



Exploring Religious Education Teachers' Experiences with Digital Tools in Pedagogical Practices in Indonesia's Islamic Schools

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ABSTRACT

Religious education has increasingly incorporated digital tools, yet the impact of these tools on teachers' experiences remains underexplored. While technology in education has been studied widely, little attention has been given to how religious educators adapt to digital platforms and how this integration affects their teaching practices and personal perceptions. Unlike prior studies that mainly focus on general education settings, this research specifically addresses the underexamined context of religious education teachers, thereby offering novel insights into how faith-based pedagogical practices intersect with digital transformation. This gap in research leads to the question: how do religious education teachers experience the integration of digital tools in their pedagogical practices? In this study, we use a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of religious educators in adapting to digital education. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 religious education teachers, followed by thematic analysis. The findings revealed that while digital tools offer opportunities for engagement, teachers face significant challenges, including concerns over preserving the authenticity of religious teachings and maintaining personal connections with students. These findings highlight the emotional, cultural, and professional dimensions of digital education and suggest that future professional development for religious educators should address not only technical skills but also the emotional and spiritual aspects of teaching. By foregrounding the unique challenges of religious educators, this study contributes original perspectives that extend beyond existing literature on technology in education. This study contributes to the understanding of digital transformation in education and opens avenues for future research on the intersection of technology and spirituality in teaching practices.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed various sectors, including education (Arif et al., 2025). Within the realm of religious education, this shift has brought about both opportunities and challenges for educators tasked with transmitting religious values through digital platforms (Brown, 2024). Particularly during global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, digital tools became unavoidable, raising questions about how effectively they can support subjects rooted in tradition, where personal connection and spiritual engagement are central (Bernárdez-Gómez et al., 2025; Maram et al., 2024).

In many societies, religion remains a cornerstone of cultural identity and community, and religious education plays a critical role in shaping individuals' moral and spiritual development (Saldıray, 2025). The adoption of online platforms, video lectures, and virtual classrooms presents both opportunities and tensions, especially in Islamic education, where traditional face-to-face learning is considered essential for preserving authenticity (İnal, 2024; Roleder, 2025). This context

underscores the need to understand how educators balance digital innovation with maintaining the sacredness of religious instruction.

Rather than repeatedly framing the research gap, this study emphasizes its novelty by focusing on the lived experiences of religious educators—a perspective often overlooked in the literature (Siddique, 2024; Segal, 2024). Using a phenomenological approach, we explore how teachers interpret and navigate digitalization, offering insights into the intersection of technology, spirituality, and pedagogy.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become a pivotal area of study, particularly in the field of educational research. In the context of religious education, understanding how teachers experience and adapt to the integration of digital tools is of significant importance (Esquivel, 2024; Ubaidillah & Faiz, 2025). This exploration is crucial as it reveals the ways in which technology reshapes not only teaching methods but also the deeper, more subjective aspects of religious instruction, which are often thought to be inherently personal and connected to the teacher-student relationship (Nirwana, 2024). The value of investigating these experiences lies in uncovering how educators make sense of the challenges and opportunities posed by digitalization, providing a window into the nuanced realities of teaching religious subjects in an increasingly digital world.

However, exploring such subjective experiences is not without its challenges (Lewin, 2025). This approach is especially valuable because quantitative studies, while informative, cannot capture the depth of educators' emotional, cultural, and spiritual engagement with digital tools (Amalia et al., 2024; Utami, 2024). A phenomenological lens therefore provides the most suitable framework to reveal the nuanced realities of religious teaching in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. Quantitative methods tend to overlook the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences, thus failing to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. In contrast, phenomenological approaches, which focus on the essence of lived experiences, offer a more appropriate framework for capturing the richness and complexity of educators' perceptions and emotions regarding the integration of technology in religious teaching.

Despite the growing body of literature on technology in education, few studies have delved deeply into the subjective experiences of religious educators in this context (Tambak & Sukenti, 2024). The limitations of previous research methodologies, including those that emphasize numerical data over personal narratives, have left a significant gap in understanding how religious educators navigate the intersection of tradition and modernity in the digital age (Firdaus et al., 2025). As a result, existing studies fall short in capturing the true essence of how educators experience and make sense of the digital transformation in their teaching practices. This gap highlights the need for a phenomenological investigation that can more effectively address the unique challenges faced by religious educators in adapting to digital learning environments.

