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Reconstructing Character Education for Generation Z: An Analytical Study Based on Al-Ghazali's Ethical Framework

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Abstract:
The growing urgency of character education in the digital age is closely tied to the challenges faced by Generation Z, who are shaped by rapid technological and social change that contributes to identity instability, cyberbullying, and mental health pressures. Addressing these issues requires a framework that integrates spirituality, ethical awareness, and digital literacy to cultivate integrity, responsibility, and psychological balance. This study examines the technological–psychological perspective of Jean Twenge alongside Al-Ghazali's spirituality-based character framework to design a curriculum relevant to the Indonesian context. Using a systematic literature review, the research synthesizes primary works of Al-Ghazali, including *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, *Al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fī Sharḥ Maʿānī Asmāʾ Allāh al-Ḥusnā*, and *Iḥyā' Ulūm al-Dīn* with contemporary scholarship on mental health and digital ethics. Data were analyzed through thematic coding centered on five domains: character education, mental well-being, digital ethics, curriculum design, and spiritual morality, using stages of comparison, contrast, and critique. The findings propose an integrative curriculum model combining digital literacy and emotional resilience with moral purification and spiritual grounding, structured around three pillars: character formation, responsible technology engagement, and spiritual development. Although implementation presents challenges related to multicultural adaptation, teacher preparedness, and assessment of character outcomes, the model offers a holistic pathway for nurturing balanced learners. The study recommends pilot implementation in schools and Pesantren, the development of assessment tools for mental and moral growth, and longitudinal research to evaluate the long-term impact across diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Curriculum; Character Education; Digital Ethic; Mental Health, Spiritual Moral

Introduction

The 21st century is increasingly characterized in interdisciplinary scholarship as a period of accelerated digital transformation that reshapes not only social interaction and knowledge production but also the psychological and moral architecture of human development. Educational theorists and sociocultural researchers converge in arguing that digital environments function as formative spaces where identity,

cognition, and ethical orientation are continuously negotiated. Within this broader transformation, Generation Z, defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, occupies a distinctive position because their developmental experience is inseparable from persistent digital immersion (Twenge, 2017). Unlike earlier cohorts that encountered digital tools as adaptive technologies, Generation Z matured within algorithmically mediated ecosystems that structure communication, social comparison, and meaning-making. Empirical and conceptual literature, therefore, portrays this generation through a dual lens: digital environments expand informational access and creative agency while simultaneously intensifying psychosocial vulnerability and ethical ambiguity (Alfikri, 2023). This dialectical condition challenges education systems to move beyond instrumental technological integration toward frameworks that critically mediate the developmental consequences of digital life.

Contemporary discussions of character education reflect a similar paradigm shift. Classical formulations emphasized the transmission of stable virtues, such as honesty, empathy, and responsibility, as the foundations of social cohesion (Anwar, 2013). However, recent scholarship interrogates the adequacy of such models within digitally saturated environments (Azmi et al., 2024). Researchers argue that social media architectures amplify performative identity construction, normalize moral relativism, and accelerate exposure to misinformation and cyber aggression, thereby altering ethical decision-making processes and self-regulation patterns (Nurhamzah & Rahman, 2016). These dynamics complicate traditional virtue-based pedagogy by embedding learners in environments where moral cues are fragmented and rapidly shifting. Consequently, scholars increasingly advocate for character education frameworks that incorporate digital ethics, critical literacy, and emotional resilience as integral components rather than supplementary skills (Isnaini et al., 2021). This evolving discourse positions character education as a dynamic field requiring epistemological renewal rather than mere curricular extension.

