

Online and In-Person Learning in Islamic Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Character Formation Using the Islamic Character Formation Ecology Model

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ABSTRACT

This study stems from concerns that digital transformation in higher education may weaken the moral and spiritual dimensions, particularly in Islamic education, which places character development at its core. This research aims to compare the impact of online and face-to-face learning on students' character development and to explain the underlying pedagogical mechanisms. The study employs a mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequential design. Quantitative data were collected via a survey of 240 Islamic Religious Education students, using a Likert scale to measure akhlak, tazkiyah, and adab. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and observations. Quantitative analysis employed an independent-samples t-test and Cohen's d, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The results revealed significant differences across all character dimensions, with face-to-face learning consistently outperforming online learning. The largest differences were observed in the spiritual dimension, followed by moral and social-relational dimensions, indicating that the deeper the character dimension, the more it depends on the quality of the learning environment. Theoretically, this study proposes the Islamic Character Formation Ecology (ICFE) model, which views character as the result of interactions among pedagogical relationships, a spiritual atmosphere, and practical discipline. This model shifts the approach to character development from an individual-centered to an ecological-relational one. In practical terms, these findings underscore the importance of redesigning digital learning to ensure that character development remains intact.

Keywords: Online Learning; Offline Learning; Islamic Religious Education; Character Formation; Pedagogical Ecology.



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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of higher education over the past decade has been marked by an acceleration of digitalization that has not only transformed how knowledge is produced and distributed but has also shifted the fundamental orientation of education itself (Kaputa et al., 2022; Sertu et al., 2025). Learning is no longer directed solely at cognitive achievements, but also at character building, psychosocial well-being, and moral responsibility (Baeva, 2022; Biesta, 2015; Fullan, 2016; Young, 2025). In this context, online learning presents a paradox: on the one hand, it offers flexibility and efficiency, but on the other hand, it raises serious questions regarding its ability to foster students' values, attitudes, and spiritual awareness (Arizona et al., 2025; Selwyn, 2019).

In Islamic education, this issue takes on a more fundamental significance. Character, which encompasses ethics, spiritual purification (*tazkiyah*), and etiquette, is not merely an additional goal, but the very core of the entire educational process (Al-Attas, 2023; Halstead, 2004). The tradition of Islamic pedagogy places direct interaction, exemplary behavior (*uswah*), and a religious atmosphere as the primary means of internalizing values (Chen & Shih, 2025; Lickona, 2013; Noddings, 2012). Therefore, the shift toward online learning cannot be understood merely as a technical change, but as a potential disruption to the relational, affective, and spiritual foundations of pedagogy (Aboukhousa et al., 2025; Biesta, 2015).

Several studies indicate that online and in-person learning is relatively comparable in terms of cognitive outcomes (Pei & Wu, 2019; Xu et al., 2023). However, when the focus shifts to engagement, the depth of interaction, and affective dimensions, the limitations of online learning become significantly apparent (Walters et al., 2022). More problematically, most research still positions character as an individual attribute separate from the learning environment, thereby failing to capture the relational and ecological dynamics in its formation (Berkowitz, 2022; L. Nucci, 2015; Selwyn, 2019).

These limitations point to an urgent research gap. First, comparative studies specifically focused on character development as the primary focus of Islamic education remain limited (Azra, 2018; Hefner, 2023). Second, existing research has not yet explained the pedagogical mechanisms underlying differences across learning modalities (Maqableh & Alia, 2021). Third, the dominance of individualistic perspectives has obscured the ecological dimension, as the space in which character develops (Biesta, 2015; Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Fourth, the Indonesian context as a complex ecosystem of Islamic education remains underrepresented in the global literature (Hefner, 2023). Building on this gap, this study aims to analyze differences in character development between online and face-to-face learning and to uncover the underlying pedagogical mechanisms. A mixed-methods approach was used to integrate the strengths of quantitative analysis with a deep contextual understanding of students' learning experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Furthermore, this study proposes a conceptual reconstruction through the Islamic Character Formation Ecology (ICFE) model. This model stems from a critique of individualistic approaches in character education, asserting that character is formed through the dynamic interaction between pedagogical relationships, spiritual atmosphere, and practical discipline. This perspective aligns with the ecological approach to human development, which emphasizes the importance of the interaction between the individual and the environment in shaping behavior (Aloka et al., 2024; Bronfenbrenner, 1986), but expands upon it by incorporating the spiritual dimension as a core element within the context of Islamic education (Miller, 2023; Palmer, 2017).

