

## TRANSFORMATION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHING MATERIALS BASED ON HOTS AND RELIGIOUS MODERATION

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze and transform Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching materials based on HOTS and religious moderation as a strategy for building adaptive, inclusive, and digitally literate Islamic character. The research method uses a qualitative-descriptive approach through interviews, observations, and document analysis at two PTKIS (Islamic Higher Education Institutions) in Pekanbaru. The results show that the implementation of HOTS-based learning activities, such as problem-based learning, digital collaboration, and contextual case studies, combined with the values of tolerance, justice, and balance, can increase critical awareness and moral reasoning of students. The transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching materials based on HOTS and religious moderation not only strengthens the relevance of Islamic education in the digital era but also contributes to the formation of a generation of faithful, knowledgeable, and moderate morals. Thus, this study emphasizes the need for transformation of the curriculum, learning strategies, and pedagogical competencies of Islamic Religious Education lecturers.

### Keywords

Transformation of Islamic Education Teaching Materials, HOTS, Religious Moderation, Islamic Character, Digital Era.



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## INTRODUCTION

The shifting educational paradigm in the digital era has demanded a fundamental transformation in the design and implementation of learning, including in the realm of Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Education no longer focuses solely on knowledge transfer but also on developing higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), enabling students to think critically, creatively, and reflectively in the face of the complexities of modern life (Wahyuni, 2021). The transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching materials in the digital era is an unavoidable necessity. Advances in information technology have transformed the way student access, process, and respond to religious knowledge. Amidst the massive digitalization, the primary challenge in Islamic education lies not only in knowledge transfer but also in developing moderate, critical, and adaptive Islamic character to the changing times. Therefore, the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) approach and religious moderation are pedagogical strategies that are not only relevant but also urgently needed to be implemented systematically (N. Rahmah, 2020). Globally, it has been stated that 21st-century education demands critical, creative, and collaborative thinking skills as the primary foundation for shaping a generation ready to face the complexities of the times. In the digital context, this article highlights the opportunities and challenges of digital pedagogy in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, including how technology can be utilized to strengthen students' spiritual and moral values (Selwyn, 2016).

However, the reality on the ground shows that most Islamic Religious Education lecturers at Private Islamic Religious Colleges (PTKIS) in Pekanbaru are still trapped in conventional approaches based on memorization and one-way lectures. This phenomenon is reinforced by the results of observations and informal interviews with several Islamic Religious Education lecturers at Islamic colleges in Pekanbaru in April 2024, which found that Islamic Religious Education learning is still dominated by lecture methods, the use of printed teaching materials that are less relevant to the digital context, and the limited ability of students to connect Islamic teachings with social realities and global challenges. Students also demonstrate low critical thinking skills on religious issues, as evident in their limitations in analyzing differing views objectively and wisely. The HOTS approach, as developed by (Wahyuni, 2021), emphasizing higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and creativity, which are crucial in developing students' critical reasoning regarding complex Islamic religious texts and social phenomena. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, HOTS serves as an instrument for building a deep and contextual understanding of Islamic

teachings, as well as encouraging students to think reflectively and find solutions in facing the challenges of the times (A. Fauzi & Rahman, 2020). This theory emphasizes that meaningful learning does not stop at the level of remembering and understanding, but must encourage students to construct new knowledge through critical and creative thinking processes.

The Ministry of Religion, through the Religious Moderation program, emphasizes the importance of the values of balance, tolerance, and national commitment in the Islamic education system (Indonesia, 2022). Religious moderation must be internalized not only in the realm of discourse but also in the Islamic Education curriculum and teaching materials that are integrated with high-level thinking skills (Hafidz et al., 2023). However, a number of studies have shown that lecturers' ability to integrate moderation values into HOTS-based learning contexts is still weak, especially in the use of digital technology as a medium for strengthening students' Islamic character. Meanwhile, religious moderation as a paradigm of Islamic education emphasizes the values of *tawasuth* (middle way), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *musawah* (equality), and *islah* (improvement), which are relevant in facing ideological polarization and digital-based radicalism (Muvid & Basyrul, 2023).