Parallel developments in developmental psychology intensify these concerns by documenting measurable shifts in youth mental health correlated with digital immersion. Research led by Jean Twenge identifies rising patterns of anxiety, loneliness, and depressive symptoms among digitally native cohorts, suggesting that screen-mediated interaction may reconfigure emotional regulation and social competence (Twenge, 2023). While debates persist regarding causality and methodological scope, there is broad scholarly agreement that digital environments exert nontrivial psychological effects that educational systems cannot ignore (Sitepu & Sarwono, 2018). Twenge's framework reframes mental well-being as a structural educational concern, emphasizing the need for curricular interventions that cultivate reflective media use, emotional intelligence, and resilience in the face of algorithmic pressures (Twenge, 2023). This perspective situates mental health not as an auxiliary domain but as a constitutive element of contemporary character formation (Twenge, 2017).

Simultaneously, scholars in moral philosophy and religious education argue that psychological and technological frameworks alone are insufficient to address the ethical disorientation associated with digital modernity. Renewed engagement with classical ethical traditions reflects a search for normative anchors to guide character development in pluralistic societies. Within Islamic intellectual discourse, Al-Ghazali's ethical psychology is frequently revisited as a comprehensive model of moral cultivation grounded in self-awareness, intentional discipline, and spiritual purification (Al-Ghazali, 2001a). Contemporary interpretations highlight the relevance of his integrative approach, which unites inner transformation with outward conduct, offering a counterpoint to fragmented models of moral education (Al-Ghazali, 2001b). Rather than functioning as a purely historical framework, Al-Ghazali's thought is increasingly positioned as a living ethical paradigm capable of engaging modern dilemmas surrounding identity, consumption, and digital distraction.

Despite the conceptual richness of these parallel discourses, current literature tends to compartmentalize psychological resilience and spiritual-ethical formation into distinct scholarly domains. Studies grounded in empirical psychology prioritize behavioral metrics and mental health outcomes, whereas religious-philosophical models emphasize intentionality and moral purification. The absence of systematic integration limits the development of educational frameworks capable of addressing the full spectrum of Generation Z's developmental challenges. This fragmentation represents a critical research gap: the need for interdisciplinary synthesis that bridges empirically grounded insights on digital well-being with normative ethical frameworks oriented toward holistic character formation (Kawuryan, 2024).

Educational policy scholarship reinforces this gap by documenting a persistent imbalance between technological competence and moral-emotional development within contemporary schooling. Systems oriented toward measurable academic performance often marginalize character formation, resulting in learners who demonstrate technical proficiency yet struggle with ethical judgment, interpersonal engagement, and emotional regulation (Johnson, 2021). Researchers argue that this imbalance reflects a broader epistemological divide between instrumental rationality and value-based education. Integrating psychological resilience frameworks with spiritual ethics offers a pathway toward rebalancing educational priorities and aligns with emerging calls for whole-person pedagogy that foregrounds moral intentionality alongside cognitive achievement (Mardi et al., 2025).

Interdisciplinary scholarship in education increasingly recognizes that digitally mediated social environments reshape the developmental conditions of contemporary learners. Empirical research on digital immersion has identified significant transformations in adolescents' psychosocial development, particularly in emotional regulation, social interaction, and identity formation (Islam & Syaifudin, 2024). Twenge's work provides a systematic empirical account of these changes, demonstrating how prolonged exposure to digital environments alters patterns of attention, well-being, and interpersonal engagement. In contrast, classical ethical psychology, as articulated by Al-Ghazali (Al-Ghazali, 2000), conceptualizes moral development as a process of disciplined self-regulation grounded in the purification of the soul and the cultivation of stable virtues. Although both perspectives address the formation of the self, they operate within distinct epistemological traditions, empirical psychology, and normative moral philosophy, and have rarely been examined within a unified educational framework.