Thus, the contribution of this study is twofold. Empirically, this study provides evidence that the ecological integrity of character formation largely determines learning effectiveness. Theoretically, ICFE offers a paradigm shift from an individualistic approach toward an ecological-relational approach in the study of character education (Berkowitz, 2022). This framework is expected to serve as a conceptual foundation for the development of learning designs, whether online, face-to-face, or hybrid, that maintain the moral, spiritual, and social dimensions as the core of education.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

The design used is an explanatory sequential design, in which quantitative data collection and analysis are conducted in the initial stage, followed by qualitative exploration to deepen and explain the numerical findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This approach allows researchers not only to demonstrate the presence or absence of differences but also to trace the processes that lead to those differences. Quantitatively, this study is comparative, comparing two independent groups using an inferential statistical approach Yüksel & Başaran (2020), while qualitatively, it employs a limited case study approach to understand learning dynamics in a real-world context (Yin, 2014).

2.2 Research Location and Context

The study was conducted in the Islamic Education program at the State Islamic University Sunan Kudus, Central Java, which features a relatively uniform curriculum, particularly in its emphasis on character education and spirituality. This context was selected because Islamic education, by its very nature, prioritizes character development as its primary goal (Al-Attas, 2023; Hefner, 2023), making it a relevant setting for a thorough examination of how learning modes influence this dimension. Additionally, the selected institution has implemented online and in-person learning in parallel, allowing for a more balanced comparison within a relatively controlled pedagogical context.

2.3 Participants and Sampling Method

The study participants were 240 active students in the Islamic Education program, divided proportionally into two groups: 120 in the online learning group and 120 in the in-person learning group. Each group consisted of classes that were equivalent in terms of course material, semester level, and instructor qualifications, to minimize the potential for external variable bias. The sampling technique used was stratified purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria including: being an active registered student, fully participating in learning in a single mode for one semester, and being willing to serve as a respondent. For qualitative data collection, participants were selected purposively, taking into account variations in learning experiences and the intensity of interaction, both among students and instructors (Bearman, 2019; Patton, 2014).

2.4 Data Collection Techniques

Quantitative data were collected through a survey using a character measurement instrument adapted to the context of Islamic education. This instrument covers three main dimensions: *akhlak* (moral), *tazkiyah* (spiritual), and *adab* (social-relational), developed based on a synthesis of character education theory and Islamic values (Berkowitz, 2022; Lickona, 2013). The questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester so that respondents had fully experienced the learning process, thereby enabling them to provide a more comprehensive reflection. Meanwhile, qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and limited observations. The interviews focused on students' and instructors' experiences regarding learning interactions, the spiritual atmosphere, and disciplinary practices in both learning modes. Observations were conducted to capture actual practices not always revealed in interviews, particularly regarding habits, routines, and classroom dynamics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

2.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using inferential statistics (Lee & Kim, 2022). Following validity and reliability testing of the instruments, the analysis proceeded with an independent-samples t-test to examine differences in means between the online and in-person groups. The significance level was set at $\alpha = 0.05$. Additionally, the effect size was calculated using Cohen's d to assess the practical strength of the differences, ensuring reliance is not solely on statistical significance (Cohen et al., 2017).

Qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic approach through open coding, category grouping, and the identification of main themes. This process was conducted iteratively to ensure that the resulting interpretations truly reflected the participants' experiences. The analysis was also aimed at linking the empirical findings to the conceptual framework developed in the study, particularly within the context of character formation ecology (Braun & Clarke, 2025). The reliability of quantitative data is ensured through construct validity and internal reliability tests, with coefficient values meeting established standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Meanwhile, the validity of qualitative data is maintained through triangulation of sources and techniques, as well as confirmation of results with participants (member checking) to enhance the credibility of the findings (Denzin, 2012; Marlina et al., 2024).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the research findings in an integrated manner, emphasizing not only statistical significance but also effect sizes and the pedagogical implications they entail. The analysis was conducted to answer two main questions: whether there are significant differences in character development between online and in-person learning, and how these differences can be explained within an ecological framework of learning. In general, the research results indicate consistent and significant differences between students who participated in in-person and online learning across all measured character dimensions. However, these differences are not only statistically significant but also possess substantial effect sizes, thereby indicating tangible practical implications within the context of Islamic education, as shown in Table 1