Previous research supporting the integration of HOTS, religious moderation, Islamic character, and digital pedagogy shows that the Islamic Education learning model based on religious moderation is able to increase students' tolerant and inclusive attitudes (Harmi, 2022). From the perspective of character education, this approach is in line with the theory of Character Education (Arifin, 2020). Digital Pedagogy Theory emphasizes that digital pedagogy is not just the use of technology, but is related to changes in the way students think, interact, and build their identities (Ramadhani & Widodo, 2022). The importance of digital innovation in Islamic Education learning is in line with research that shows the need for learning strategies that are responsive to digital challenges (Shiliya, 2025). From the study of Islamic character, it is shown that strong character is not formed enough through lectures and memorization, but through dialogic, reflective, and value-based learning (Afif & Ningrum, 2025). Similar to what was found, most Islamic Education teaching materials are still descriptive and textual, not HOTS-based.

Integrating religious moderation into Islamic Religious Education teaching materials is an urgent need in the digital era. (Rofiah et al., 2019) This finding is in line with what Basri explained, that Islamic Religious Education learning outcomes in the aspects of character, moderation, and high-level thinking skills have not been systematically integrated into either the teaching content or teaching strategies.

The success of students' internalization of religious moderation values is greatly influenced by the campus social context and a learning environment that supports inclusive dialogue. This suggests that transforming Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching materials requires more than just adding content; it also requires a pedagogical approach that encourages critical discussion, reflection, and ethical assessment of diversity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The integration of digital literacy into Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning can improve students' ability to critically interpret religious information. However, the study also highlighted that lecturers' use of technology remains technical-instrumental and has not been directed at strengthening reflective thinking patterns or Islamic value-based problem-solving skills. This indicates that the digitalization of learning has not automatically improved the quality of higher-level cognitive processes (Musyahid, 2023).

Several relevant studies show that the integration of HOTS, digital literacy, and religious moderation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is an urgent need in Islamic higher education. Research conducted by (Suprpto, 2023) found that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, which is still oriented towards memorization and one-way delivery of material, results in students being less trained in using higher-order thinking skills. The results of his research indicate that without an analytical and reflective approach, students' religious understanding tends to be textual, rigid, and difficult to adapt to the dynamics of digital life (Imam Hanafie et al., 2024).

The study explains that the transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning requires the integration of digital technology as a means of analysis, collaboration, and exploration of contemporary Islamic discourse. The study found that technology use is suboptimal and is generally used only as a medium for presenting material, rather than as a means of developing critical thinking skills (Azra, 2020). Furthermore, research on digital literacy shows a strong correlation between students' digital literacy and the quality of their understanding of current religious issues. The findings suggest that students with low digital literacy are more susceptible to biased or extreme religious information, suggesting that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) instruction should include training in digital information analysis to strengthen moderate religious attitudes (N. Rahmah, 2020).

These findings align with research showing that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning that does not incorporate HOTS and religious moderation has the potential to shape a rigid religious mindset that is less responsive to differences. This study confirms that integrating these three

aspects—HOTS, digital literacy, and moderation—is a crucial foundation for developing a tolerant and adaptive religious character in students (Setiawan, 2023). Meanwhile, the study revealed that the use of technology in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning not only increases learning effectiveness but also plays a crucial role in internalizing religious moderation. The research findings indicate that students trained in the critical use of digital resources tend to have a more inclusive and contextual understanding of religion (Burga & Damopolii, 2022).

Campus environmental factors also have a significant influence, as shown in the research (Dewi & Fazal, 2025). The study explains that the success of internalizing religious moderation is greatly influenced by academic culture, student social groups, and campus social dynamics. When the campus environment is less inclusive, or there are exclusive religious groups, the development of moderate attitudes in students is hampered (Nurdin & Yusuf, M., 2021). Although various previous studies have highlighted the importance of integrating HOTS, digital literacy, and religious moderation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, these findings also indicate a research gap that has not been adequately filled (Suprpto, 2023), (Rajaminsah & al., 2025) and emphasize the urgency of strengthening critical thinking, digital analytical skills, and internalizing the values of religious moderation in Islamic higher education. However, these studies have not comprehensively described how Islamic Religious Education lecturers directly transform teaching materials in the classroom, particularly in the context of Private Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS) (MASTURAINI, 2021).