Existing studies on digital-age education tend to adopt either a psychological-adaptive orientation or a normative-character orientation. Research on digital mental health focuses primarily on behavioral risks and coping mechanisms, while character education research emphasizes value transmission and moral habituation. This disciplinary separation produces a conceptual limitation: psychological analyses explain the mechanisms of digital influence but often lack a coherent ethical framework, whereas moral education theories provide normative direction but insufficiently address empirically observable patterns of digital behavior. Although recent scholarship has suggested the potential compatibility of scientific and religious knowledge traditions (Jaya, 2024), these contributions remain largely programmatic and do not yet articulate a theoretically grounded model that explains how empirical digital psychology and classical ethical psychology can function as mutually informative components of educational design. Consequently, the relationship between digital immersion, moral self-regulation, and educational formation remains theoretically under-specified (Islam et al., 2023).

The need for a more integrated framework becomes particularly evident in culturally plural educational contexts, where curriculum reform must respond simultaneously to global technological transformations and locally grounded ethical traditions (Alhamuddin, 2017). Current curriculum approaches often treat

technological competence and character formation as parallel yet disconnected objectives. This separation limits the explanatory and practical capacity of educational models to account for how learners negotiate digital environments as they construct morally coherent identities. Without a conceptual framework linking psychological resilience to ethical self-formation, educational responses to digital transformation risk remaining fragmented and pedagogically inconsistent.

Within the broader field of educational theory, the intersection of digital mental health research, character education, and spiritual ethics represents an emerging but insufficiently theorized domain. The central research gap lies not merely in the absence of interdisciplinary dialogue, but in the lack of a conceptual model that explains how empirically grounded accounts of digital behavior can be systematically integrated with virtue-based theories of moral development. Addressing this gap requires a theoretical synthesis that connects descriptive psychological knowledge with normative accounts of human flourishing, thereby clarifying the educational implications of digital-era subject formation (Subir et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this study investigates the following research questions: (1) How does Twenge's empirical analysis conceptualize the psychological mechanisms through which digital immersion shapes adolescent development? (2) How does Al-Ghazali's ethical psychology conceptualize disciplined agency and moral self-regulation as processes of character formation? (3) In what ways can these two theoretical perspectives be synthesized into a coherent educational framework for Generation Z? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to develop a theoretically grounded model that explains how education can mediate the relationship between digital environments and the formation of morally and psychologically integrated individuals. Rather than proposing a purely normative solution, the study aims to clarify the theoretical conditions under which psychological adaptation and ethical self-formation can be treated as mutually reinforcing dimensions of education in the digital age.

Literature Review

Contemporary Challenges of Character Education in the Digital Era

Character education has become a central concern in contemporary educational discourse, particularly in response to the rapid transformation of social life caused by digital technology. Educational institutions are increasingly required not only to develop students' cognitive competence but also to cultivate moral integrity and emotional stability. The emergence of Generation Z, a generation raised in a digital environment, has heightened the urgency of reconstructing character education to address new moral and psychological challenges (Facer, 2011).

Generation Z is characterized by intensive exposure to digital media, rapid access to information, and constant online interaction. While digital technology provides opportunities for learning and social connectivity, it also introduces various risks, including moral relativism, reduced empathy, social isolation, and psychological vulnerability (Twenge, 2017). Excessive digital engagement has been associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional instability among adolescents (Odgers & Jensen, 2021).

Traditional models of character education often emphasize moral instruction through formal teaching but pay insufficient attention to students' psychological and spiritual development. As a result, these models are often unable to respond effectively to the complex challenges faced by modern students. Contemporary scholars, therefore, argue that character education should adopt a holistic approach that integrates cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

In the Indonesian educational context, character education has been formally incorporated into the national curriculum. However, several studies indicate that implementation often remains superficial, limited to symbolic activities rather than to the deep internalization of values (Millán-Ghisleri & Fuentes, 2025). Consequently, there is a need to reconstruct character education using a more comprehensive philosophical framework that can address both moral and psychological dimensions. One potential framework that offers a holistic perspective is Al-Ghazali's ethical philosophy. His theory of moral education integrates spiritual purification, psychological development, and behavioural transformation, making it highly relevant to contemporary educational challenges.

