof of ethical educational practice. Mouta et al. (2024) initially retrieved 250 Scopus and 249 Web of Science records, reduced the set to 410 after duplicate removal, retained 156 contributions after preliminary screening, and produced a 107-paper analytical sample after quality assessment and supplementary inclusion. Their review identified persistent blind spots concerning cultural differences, inclusion, emotion, and ethical capacity building, including evidence that approximately 53% of papers addressing intercultural challenges highlighted insufficient responsiveness of AI systems to learners' cultural backgrounds and values. Such findings are especially relevant for Islamic education because

technological ethics must remain sensitive to culturally and religiously embedded understandings of responsibility rather than relying only on universalized technical standards (Mouta et al., 2024).

Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah offers a normative basis for integrating these ethical concerns with Islamic character education because its evaluative logic connects actions with their effects on religion, intellect, human dignity, life, social relationships, and material interests. The growing interdisciplinary application of Maqāṣid indicates that it increasingly functions as a framework for addressing contemporary social and ethical questions rather than remaining restricted to classical jurisprudential classification (Mohammed, 2024). This orientation also aligns with religious moderation education, where tolerance, nonviolence, social responsibility, and accommodation of legitimate difference are approached as learnable dispositions supported by structured educational experiences (Mukhibat et al., 2024). Ethical character within a Maqāṣid-oriented digital environment can accordingly be understood as the ability to convert normative knowledge into reasoned and responsible action across both physical and online settings.

The published evidence supports an educational model in which ethical character is cultivated through repeated engagement with realistic dilemmas rather than measured only through declarations of values or knowledge of prescribed conduct. Digital cases involving online incivility, misinformation, privacy, artificial-intelligence use, bias, and interpersonal respect provide contexts in which students can evaluate intentions, consequences, rights, virtues, and higher Islamic purposes simultaneously (Harrison & Polizzi, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023). Such an approach addresses the unresolved problem identified by Metcalfe et al. (2024), namely that educators may recognize the importance of moral development while remaining uncertain about whether and how character should be explicitly taught. Within the proposed framework, Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah supplies the normative orientation, digital scenarios provide the decision context, and reflective ethical reasoning becomes the pedagogical mechanism through which responsible character can be deliberately developed.

CONCLUSION

The integration of Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah into digital Islamic education provides a coherent framework for strengthening students' religious literacy, critical thinking, and ethical character development. By linking digital learning activities with higher Islamic objectives, the approach moves beyond technology-centered instruction and encourages students to interpret religious knowledge contextually, evaluate information critically, and make ethically responsible decisions in contemporary digital environments. The study highlights the importance of designing Islamic digital pedagogy that combines normative religious values with analytical and reflective learning processes. Its theoretical contribution lies in positioning Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah as an integrative educational framework, while its practical contribution is reflected in the development of learning activities that connect religious understanding, intellectual judgment, and moral responsibility. Future empirical studies should test this framework with larger and more diverse student populations to assess its effectiveness across different educational settings.

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