Research integrating Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning outcomes with character and religious moderation remains incomplete. Many Islamic educational institutions still emphasize cognitive aspects, resulting in suboptimal development of moderate Islamic character. This highlights the need to reposition Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning so that it emphasizes not only knowledge but also the internalization of values (Arifin, 2020).

Based on various previous studies and field findings, it can be concluded that there are still research gaps. First, the aspect of higher education, especially private PTKIS (Islamic Higher Education Institutions), has not been widely explored. Second, there is limited research examining the readiness and competence of Islamic Religious Education lecturers in developing HOTS-based teaching materials that internalize the values of religious moderation. Third, the effectiveness of using digital technology and innovative learning media in integrating HOTS with religious moderation has not been studied empirically and systematically.

Against this backdrop, this study explores the transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching materials based on HOTS and religious moderation in private universities in Pekanbaru. This study not only focuses on improving students' cognitive mastery, but also measures lecturers' readiness in designing and implementing HOTS-based learning. It also analyzes challenges in internalizing the value of religious moderation and evaluates the effectiveness of using digital media in supporting meaningful Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning transformation and building moderate characters that are adaptive to social dynamics and digital challenges. Therefore, this study is important to fill this gap through in-depth exploration and analysis of the transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching materials based on HOTS and religious moderation in private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS) in Pekanbaru.

## **METHOD**

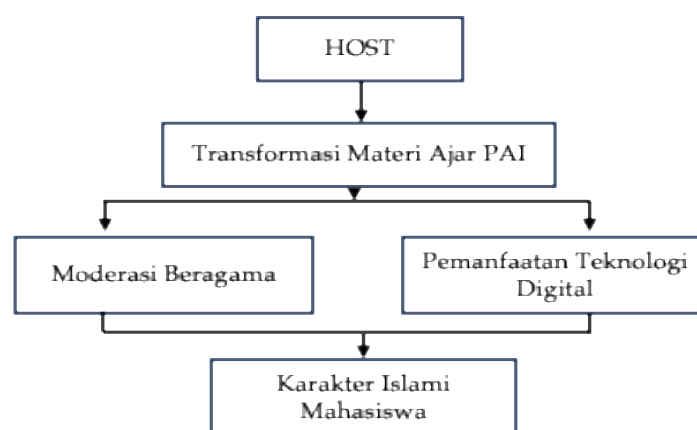
This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a phenomenological orientation, as explained by (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which emphasizes the importance of understanding the meaning and experience of individuals in a particular social context. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring in depth the process, strategies, and dynamics of implementing Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and the values of religious moderation in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. This research was conducted for three months, namely from May to July 2025, taking place at two private Islamic universities in Pekanbaru City that have implemented digital-based learning innovations, namely IAI Diniyah Pekanbaru and STAI Al-Ashar Pekanbaru. This research focuses on explaining in depth how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lecturers transform their teaching materials to align with the demands of digital-era learning. This transformation involves not only adapting content and learning media, but also developing PAI teaching materials based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and the values of religious moderation.

Data collection was carried out using three main techniques, namely in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies, as described by those who emphasized that the combination of these techniques can provide complementary data (Sugiyono, 2022). Interviews were conducted with 70 key informants, consisting of Islamic Religious Education lecturers, students, and curriculum developers at the IAI Diniyah Pekanbaru and STAI Al-Ashar Pekanbaru campuses. Participatory observations were conducted in Islamic Religious Education classes to understand the

implementation of HOTS-based teaching materials and religious moderation, including learning interactions utilizing digital technology. Documentation was conducted by reviewing the syllabus, Semester Learning Plans (RPS), digital teaching media, and student learning evaluation results. These three techniques were chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the practice of transforming Islamic Religious Education teaching materials in the field.