Theoretical Foundations of Character Education

Character education refers to a systematic effort to develop moral virtues and ethical behaviour through educational processes. It involves cultivating moral knowledge, moral emotion, and moral action within educational environments (Lickona, 1992). Modern theories of character education emphasize that moral development cannot be achieved solely through cognitive instruction. Instead, character formation requires integrating understanding, emotional attachment, and behavioural practice (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Schools, therefore, play a crucial role in creating moral environments that encourage the development of ethical behaviour. Character education has been shown to contribute significantly to students' social competence, academic achievement, and emotional well-being (Nucci, 2017). Students who receive effective character education demonstrate stronger self-regulation and greater social responsibility.

In Islamic educational thought, character education occupies a central position because education is understood as a process of forming morally responsible individuals. Islamic scholars emphasize that knowledge must be accompanied by moral refinement and spiritual awareness (Halstead, 2007). This holistic understanding of education aligns closely with Al-Ghazali's ethical theory, which views moral development as an internal transformation of the soul rather than merely the acquisition of moral knowledge.

Al-Ghazali's Ethical Framework

Al-Ghazali is one of the most influential Muslim scholars in the field of moral education. His ethical theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the formation of human character. According to Al-Ghazali, character (*akhlaq*) is a stable condition of the soul that enables individuals to perform actions spontaneously without conscious deliberation. When moral qualities become deeply rooted in the soul, ethical behaviour emerges naturally (Al-Ghazali, 2011, p. 1707). Al-Ghazali emphasizes that character formation requires a gradual process involving knowledge, self-discipline, and spiritual purification. The concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) represents the core of his moral philosophy. Through spiritual purification, individuals develop self-control and moral awareness (al-Ghazali, 2011, p. 2).

Al-Ghazali divides the human soul into three fundamental dimensions: rational faculty (*al-'aql*), appetitive faculty (*al-shahwah*), and irascible faculty (*al-ghadab*). Moral excellence is achieved when these faculties are balanced under the guidance of reason and divine revelation (al-Ghazali, 1960, p. 291). This theory provides a psychological framework for understanding moral development that remains relevant to modern educational contexts. Emotional imbalance and uncontrolled desires, which are common among adolescents in digital environments, can be addressed through moral discipline and spiritual training. Al-Ghazali also emphasizes the importance of habituation (*riyadah al-nafs*) in moral education. Repeated practice of virtuous behaviour gradually shapes stable character traits (Mutmainah, 2021, p. 49). Moral education therefore requires continuous training rather than occasional instruction. The integration of

knowledge, practice, and spirituality makes Al-Ghazali's ethical framework particularly suitable for contemporary character education.

Generation Z and Moral–Psychological Challenges

Generation Z represents a generation shaped by digital technology from early childhood. This generation is often described as "digital natives" because they have grown up in environments dominated by smartphones, social media, and online communication (Creighton, 2018). Research indicates that Generation Z tends to experience higher levels of psychological stress compared to previous generations. Intensive exposure to social media has been associated with increased anxiety and decreased emotional stability (Twenge, 2017). Digital environments also influence moral development. Online anonymity may reduce moral responsibility and encourage unethical behaviour such as cyberbullying and misinformation (Odgers & Jensen, 2021).

In addition, continuous exposure to digital entertainment may weaken self-discipline and concentration. These conditions create new challenges for educational institutions that aim to develop responsible and morally grounded individuals. Educational approaches for Generation Z therefore must integrate psychological resilience and moral awareness. Character education that ignores psychological conditions is unlikely to produce sustainable moral development. Al-Ghazali's emphasis on self-control and spiritual discipline provides a conceptual basis for addressing these challenges.