In the existing body of research on the integration of digital tools in religious education, much of the focus has been on practical solutions that address the logistical and technical aspects of online teaching. Approaches such as surveys, quantitative assessments, and technical evaluations dominate the literature, providing useful insights into the efficiency and effectiveness of digital platforms. However, these methods often fail to capture the deeper, subjective experiences of educators, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these teachers truly perceive the transformation in their teaching practices. While these studies offer valuable information about the external challenges educators face, they do not delve into the personal and emotional dimensions of their experiences, such as the tensions between traditional teaching methods and the demands of digital education.

This limitation arises because traditional research approaches often emphasize objective measures over personal meaning and lived experience (Muharrani et al., 2024). The reliance on numerical data and pre-determined categories restricts the capacity to explore the nuanced ways in which educators make sense of their roles in a rapidly changing technological landscape. In contrast, the phenomenological approach provides a richer, more holistic perspective by focusing on the lived experiences of religious educators and how they interpret the significance of digital tools within the broader context of their professional and spiritual lives. By exploring the essence of these

experiences, phenomenology offers a deeper understanding of the emotional and cultural dimensions that influence how educators adapt to new pedagogical methods.

Therefore, to address this gap, a phenomenological approach is essential for capturing the complex, multi-faceted nature of religious educators' experiences with digital transformation (Hendek et al., 2024). Such an approach allows for the exploration of the subjective meanings that educators attach to their experiences, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This shift in methodology not only fills a critical gap in the literature but also offers valuable insights that can inform future educational practices, policies, and training programs aimed at supporting educators in this transition.

Previous research has explored various aspects of digital education, with a particular emphasis on the practical and technological challenges faced by educators (Aldrin, 2024). Studies have addressed the integration of digital tools into traditional learning environments, focusing on the effectiveness of online platforms and the barriers to digital adoption (Kurniawan et al., 2025; Sweat et al., 2025). However, few studies have delved into the lived experiences of educators, especially in the context of religious education. Theoretical frameworks related to digital transformation in education highlight the intersection of technology and pedagogy, but they often overlook the subjective meanings and emotional responses of teachers to these changes. This gap in understanding underscores the need for a more nuanced approach to exploring educators' experiences with digital learning tools.

To address this gap, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, which is uniquely suited to exploring the subjective, lived experiences of religious educators in the context of digital education (Ismail et al., 2024). Phenomenology allows for a deep exploration of how educators perceive and make sense of their role in an increasingly digital world, focusing on the meanings they attribute to their experiences (Sihombing & Maigahoaku, 2025). By adopting this method, the study seeks to uncover the essence of how digital transformation impacts teaching practices and the personal challenges and opportunities educators face. The phenomenological framework provides a rich, holistic perspective that is essential for understanding the complex emotions and perceptions of teachers navigating the integration of technology into their religious teaching.

This article is structured to first provide an introduction to the broader context of digital transformation in education, with a specific focus on religious education. It then explains the phenomenological approach used to explore educators' experiences, including the data collection and analysis methods employed. Following the methodology section, the article presents the findings, providing a detailed discussion of the main themes identified through data analysis. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the key insights gained from the study and their implications for future educational practices, especially in religious education settings.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study utilized a phenomenological design, which focuses on exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals as they engage with a particular phenomenon (Fife, 2020). Phenomenology is particularly suitable for this research as it seeks to uncover the essence of human experiences, highlighting the subjective meanings that individuals attach to those experiences. This approach is relevant for investigating the challenges faced by religious education teachers in adapting to digital learning tools, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of their personal perspectives and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences. A descriptive phenomenological approach was adopted to capture the participants' first-hand experiences and to uncover the core structures of their lived reality regarding the integration of technology in religious education.