Data analysis was conducted interactively and continuously following a model that includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. The reduction process was carried out by sorting and focusing relevant data according to the research objectives. Data presentation was carried out in the form of a thematic narrative so that the relationship between the application of HOTS, religious moderation, and Islamic character formation could be understood in depth. The final stage was drawing conclusions by verifying the findings against theory and empirical data. To maintain validity, the researcher applied triangulation of sources and techniques as proposed by (Moleong, 2019), namely, comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation to obtain the validity and consistency of research data.

This study places the application of HOTS and the value of religious moderation as the core of the transformation of Islamic Religious Education teaching materials with the support of digital technology to form the Islamic character of students who are critical, adaptive, and moderate, as shown in the thinking framework image below:



**Figure 1.** The Framework of Thinking

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

This research produces empirical findings that describe the process of transforming Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching materials based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and the values of religious moderation in the context of utilizing digital technology at a Private Islamic Religious College (PTKIS) in Pekanbaru, namely the IAI Diniyah Pekanbaru campus. Data were obtained through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with lecturers and students, and reviewing learning documents such as Semester Learning Plans (RPS), digital teaching materials, and recordings of online learning activities.

Field findings indicate that the implementation of HOTS, internalization of religious moderation values, and the use of digital technology have not been optimal and are still partial. Although most lecturers have understood the urgency of these three components, their application is still limited to the conceptual level and has not been comprehensive in learning practices. The data from this study can be seen in three main focuses: (1) the integration of HOTS in Islamic Religious Education teaching materials, (2) the internalization of religious moderation values, and (3) the use of digital approaches.

In general, the research results indicate that the transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching materials at Pekanbaru's Private Islamic Religious Colleges (PTKIS) is still at the conceptual strengthening and practical adaptation stages. Lecturers are beginning to understand the urgency of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-based learning, the values of religious moderation, and the integration of digital approaches, but their implementation is not yet optimal across all aspects of learning. Details of the research results are presented in the following three tables.

**Table 1.** HOTS Integration in Islamic Religious Education Teaching Materials at Private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS) in Pekanbaru

No.	Observed Aspects	Field Findings	Academic Interpretation
1.	Learning planning (HOTS-based RPS)	70% of lecturers understand the HOTS concept, but only 30% apply it consistently in the RPS.	Conceptual understanding has not been fully followed by application skills in designing RPS.
2.	Implementation of analytical and creative-based learning	Class activities are still dominated by lecture methods and low-level discussions (remembering and understanding).	Lecturers need training in innovative learning methods to facilitate higher-order thinking.



3.	HOTS-based assessment	Project-based and reflective assessments are not well structured.	The evaluation has not fully measured students' analytical and synthetic abilities. This is in accordance with.
4.	Development of HOTS-based teaching materials	Most of the teaching materials are still oriented towards memorizing verses and theories, and do not include contextual case studies.	Teaching materials need to be directed at problem-based learning to encourage analysis, evaluation, and creativity, as in the Revised Bloom constructivist model.
5.	Student involvement in the critical thinking process	Students tend to be passive and follow the lecturer's instructions without critical argumentation.	Students need to be trained in metacognitive and reflective skills.

Source: Primary Data Through Observation, Interviews, and Documentation in May and June

**Table 2.** Internalization of the Value of Religious Moderation in Islamic Education Teaching Materials

No	Observed Aspects	Field Findings	Academic Interpretation
1.	Integration of the values of tolerance, justice, and balance	32% of courses contain religious moderation values, but are not accompanied by contextual case studies.	The approach is still normative and has not touched on the affective realm of students.
2.	Relevance of material to student diversity	PAI content does not fully reflect the multicultural context of the campus.	It is necessary to adapt the material to the social reality of students so that the value of moderation is more meaningful.
3.	Islamic character formation through reflective dialogue	Reflective activities and cross-view dialogue are still limited.	Strengthening critical dialogue needs to be developed so that the value of moderation becomes a real character.
4.	Lecturer involvement as a role model for moderation	55% of students believe that Islamic Education lecturers are already role models of moderate attitudes in speech and actions, but this has not been programmed into the curriculum.	Moderation values will be effective if lecturers become behavioral models, in accordance with the concept of the hidden curriculum in character education.
5.	Implementation of moderation-based co-curricular activities	Extra activities such as halaqah, thematic studies, and interfaith discussions are still rarely carried out.	Religious moderation needs to be strengthened through co-curricular activities so that the values of tolerance and justice become real social experiences for students.