Integration of Al-Ghazali's Ethics and Contemporary Character Education

The integration of Al-Ghazali's ethical philosophy with modern character education theories offers a promising framework for reconstructing moral education for Generation Z. Al-Ghazali's concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* can be interpreted as a process of psychological and spiritual development that strengthens emotional regulation. This concept aligns with contemporary theories of emotional intelligence and mental well-being (al-Ghazali, 2011, p. 2). Similarly, Al-Ghazali's emphasis on habituation corresponds with modern behavioural approaches to character formation. Repeated practice of ethical behaviour strengthens moral habits and reduces impulsive actions. Spiritual awareness plays a crucial role in Al-Ghazali's educational philosophy. Consciousness of God encourages individuals to regulate their behaviour even in situations where external supervision is absent. This principle is highly relevant in digital environments where students often interact without direct supervision. Several studies in Islamic education indicate that spiritual-based character education contributes significantly to students' moral awareness and emotional stability (Erricker, 2009). The integration of spiritual values with psychological development creates a comprehensive approach to character education that addresses both internal and external dimensions of human behaviour.

Methods

The primary objective of this study is to develop a conceptual reconstruction of character education for Generation Z grounded in Al-Ghazali's ethical framework, using a systematic literature review. This study adopts a qualitative literature review design following a structured and transparent procedure for identifying, selecting, and synthesizing relevant academic sources (Fahrudin, 2020; Okoli & Schabram, 2010, pp. 1–3). The research design consists of four main stages: literature identification, screening and selection, thematic analysis, and conceptual synthesis.

Data collection was conducted through systematic searches in major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, and nationally accredited journals, using keywords such as *character*

education, *Generation Z*, *digital generation*, *moral education*, *ethical psychology*, and *Al-Ghazali* (Qomar, 2022). The inclusion criteria consisted of: (1) scholarly publications relevant to character education and digital generation development, (2) studies discussing Al-Ghazali's ethical thought or Islamic moral philosophy, and (3) publications written in English or Indonesian. The exclusion criteria included non-academic publications, duplicated sources, and studies not directly related to ethical education or Generation Z development. The selected literature consisted of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and conference proceedings relevant to the research focus. Primary sources consisted of Al-Ghazali's major works, including *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, *Al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fī Sharḥ Maʿānī Asmāʾ Allāh al-Ḥusnā*, and *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, which were analyzed to identify key concepts related to moral formation, self-discipline, and spiritual development. Secondary sources included contemporary studies on character education, digital psychology, and the development of Generation Z, which provided contextual and theoretical support for the analysis.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis to identify and interpret recurring conceptual patterns within the selected literature (Heriyanto, 2018, p. 317). The analysis followed several steps: (1) familiarization with the literature through repeated reading, (2) initial coding of relevant concepts related to moral development and digital challenges, (3) categorization of codes into broader themes, and (4) synthesis of themes into an integrative conceptual framework based on Al-Ghazali's ethical psychology. This process enabled the systematic interpretation of both classical and contemporary sources within a unified analytical structure.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, several strategies were applied. First, source triangulation was conducted by comparing primary classical texts with contemporary scholarly interpretations. Second, conceptual consistency was maintained by using clearly defined analytical categories derived from Al-Ghazali's ethical theory. Third, transparency was ensured by documenting the procedures of literature selection and thematic coding. These steps were intended to enhance the credibility and analytical rigor of the study (Qomar, 2024).

Results

This study underscores the importance of developing an integrative character education curriculum tailored to Generation Z, addressing their unique needs and challenges. By examining the thoughts of Jean Twenge and Al-Ghazali, this research proposes a model that combines psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions, offering a comprehensive approach to character formation in the digital era. The discussion below delves into the significance of the findings and their implications for education today.

Generation Z, as described by Jean Twenge, is a generation shaped profoundly by technology, social media, and the internet (Twenge, 2017). These influences have created both opportunities and challenges, including heightened anxiety, declining mental well-being, and an increasing focus on social justice and diversity. Twenge's insights highlight the urgency of addressing mental health and emotional resilience within the education system (Twenge, 2023). The proposed curriculum integrates these concerns by including mental health education, emotional regulation techniques, and digital literacy as core components.