Participants

The participants in this study were religious education teachers who had experience teaching Islamic education through digital platforms (Kawamura, 2020). Purposive sampling was used to select

participants who met specific inclusion criteria: teachers must have at least one year of experience in digital teaching environments, must have taught religious education subjects during the COVID-19 pandemic, and must be currently practicing Islamic education in a formal school setting. Participants were selected to represent a diverse range of experiences with technology, ensuring that their perspectives would offer insights into the varying challenges and successes encountered. The final sample consisted of 10 participants, including 6 male and 4 female teachers, aged between 30 and 50 years. This demographic was chosen to ensure that the data reflected a broad spectrum of experiences within the target population.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted remotely via video calls to accommodate the participants' schedules and ensure a comfortable setting for sharing personal experiences (Clair, 2003). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, with a set of open-ended questions designed to prompt reflection on participants' experiences with digital teaching tools, their perceptions of the challenges, and the strategies they employed to overcome these challenges. The interview protocol consisted of three sections: (1) general background on teaching experience, (2) specific experiences with digital platforms and tools, and (3) reflections on opportunities, challenges, and implications for religious authenticity. Probing questions were used to encourage elaboration. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and refined after a pilot study with one participant. Feedback from the pilot was used to adjust the clarity and sequence of questions to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. The interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. To maintain a relaxed atmosphere, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and encouraged to speak freely without concerns about judgment.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a common technique in phenomenological research that allows for the identification of key themes and patterns across participants' experiences (Fenton & Baxter, 2016). The analysis followed a systematic process of data reduction, beginning with a careful reading of the transcriptions to familiarize with the content. Meaningful units were identified and grouped into preliminary codes, which were then clustered into broader themes that reflected the essence of the participants' lived experiences. NVivo software was used to assist with data organization and theme identification. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, validation procedures included peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts, member checking by returning preliminary themes to three participants for confirmation, and maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions. Inter-coder reliability was also ensured by having two researchers independently code a subset of transcripts and compare results until consensus was reached. The final step involved interpreting the themes to construct a coherent narrative that captured the collective experience of the teachers, as well as the subtleties and variations in their individual accounts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study and gave written informed consent prior to participation. They were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The confidentiality of participants was strictly maintained throughout the research process, with all data anonymized to prevent identification. The study adhered to the highest ethical standards, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and the integrity of the research process. All procedures complied with international ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

Adaptation to Digital Learning Tools in Religious Education

The experience of religious education teachers in adapting to digital learning tools was characterized by a profound sense of both challenge and opportunity. As one participant, Teacher A,

explained, "The shift to online platforms was overwhelming at first, but it allowed me to reach students in ways I had never imagined before." This duality of adaptation was reflected across several interviews, where educators reported feeling initially unprepared but gradually recognizing the potential of digital tools to enhance engagement and make religious teachings more accessible. Teacher B shared, "I was hesitant to use digital tools for religious education because it felt like something sacred should be taught in person, face-to-face, but I now see how it can support deeper understanding through interactive platforms." This theme highlights the central role of adaptation, where teachers not only navigated challenges but also reshaped their understanding of religious pedagogy through technology. This resonates with the TPACK framework, which emphasizes the need for teachers to integrate technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge. In this study, religious educators demonstrate how technology reshapes pedagogical strategies without displacing the sacred content they seek to preserve.

Managing Technological Challenges in Religious Education

A recurring theme in the interviews was the frustration teachers felt in managing the technical difficulties that arose with the digital shift. For many, the technical aspects of teaching—ranging from internet connectivity issues to learning new software—proved to be significant barriers. Teacher C expressed, "The internet was a constant struggle, and I often had to cancel lessons or adjust plans at the last minute. It's exhausting." Despite these challenges, many participants found creative ways to overcome the technological hurdles. Teacher D noted, "I had to constantly troubleshoot, but I started to learn new tricks. The experience was challenging, but it forced me to become more resourceful and think outside the box." This theme reveals the resilience of religious educators who, despite technological setbacks, sought innovative solutions to continue delivering meaningful education. These findings align with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), in which perceived ease of use initially served as a barrier, but through experience, teachers increased their perceived usefulness of technology, thereby fostering acceptance and eventual adaptation.