Source: Primary Data Through Observation, Interviews, and Documentation in May and June

**Table 3.** Utilization of Digital Approaches in the Transformation of Islamic Religious Education Teaching Materials

No	Observed Aspects	Field Findings	Academic Interpretation
1	Use of LMS and digital media	70% of lecturers use digital platforms (Google Classroom, Moodle, Canva)	Digital utilization is high, but not yet directed at integrating moderate Islamic values.
2	Integration of moderate Islamic values in digital content	Only 30% of digital content contains Islamic values that are <i>rahmatan lil 'alamin</i> (mercy for the universe). (Analysis of digital teaching media,	Digital content is still technical and not yet value-oriented. This demonstrates the need for a values-based digital learning approach.
3	Student participation in digital learning	Students are more enthusiastic when the material is packaged interactively and contextually.	Digital technology has been shown to increase learning motivation and requires active and meaningful learning experiences.
4	Digital skills of Islamic Education lecturers	Some lecturers are still limited in interactive content design and digital learning management.	It is necessary to improve digital pedagogical competence so that the integration of moderate Islamic values can run effectively.
5	Digital collaboration between students and lecturers	Collaboration in online forums and digital projects is still individual.	Digital-based collaborative learning needs to be developed to form a reflective and value-oriented learning community.

Source: Primary Data Through Observation, Interviews, and Documentation in May and June

### HOTS Integration in Islamic Education Teaching Materials

The research results show that the majority of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lecturers at Pekanbaru's private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS) have a fairly good understanding of the concept of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), at 70%. Lecturers in this category are able to explain the main characteristics of HOTS, which include analytical, evaluation, and creative skills, in the context of learning. However, actual implementation in learning planning documents such as Semester Learning Plans (RPS) and teaching materials only reaches around 45%. This means there is still a gap between theoretical understanding and pedagogical practice in the field.

In teaching and learning, learning activities are still dominated by lower-level cognitive domains such as remembering and understanding. Lecturers tend to use lectures and general discussions that focus on delivering material and memorizing verses or hadith, rather than on in-depth reasoning or applying values to real-life contexts. As a result, students' analytical, evaluative, and creative dimensions are not optimally developed.

Furthermore, HOTS-based assessments also show weaknesses. Most evaluation instruments used are still objective tests, such as multiple-choice or short-answer questions, which only measure the ability to recognize or recall information. Assessments of critical thinking, argumentative skills, and problem-solving have not been systematically designed and measured. This situation indicates that HOTS integration in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is still in the early stages of adaptation. Lecturers only understand the concept but are not yet fully able to internalize it into a comprehensive learning system, from planning, implementation, and evaluation. Contributing factors include limited HOTS-based pedagogical training, a lack of forums for sharing good practices among lecturers, and a lack of institutional support in the form of academic supervision or monitoring of HOTS-based learning implementation.

However, there are also some positive indications of progress. Some lecturers have begun adapting collaborative and problem-based learning models, which encourage students to think critically and creatively about contemporary Islamic issues. They are attempting to connect Islamic values with modern social issues, such as tolerance, the environment, and digital ethics. Thus, the results of this study emphasize the need for ongoing training and academic mentoring for Islamic Religious Education lecturers to strengthen their ability to design learning and assessment strategies that foster students' higher-order thinking skills. HOTS integration is expected to become not only a pedagogical trend, but also part of the transformation of Islamic Religious Education learning that is contextual, moderate, and oriented towards developing critical thinking and Islamic values that are *rahmatan lil 'alamin*.

### **Internalization of the Values of Religious Moderation**

Research findings indicate that religious moderation values such as tolerance, justice, balance, and respect for differences have begun to be integrated into approximately 32% of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) courses at private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS) in Pekanbaru. This percentage indicates a good level of awareness among lecturers of the importance of religious moderation as the foundation of PAI learning. However, this integration process remains normative and conceptual and has not yet been fully implemented in contextual and reflective learning strategies.