In today's education landscape, mental health is often overlooked or treated as secondary to academic achievement. However, Twenge's research indicates that addressing mental health is foundational for enabling students to thrive academically and socially. The curriculum's inclusion of mindfulness practices, stress management techniques, and the development of emotional intelligence equips students with the tools to navigate the complexities of the digital world while maintaining their mental well-being. Moreover, emphasizing digital literacy not only prepares students for technological advancements but also teaches

them to use digital platforms ethically and responsibly, which is crucial for maintaining a positive online presence (Fitriyani, 2023).

On the other hand, Al-Ghazali's perspective on character education adds a deeply spiritual and moral dimension to the curriculum. Al-Ghazali emphasizes the purification of the heart (*tazkiyatun nafs*) and the cultivation of virtues such as sincerity, humility, and patience. These elements are particularly relevant in addressing the moral and ethical challenges faced by Generation Z, who live in a world that often prioritizes individualism and material success over collective well-being and spiritual growth (Wardanik et al., 2021).

Incorporating Al-Ghazali's principles into the curriculum offers Generation Z a framework for self-reflection and moral development, which counters the superficiality and instant gratification prevalent in the digital age. Practices such as dhikr, prayer, and self-reflection encourage students to internalize values rather than merely perform them outwardly (al-Ghazali, 2011). This spiritual grounding provides a sense of purpose and resilience, enabling students to face modern challenges with strength and integrity.

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali's focus on balancing knowledge with good deeds is a valuable reminder for educators. While academic achievement is important, true education involves the formation of character and morality. By teaching Generation Z to align their actions with ethical principles, the curriculum helps students navigate life with a sense of accountability to themselves, others, and their Creator.

The integration of Twenge's and Al-Ghazali's perspectives creates a balanced curriculum that addresses both external and internal challenges faced by Generation Z. On the one hand, Twenge's psychological insights ensure the curriculum is relevant to today's digital and social realities. On the other hand, Al-Ghazali's spiritual teachings provide a timeless framework for character and moral development. This combination ensures that students are not only competent in navigating the modern world but also grounded in values that promote holistic well-being.

The curriculum prioritizes three key pillars: mental health, digital literacy, and moral and spiritual development (Kholidah, 2015). Mental health education is addressed through modules on mindfulness, emotional regulation, and stress management. Digital literacy focuses on the ethical use of technology, cybersecurity, and critical thinking about online content. Moral and spiritual development is emphasized through teachings on sincerity, humility, and self-control, supported by spiritual practices such as prayer and dhikr. One of the curriculum's strengths is its adaptability to Generation Z's learning styles. This generation prefers interactive, visually engaging, and technology-driven approaches. The curriculum incorporates project-based learning, where students engage with real-world issues such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and cultural diversity.

For example, students might work on group projects that involve creating mental health awareness campaigns or designing ethical guidelines for social media use. Self-reflection and spiritual practices are also integral to the learning process. Activities such as journaling, guided meditation, and discussions on moral dilemmas encourage students to think critically about their actions and values. These practices help students internalize the curriculum's teachings, fostering long-term character development rather than short-term academic gains. Teachers play a crucial role as facilitators and moral guides (Rokhamah & Sayuti, 2023). Beyond delivering content, they model the values taught in the curriculum, creating a supportive and inspiring learning environment. Training teachers to integrate both psychological and spiritual perspectives into their teaching practices ensures the curriculum's effectiveness and relevance.

Evaluating the success of a character education curriculum requires innovative approaches that go beyond traditional academic assessments. The integrative curriculum proposed in this study combines qualitative

and quantitative methods. Behavioural observations, personal reflections, and portfolios allow educators to assess students' progress in areas such as empathy, self-control, and ethical decision-making. Group projects and presentations provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding of social justice, digital ethics, and moral responsibility (Suter, 2011).