Table 1. Comparison of PAI Students' Character Scores Based on Learning Mode

Character Dimension	Learning Mode	Mean	SD	t	p-value	Cohen's d
Moral (Akhlāq)	Online (n = 120)	3.82	0.48	4.91	< .001	0.87
	In-person (n = 120)	4.21	0.41			
Spiritual (Tazkiyah)	Online	3.69	0.52	6.38	< .001	1.18
	In-person	4.26	0.44			
Social-Relational (Adab)	Online	3.88	0.46	3.27	.001	0.49
	In-person	4.10	0.43			

Based on the independent samples t-test in Table 1, the moral (*akhlāq*) dimension shows a significant difference between the online group ($M = 3.82$; $SD = 0.48$) and the in-person group ($M = 4.21$; $SD = 0.41$), with a t-value of 4.91 and $p < 0.001$. Calculations of the effect size yielded a Cohen's d value of ≈ 0.87 , which falls into the category of a large effect. This indicates that in-person learning has a strong influence on shaping students' moral behavior, rather than merely a small difference that is statistically coincidental. In the spiritual dimension (*tazkiyah*), the differences found were even more pronounced. Students in online learning had an average score

of 3.69 (SD = 0.52), while students in face-to-face learning had an average score of 4.26 (SD = 0.44), with a t-value of 6.38 and $p < 0.001$. A Cohen's d value of ≈ 1.18 indicates a very large effect. This finding confirms that the spiritual dimension is the most sensitive to differences in learning modes and also serves as the primary indicator of the strength of the learning ecosystem that has formed.

Meanwhile, in the social-relational dimension (*adab*), the difference was also significant with a t-value of 3.27 and $p = 0.001$. The average score for the online group was 3.88 (SD = 0.46), while the in-person group reached 4.10 (SD = 0.43). A Cohen's d value of ≈ 0.49 indicates a moderate effect, suggesting that social and relational interactions continue to develop in both learning modes but are more optimal in the in-person context. When these three dimensions are interpreted holistically, a clear pattern emerges: in-person learning is not only statistically superior but also possesses an ecological advantage in fostering holistic character development. The greatest differences were observed in the spiritual dimension, followed by the moral dimension, and then the social-relational dimension, suggesting that as character dimensions deepen (from behavior to inner awareness), the influence of the learning environment becomes increasingly significant.

These quantitative findings are reinforced by qualitative results that provide contextual explanations of how the learning environment works in shaping character. Students in face-to-face learning consistently describe a more vibrant, purposeful learning experience that includes constructive social-moral pressure. One student stated, *"In a physical classroom, I feel more supported. Whether I like it or not, I have to behave better because the professor and classmates are watching directly."* This statement indicates that physical presence creates an informal yet effective mechanism of social control. Conversely, students in online learning tend to perceive the learning process as an individual activity focused on task completion. One respondent remarked, *"The content might be the same, but the atmosphere is different. Online learning is more free-form, which can sometimes lead to a lack of structure."* This experience reflects the weakening of relational and normative dimensions in digital environments.

From the perspective of Islamic Character Formation Ecology (ICFE), these findings suggest that in-person learning simultaneously activates three key layers: pedagogical interaction, a spiritual atmosphere, and discipline manifested in daily practice. Pedagogical interaction in an in-person context is not merely cognitive but also relational and normative, where students directly experience the processes of modeling, correction, and reinforcement of values. The spiritual atmosphere also emerges as a significant distinguishing factor. Simple practices such as communal prayer, religious expressions, and the sacred ambiance of the classroom create an affective field that fosters students' transcendental awareness. This cannot be fully replicated in online learning, which tends to be fragmented.

Furthermore, embodied discipline is a key element in explaining why in-person learning is more effective. Physical presence, temporal regularity, and observable behavioral expectations form repetitive habits, so that values are not only understood but also put into practice. Conversely, online learning tends to weaken all three layers simultaneously. Interactions become limited, a collective spiritual atmosphere does not form, and discipline tends to be lax due to the lack of direct social control. This condition can be understood as a form of "ecological depletion" in the character-building process. The results of this study not only confirm the differences between online and in-person learning but also reveal that the strength of character formation lies in the ecological integration of relationships, atmosphere, and practice. The more complete this ecological framework is, the stronger the resulting character becomes.