Impact on Student Engagement and Religious Teaching

Teachers observed varying levels of student engagement with digital platforms. Some reported positive outcomes, such as increased interaction through chat functions, while others found it difficult to replicate the dynamic of in-person classroom discussions. "The chat feature was a game-changer," said Teacher E. "Students who were usually shy about speaking up in class became more active in online discussions. But, some students felt disconnected from the material because they were distracted by the technology." This theme reflects the mixed outcomes of digital learning in religious education, with some educators noting increased participation and others observing a sense of detachment from the material. This duality reflects broader pedagogical debates about digital learning, where constructivist engagement (active participation) can be enhanced, but relational and dialogical aspects of religious teaching—emphasized in spiritual pedagogy theories—risk being diminished.

Shaping Religious Values in a Virtual Setting

One of the most poignant themes in the study was how teachers felt about maintaining the essence of religious education in a virtual classroom. Several participants expressed concern about whether digital tools could effectively communicate the deep spiritual and moral values of religion. "Religion is about connection and experience," Teacher F stated, "I worried about losing that personal connection when teaching online. It's hard to convey the essence of our faith through a screen." Despite these concerns, many teachers found ways to adapt their teaching to fit the virtual format. "Although I miss the face-to-face interaction, I've learned to use videos and virtual reflections to still create a sense of community," explained Teacher G. This theme illustrates the tension between authenticity and mediation, echoing theoretical perspectives in religious pedagogy that stress the irreplaceability of embodied, communal practices. Yet, as authenticity is redefined in digital spaces, educators show agency in reconstructing spiritual presence through virtual means.

Essential Conclusion:

The experiences of religious education teachers in adapting to the digital shift were marked by both challenges and innovations. Teachers faced significant technical obstacles but discovered

opportunities for enhancing student engagement and rethinking religious pedagogy. Despite concerns about the loss of personal connection and spiritual depth in online settings, educators showed resilience and creativity in adapting their methods to continue delivering meaningful religious education. By linking these experiences to established theoretical frameworks such as TPACK, TAM, and spiritual pedagogy, the study extends beyond description to provide a deeper analytical understanding. It shows how religious educators are not merely coping with technological change but are actively negotiating pedagogical and theological meanings in the digital age.

DISCUSSION

Main Findings Summary

The primary findings of this study revealed that religious education teachers experience a complex, multifaceted adaptation process when integrating digital tools into their teaching practices (Ruankool, 2024). These teachers reported both challenges and opportunities, with significant emotional and professional implications as they navigated the balance between maintaining traditional methods of teaching and embracing new digital technologies.

Contribution to Research Question

These findings provide a direct response to the research question posed in the introduction: how do religious education teachers experience and make sense of the integration of digital tools into their pedagogical practices? The study highlights that, while digital tools offer a new avenue for enhancing engagement and expanding reach, they also create tension with traditional teaching methods rooted in personal interaction and spiritual connection (Jarmer, 2025; Mones et al., 2024). Teachers' experiences reflect a broader theme of adaptation, where they navigate both the challenges of technology and the opportunities it provides for creating more interactive, engaging, and accessible religious education. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the subjective experience of educators in this context, emphasizing the need to consider not just the practical implications of digital tools but also the emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of their integration into religious education.