This holistic evaluation approach ensures that character development is given equal weight to cognitive achievements. By focusing on both academic and moral outcomes, the curriculum prepares students to become well-rounded individuals who contribute positively to society. The findings of this study have significant implications for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers. As the digital age continues to reshape society, traditional approaches to education must be revaluated to address the unique needs of Generation Z. The integrative curriculum model proposed here offers a blueprint for reforming character education that is both relevant and impactful.

For educators, this model emphasizes the importance of addressing students' mental health and emotional well-being alongside academic instruction. For policymakers, it highlights the need to prioritize character education in national curricula, ensuring that students are equipped with the skills and values necessary for thriving in the 21st century. For curriculum developers, it provides a framework for creating educational materials that balance technological proficiency with moral and spiritual growth. The integrative character education curriculum model, grounded in the perspectives of Jean Twenge and Al-Ghazali, offers a transformative approach to education for Generation Z. By addressing the psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of character development, this model provides a comprehensive framework for nurturing resilient, ethical, and socially responsible individuals.

This research demonstrates that a balanced approach to character education grounded in both modern psychology and traditional spirituality is essential for preparing Generation Z to face the challenges of the digital era. By fostering mental well-being, digital literacy, and moral integrity, the proposed curriculum equips students not only to succeed in a rapidly changing world but also to lead lives of purpose and meaning.

Discussion

Generation Z and the Digital Developmental Context

Generation Z, defined as individuals born between the mid-1997s and early 2012s, is widely recognized as the first cohort to grow up entirely within a digitally mediated social environment (Twenge, 2017). Their developmental experiences are deeply intertwined with smartphones, social media, and networked communication, making them the most technologically immersed generation to date. Scholars argue that this immersion reshapes not only communication patterns but also identity formation, emotional regulation, and moral reasoning. While digital access expands opportunities for learning and creativity, it simultaneously introduces new psychosocial pressures linked to hyper connectivity, globalization, and consumer culture.

Research increasingly frames this condition as paradoxical: digital technologies enable unprecedented informational access while also contributing to weakened social bonds, emotional vulnerability, and ethical ambiguity (Alfikri, 2023). These pressures manifest in mental health struggles, shifting social norms, and value disorientation that collectively influence the holistic development of young individuals. Consequently, educational discourse emphasizes that Generation Z's challenges cannot be understood solely through technological lenses; they must also be interpreted as developmental, cultural, and moral phenomena requiring integrative pedagogical responses.

Reframing Character Education in the Digital Era

Within this context, character education emerges as a critical framework for addressing the multidimensional pressures faced by Generation Z. Traditionally, character education aimed to cultivate virtues such as honesty, empathy, responsibility, and social awareness, supporting balanced intellectual and moral growth (Mufti, 2021). However, contemporary scholarship questions whether conventional virtue-transmission models adequately respond to digitally mediated realities.

Digital environments introduce new ethical dilemmas, including online identity performance, cyber aggression, misinformation, and addictive media consumption. These challenges complicate traditional moral pedagogy, requiring adaptive frameworks that incorporate emotional regulation, digital literacy, and reflective decision-making (Alfikri, 2023). Scholars increasingly argue that effective character education for Generation Z must address psychological resilience alongside ethical formation, enabling learners to navigate the digital landscape responsibly while developing a stable sense of purpose. This shift represents not a rejection of traditional character education but its expansion into domains shaped by technological modernity.

Integrating Psychological and Spiritual Perspectives

A comprehensive response to Generation Z's developmental challenges requires engagement with both contemporary psychological research and enduring moral philosophy. Insights from Jean Twenge highlight measurable trends in youth mental health, including rising anxiety, loneliness, and reduced face-to-face interaction, phenomena often linked to excessive digital exposure (Megawati & Lawi, 2021; Sitepu & Sarwono, 2018; Twenge, 2023). Twenge emphasizes that education must cultivate emotional intelligence, resilience, and digital self-regulation to mitigate these pressures. Her framework positions mental well-being as foundational to character development rather than secondary to academic achievement.