The findings of this study confirm that the differences between online and in-person learning cannot be understood merely as a technical issue of material delivery, but rather as a fundamental difference in the quality of the pedagogical environment that shapes students' learning experiences. Quantitative results showing significant differences with large effect sizes, particularly in the spiritual dimension, indicate that in-person learning provides more holistic conditions for the process of internalizing values in Islamic education. These findings align with the literature, which emphasizes that meaningful learning is determined not only by content but also by the quality of relational and contextual learning experiences (Biesta, 2015; Miller, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, these findings challenge the dominant assumption in the digital education literature that views learning modes as neutral variables. Previous studies have indeed shown that online learning can achieve effectiveness relatively comparable to face-to-face learning in cognitive aspects and learning satisfaction (Anggrawan & Jihadil, 2018; Ebner & Gegenfurtner, 2019). However, this study demonstrates that when the examined dimensions shift to the realm of character which encompasses ethics, spirituality, and social relations such neutrality becomes irrelevant. This reinforces critiques of reductionism in digital education, which often overlooks affective and moral dimensions (AlAfnan, 2025; Selwyn, 2019).

Conceptually, these research findings can be explained through the Islamic Character Formation Ecology (ICFE) framework, which is positioned not merely as an analytical model but as the embryo of a grand theory in value-based character education studies. ICFE views character formation as an ecological process occurring through the simultaneous interaction of three primary layers: pedagogical interaction, spiritual atmosphere, and discipline manifested in daily practices. This perspective resonates with the ecological approach to education, which emphasizes the importance of interactions between individuals and their environment in shaping human development (Biesta, 2015; Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Within this framework, Islamic Character Formation Ecology (ICFE) can be positioned as the embryo of a grand theory that explains character formation as an ecological phenomenon emerging from the simultaneous interaction of three main dimensions: pedagogical interaction, spiritual atmosphere, and discipline manifested in practice (see Figure 1). This perspective expands human developmental ecology theory by incorporating the spiritual dimension as a central component (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Miller, 2023).

Unlike linear approaches that view character as the result of cognitive internalization or one-way value transmission, ICFE asserts that character arises from the learner's engagement within a dynamic pedagogical environment. Pedagogical interactions serve as the relational core enabling value transmission through modeling, dialogue, and direct moral correction (Bandura, 1977). A spiritual atmosphere creates an affective-transcendental field that imbues the learning process with depth of meaning Palmer (2012, 2017), while discipline manifested in practice provides a mechanism of habituation that reinforces the internalization of values through repeated actions (Bourdieu, 1986).

In conditions where these three dimensions are present in an integrated manner, what can be termed "ecological integrity" is formed that is, a situation where values are understood, felt, and practiced consistently within a unified educational experience. Conversely, when one of these dimensions weakens as seen in online learning ecological depletion occurs, characterized by a reduction in relationship density, the fragmentation of spiritual experiences, and the weakening of practical discipline. Thus, ICFE not only serves as an interpretive framework for this study's findings but also makes a significant theoretical contribution toward building a new paradigm of ecology-based character education relevant to the challenges of the digital age.

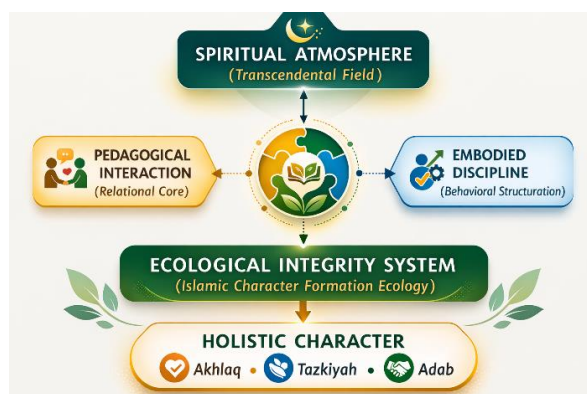


Figure 1. Islamic Character Formation Ecology Framework

In-person learning has proven capable of activating all three layers simultaneously. Pedagogical interaction in a physical space enables direct modeling, spontaneous correction, and more intense relationships between instructors and students. In the Islamic educational tradition, this dimension of modeling holds a central position because values are not merely transmitted through words but through living practice (Al-Attas, 2023; Halstead, 2004; Hidayatullah & Arif, 2022). This finding is also consistent with social learning theory, which emphasizes the role of observation and modeling in shaping behavior (Bandura, 1977).

Furthermore, the spiritual atmosphere fostered in face-to-face learning significantly strengthens students' transcendental awareness. Simple practices such as communal prayer, religious expressions, and the sacred ambiance of the learning space create an affective field that fosters a deeper internalization of values. Within the ICFE framework, this atmosphere functions as a resonant space that connects the cognitive dimension with inner experience, ensuring that values do not remain at the level of understanding but transform into consciousness. This aligns with a holistic educational approach that emphasizes integrating cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions in the learning process (Miller, 2023; Palmer, 2012, 2017; Taufikin, 2021).