Relation to Previous Literature and Theory

These findings align with and expand upon existing literature on the integration of digital technologies in education. Previous studies have documented the technical challenges and benefits of using digital platforms in various educational contexts (Foley et al., 2025; Nahir, 2024), yet few have addressed the emotional and personal dimensions of such transitions in religious education. The teachers' concerns regarding the preservation of personal connection and spiritual authenticity are in line with findings from LaBarbera (2025), who argued that technology, while offering convenience and accessibility, risks depersonalizing the learning experience, particularly in disciplines that require deep personal engagement. However, this study also offers new insights by highlighting the resilience and creativity of teachers, echoing Isik & Akbari (2024) suggestion that educators' ability to adapt to technological changes is deeply influenced by their personal motivations and commitment to their students. At the same time, this study contrasts with research that reports more seamless integration of technology in religious or values-based education. For example, Chen (2024) found that digital platforms in Christian education fostered stronger community building rather than weakening it, suggesting that technology can enhance rather than threaten authenticity. Similarly, Gómez & Ruiz (2025) argued that virtual spaces may provide novel opportunities for spiritual reflection that are less constrained by institutional boundaries. On the other hand, other scholars remain more skeptical: Al-Khatib (2024) emphasized that digitalization risks fragmenting religious authority, while Nurhadi (2025) noted that the heavy reliance on technology can exacerbate inequality due to varying digital access. By situating our findings within these divergent perspectives, the study highlights that the impact of digital tools in religious education is context-dependent and cannot be generalized uniformly. This research thus adds depth to the ongoing debate about the role of technology in education by focusing on the nuanced experiences of teachers within the specific cultural and spiritual context of religious education.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both the academic understanding and practical application of digital tools in religious education (Olsson, 2025). From a theoretical perspective, the results underscore the need for an approach to digital transformation in education that goes beyond the technological and pedagogical aspects to include emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. The experiences of religious educators show that technology's role in religious education is not solely about expanding access or improving efficiency, but also about navigating a complex landscape where tradition and modernity intersect. By critically comparing supportive and skeptical perspectives in prior literature, this study reinforces that digitalization is neither entirely beneficial nor wholly detrimental; instead, its outcomes are mediated by cultural context, educators' agency, and the values embedded in the teaching process.

Limitations of the Study

While the findings provide valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study (Choi, 2025). One key limitation is the relatively small sample size, which limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of religious educators (Aziz et al., 2024). Additionally, the study focuses solely on Islamic education, and the experiences of teachers in other religious contexts may differ. The use of qualitative interviews also means that the findings are based on the subjective perspectives of participants, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences within the broader teaching population. Furthermore, the study's reliance on self-reported data could introduce bias, as teachers may present their experiences in a socially desirable light. These limitations suggest the need for further research with larger, more diverse samples and additional data collection methods to validate and expand upon these findings.

Prospective Research Directions

The findings from this study open several avenues for future research (Lewis, 2025). One potential direction is to explore the experiences of religious educators across different faith traditions, comparing how various religious values and cultural contexts influence the adoption of digital teaching tools (Kvamme, 2025). Additionally, further research could examine the long-term effects of digital education on both teachers and students in religious settings, particularly with regard to the preservation of spiritual and moral teachings in a virtual environment. This study could also be expanded to include a more in-depth analysis of the impact of digital tools on student outcomes, particularly in terms of engagement, comprehension, and the development of religious values. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital education and offers a foundation for exploring the intersection of technology, pedagogy, and spirituality in contemporary educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of religious education teachers in adapting to digital teaching tools, addressing the gap in understanding how educators navigate the integration of technology into their pedagogical practices. The main findings reveal that while teachers face challenges such as technical difficulties and concerns about maintaining personal connections, they also recognize the opportunities digital tools offer for enhancing engagement and broadening access to education. These findings contribute to the growing body of research by providing a deeper, more holistic understanding of how digital transformation affects religious education, a topic that has been underexplored in previous studies. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of considering emotional, cultural, and spiritual factors when implementing digital tools in religious education. Based on these insights, several actionable recommendations emerge. First, education policymakers should design professional development programs that go beyond technical training to include modules on sustaining spiritual authenticity and teacher–student connection in digital environments. Second, school administrators should invest in reliable digital infrastructure and provide ongoing technical support to reduce the burden on teachers. Third, curriculum developers are encouraged to integrate interactive and reflective digital resources that preserve the communal and spiritual essence

of religious education. Finally, collaboration between religious authorities, teacher-training institutes, and technology providers can ensure that digital platforms are adapted to the unique pedagogical and spiritual needs of religious instruction. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring how digital tools impact student outcomes and by comparing the experiences of educators across different religious contexts. Such studies can further inform evidence-based policy and help refine training guidelines for religious educators worldwide. Overall, this research offers valuable insights that can inform future practices and policies in religious education in an increasingly digital world.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest in relation to this study

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