Complementing this psychological perspective, Al-Ghazali's ethical philosophy offers a holistic model of character formation grounded in spiritual awareness and moral discipline. Al-Ghazali conceptualized education as a process of nurturing the soul through moral purification (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), intentional action, and balance between worldly engagement and spiritual responsibility (Al-Ghazali, 2001b; Julianti, 2022; Tanis, 2013). His emphasis on aligning knowledge with ethical practice challenges purely instrumental conceptions of education and offers a counterbalance to materialistic tendencies prevalent in modern society.

Synthesizing these perspectives reveals a shared concern: human flourishing depends on integrating emotional resilience and moral intentionality. Twenge's psychological insights clarify the external pressures shaping Generation Z, while Al-Ghazali's framework addresses the cultivation of virtue from within. Together, they provide complementary foundations for an educational model that attends to both behavioral adaptation and spiritual grounding (Saini & Latipah, 2022).

Toward an Integrative Curriculum Model for Generation Z

Building upon this synthesis, the proposed curriculum model seeks to address Generation Z's developmental needs through interconnected pillars: mental well-being, digital literacy, and moral-spiritual formation. Drawing from Twenge's framework, the curriculum foregrounds mental health education through stress management, emotional regulation, and reflective media engagement. Practices such as mindfulness, peer support, and digital detox strategies promote healthier relationships with technology while strengthening psychological resilience (Fitriyani, 2023).

Digital literacy functions as a second pillar, equipping students to critically evaluate information, safeguard privacy, and participate ethically in online environments. This component recognizes that digital competence is inseparable from moral judgment in contemporary social life. The third pillar draws inspiration from Al-Ghazali's ethical teachings, integrating spiritual reflection, moral reasoning, and the cultivation of virtue into everyday learning. Practices such as self-reflection, dhikr, and intentional action encourage students to internalize values rather than merely perform them (Al-Ghazali, 2001b; Wardanik et al., 2021). Community engagement and collaborative projects further reinforce social responsibility, connecting personal development with collective well-being (Rajatman et al., 2025).

The curriculum's adaptability ensures relevance across diverse cultural contexts, particularly within Indonesia's plural educational landscape. Interactive pedagogies, including project-based learning, reflective journaling, and ethical dialogue, align with Generation Z's learning preferences while fostering long-term character formation (Kholidah, 2015). Teachers act not only as instructors but as moral facilitators, modeling ethical behavior and integrating psychological and spiritual perspectives into classroom practice (Rokhamah & Sayuti, 2023). Evaluation strategies extend beyond conventional academic metrics to include behavioral observation, reflective portfolios, and collaborative assessments that capture moral growth and social responsibility (Suter, 2011). This holistic assessment framework reinforces the curriculum's commitment to whole-person development.

The implications of this integrative model extend to educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers. By aligning mental health, digital competence, and ethical formation, the framework addresses the structural imbalance between technical proficiency and moral development often observed in modern schooling. It offers a blueprint for educational reform that prepares Generation Z to engage the digital era with resilience, responsibility, and spiritual awareness.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that integrating Twenge's psychological analysis with Al-Ghazali's ethical philosophy provides a coherent framework for reconstructing character education for Generation Z in the digital era. Twenge's perspective explains the psychological vulnerabilities associated with intensive digital exposure, while Al-Ghazali's ethical psychology offers a structured approach to moral self-regulation and spiritual development. The main scholarly contribution of this study is the development of an integrative conceptual model that connects empirical digital psychology with virtue-based moral philosophy, thereby addressing the fragmentation between psychological and moral approaches in contemporary character education. The findings imply that curriculum development should integrate digital literacy, mental well-being, and ethical spiritual formation within a unified framework. However, this study is limited by its reliance on literature-based analysis and the absence of empirical validation. Future research should test the proposed framework in diverse educational contexts and develop appropriate instruments to measure psychological, digital, and moral development outcomes.

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