Most lecturers convey the values of religious moderation through a cognitive approach, namely through lectures, theoretical explanations, and literature reading assignments. Students understand the concept of moderation as a religious discourse that emphasizes the balance between

faith and humanity, but not all are able to express these values in social attitudes on campus. The emerging phenomenon in the field demonstrates that students' cognitive understanding has not fully transformed into affective awareness and concrete behavior. This situation indicates that the learning approach used is still dominated by teacher-centered learning, where the lecturer is the primary source of knowledge. Students tend to be passive and less involved in the process of value reflection or cross-view dialogue. However, learning about religious moderation should ideally prioritize contextual and participatory approaches such as case studies, experiential learning, or problem-based learning, which can foster empathy, social awareness, and cross-cultural interaction skills.

In several study programs, there have been interesting initial efforts to instill the value of religious moderation through social projects, cross-study collaborative activities, and thematic discussions on diversity issues. For example, community service activities involving students from different faiths and campus activities themed around tolerance are potential vehicles for fostering moderate spiritual experiences. However, these activities remain sporadic and have not yet become part of a systematic curriculum. In general, the results of this study indicate that the internalization of religious moderation values in Pekanbaru's private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS) is still at the introduction and pedagogical adjustment stage. Moderation values are recognized and understood theoretically, but have not been firmly integrated into the affective and practical domains of learning. The main obstacles identified are limited relevant learning models, minimal training for lecturers on contextual moderation approaches, and a lack of character- and values-based evaluation. To optimize the internalization of these values, a shift in the learning paradigm is needed, from knowledge transfer to value transformation. This requires students not only to understand moderation as a religious concept but also to embody it in their daily social behavior. Implementing student-centered learning based on values, projects, personal reflection, and interdisciplinary dialogue will be a strategic step in making religious moderation a lifelong characteristic.

Thus, Islamic Religious Education at Pekanbaru's Private Islamic Boarding Schools (PTKIS) is expected to become a platform for fostering moderate, inclusive, and universally humanitarian religious awareness. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is not merely a space for understanding Islamic teachings textually, but also an arena for fostering empathy, tolerance, and the ability to engage in dialogue within diversity—values that are the primary foundation for

peaceful national and religious life in Indonesia.

### **Utilization of Digital Approaches in Islamic Religious Education Learning at Private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS) in Pekanbaru**

Field findings indicate that in the digital era, the majority of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lecturers at private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS) in Pekanbaru have begun utilizing various online learning platforms such as Google Classroom, Moodle, Canva, and YouTube Education as their primary medium for teaching and learning. Data shows that approximately 70% of lecturers have used digital technology to support lectures, both in delivering material, assigning assignments, and academic interactions. This is a positive indication that digital literacy among educators is improving and is in line with the demands of 21st-century learning. However, research also shows that only around 30% of the digital content truly integrates moderate Islamic values. This means that despite rapid technological developments, the spiritual, moral, and social dimensions of values have not been fully accommodated in digital learning designs. Most digital content remains informative and cognitive in nature, failing to address the Islamic character-building dimension of a balance between knowledge and morals.

In practice, students demonstrate high levels of enthusiasm and motivation to learn when the material is presented interactively, engagingly, and relevant to their lives. Digital media-based learning activities such as reflective videos, interactive quizzes, Islamic infographics, and thematic online discussion forums have been shown to increase student participation. Students feel freer to express themselves, express their opinions, and discuss topics, especially when topics are linked to contemporary socio-religious issues such as tolerance, humanity, and moderation in social media use. However, some lecturers still face challenges in aligning technological aspects with moderate Islamic values. Many lecturers focus on mastering the technical aspects of platform use, but fail to develop digital content based on the principles of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (blessing for all the worlds). As a result, digital learning tends to emphasize efficiency and ease of access, but fails to foster a deep awareness of spiritual values and reflection.