The third dimension, embodied discipline, indicates that character is shaped not only through understanding and affective experiences but also through the repetition of actions within a structured context. Physical presence, temporal regularity, and observable behavioral expectations form a habitus that reinforces the consistency of student behavior (Bourdieu, 1986; Eloire, 2018). In this context, in-person learning provides a space for the formation of embodied character values that live in action rather than merely in discourse. This perspective reinforces the argument that effective learning must involve a practical dimension rather than merely symbolic representation (Dewey, 1974; Kolb & Kolb, 2012; Ye & Shih, 2021).

Conversely, online learning tends to experience fragmentation across these three layers. Pedagogical interactions become limited and tend to be instrumental, a collective spiritual atmosphere fails to emerge, and discipline loses its practical dimension due to the lack of direct social control. This condition results in what this study terms "ecological depletion"—the weakening of integration among elements that should operate simultaneously in shaping character. This finding reinforces critiques of online learning, which often creates a disintegrated learning experience (Maqableh & Alia, 2021; Selwyn, 2019; Tessier & Aubry-Boyer, 2021).

This finding expands the discourse on character education by emphasizing that the quality of character formation is not determined solely by the curriculum or instructional materials, but by the overall configuration of the learning environment. Thus, ICFE offers a paradigm shift from an individualistic approach toward a more comprehensive ecological approach. This approach opens

space for integrating moral education theory, the sociology of education, and developmental psychology within a more cohesive conceptual framework (Berkowitz, 2022; Nucci, 2001). From a theoretical contribution perspective, ICFE has the potential to develop into a grand theory in character education studies, particularly within the context of values- and faith-based education. Unlike previous approaches that tend to view character as an individual attribute, ICFE views character as the result of dynamic interactions between the individual and their environment. Thus, this theory is not merely descriptive but also explanatory and predictive in understanding how the learning environment influences character formation.

In practice, the findings of this study have important implications for the development of instructional design in Islamic higher education. Digital transformation cannot focus solely on efficiency and accessibility; it must also consider how relational, spiritual, and disciplinary dimensions can be reconstructed in virtual spaces (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Without such efforts, online learning risks producing graduates who are cognitively strong but weak in character dimensions. Thus, a hybrid learning approach that integrates the strengths of online and in-person learning becomes an alternative worth considering. However, such integration must be consciously designed while maintaining the integrity of the character-forming ecology as outlined in the ICFE framework. This underscores that educational innovation is not merely technological but must be rooted in a philosophical understanding of the very nature of education itself (Al-Attas, 2023; Biesta, 2015).

4. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that character development in Islamic education cannot be reduced to mere knowledge transfer; rather, it is a complex, multi-layered, and holistic process. However, these findings must be understood within the specific context of this study, namely among Islamic Religious Education students at a single higher education institution in Indonesia with specific curriculum characteristics and academic culture. Within these limits, face-to-face learning offers significant advantages in character formation, fostering intense pedagogical interactions, a vibrant spiritual atmosphere, and discipline manifested in daily practices. Conversely, online learning tends to weaken in these three dimensions, which this study conceptualizes as “ecological depletion.” Based on the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings, this study proposes the Islamic Character Formation Ecology (ICFE) as a conceptual framework that explains how character is formed through dynamic interactions among pedagogical relationships, a spiritual atmosphere, and practical discipline. These three elements work in a mutually reinforcing manner and produce what is termed “ecological integrity.” In this context, ICFE is not intended as a final claim but rather as an initial framework (theoretical proposition) with the potential for further development in Islamic education studies, particularly in bridging the cognitive, affective, and practical dimensions in an integrated manner.

Practically, these findings call for the reconstruction of digital learning designs that are more sensitive to character dimensions. Some concrete implications that can be implemented include: (1) designing synchronous interactions that enable real-time moral engagement between instructors and students; (2) integrating structured spiritual practices, such as value-based reflection or virtual collective worship, into the learning process; and (3) establishing a discipline system based on monitored activities, rather than merely task completion. Thus, online learning is not only oriented toward efficiency but also toward the sustainability of character formation.

Moving forward, further research is needed to test the validity and applicability of the ICFE across various contexts, including across educational levels, cultures, and hybrid learning models.

Additionally, developing measurement instruments that capture “ecological integrity” more comprehensively is a key priority. Longitudinal studies are also needed to understand how character develops over the long term across different learning ecosystems. With this direction, ICFE has the potential to evolve from an initial conceptual framework toward a more mature theoretical contribution to the global discourse on character education.

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