This situation indicates that digital learning at Pekanbaru's private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS) is still in the transition phase, from administrative digitalization to values-based pedagogical digitalization. Lecturers need guidance in designing digital instructional designs that harmoniously integrate cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects. For example, this could be achieved through digital project-based assignments that challenge students to create moderate

Islamic preaching content, analyze socio-religious cases, or campaign videos promoting the values of tolerance and peace from an Islamic perspective.

Optimizing a values-based digital approach is a strategic key in modern Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. This approach not only increases the effectiveness and flexibility of the learning process but also strengthens students' character, making them more critical, collaborative, and tolerant in facing the dynamics of global life. When digital technology is used as a means of educational preaching that touches on the spiritual dimension, the learning process is no longer merely a transfer of knowledge but also a transformation of values and the formation of digital civility. Thus, the transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning in the digital era demands synergy between pedagogical competence, digital literacy, and a commitment to moderate Islamic values. Lecturers play a role in designing learning experiences that are not only visually appealing but also spiritually and socially meaningful. Through this approach, Islamic religious education at Pekanbaru's private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS) has the potential to become a learning model oriented toward the integration of knowledge, faith, and morals, and capable of producing a generation of Muslims who are adaptive, innovative, and possess the character of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (blessing for the universe).

## **Discussion**

The results of this study indicate that the transformation of Islamic Religious Education teaching materials based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and religious moderation at the private PTKIS Pekanbaru IAI Diniyah Pekanbaru and STAI Al-Ashar Pekanbaru has progressed, but its implementation is not yet optimal (Sirajuddin, 2020). The integration of HOTS in the RPS and learning activities has been understood by some lecturers, but learning activities are still dominated by lower cognitive domains (remembering and understanding), while students' analytical, evaluation, and creative abilities have not been fully developed. This finding is in line with research that found that HOTS-based Islamic Religious Education learning improves religious character, but measurements of religious moderation are still minimal, and their research focuses on elementary or secondary school students. This study expands this focus to the context of PTKIS students and emphasizes the integration of religious moderation as part of HOTS in Islamic Religious Education learning (Hidayat & Husnan, nd).

In the aspect of internalizing the value of religious moderation, this study found that most lecturers had introduced the values of tolerance, justice, and balance, but the presentation was still

normative.(Widaswara & Kom, nd)Students understand the moderation conceptually, but the implementation of the values in campus behavior remains limited. This finding supports research that emphasizes the effectiveness of moderate preaching through digital platforms, but their research has not yet linked moderation to Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and HOTS learning (Kafid, 2023). In contrast to that research, this study shows the need for a student-centered learning approach based on projects and reflection so that the value of religious moderation can be internalized as a character, not just a theoretical concept (R. Fauzi, 2024).

The use of digital technology in this study demonstrated a positive impact on student motivation and engagement. The LMS platform, interactive media, and interactive digital content can foster critical thinking and collaborative skills, as well as an understanding of the values of moderation. However, the integration of moderate Islamic values into digital content is still limited, resulting in suboptimal learning effectiveness (Lessy et al., 2022)This aligns with findings that the integration of religious moderation into digital media is still rare. This study adds a new dimension by examining the combination of HOTS, religious moderation, and digital technology to shape the Islamic character of students at PTKIS (Wibowo & Bakri, 2022).

An effective digital approach also demands a new paradigm in learning design, where the principles of student-centered learning and value-based education become the main focus (M. Rahmah, 2020). states that digital-based learning that combines technology with moderate Islamic values is able to foster digital religiosity, namely the ability of students to actualize religious values in cyberspace in a wise, tolerant, and productive manner (Ade, 2021). Meanwhile, he added that digital transformation in Islamic education needs to be directed at developing 21st-century skills, particularly critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity (4Cs), so that students can adapt to global change without losing their spiritual roots (Candra et al., 2023). By integrating the values of moderation, digital Islamic Education learning not only improves cognitive effectiveness but also strengthens students' moral identity, social empathy, and religious awareness comprehensively (Yulianto, 2020).

The use of digital approaches in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning needs to be directed at synergizing technology and values. Integrating digital innovation with the principles of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (blessing for the universe) will result in a mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning model that not only encourages higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) but also fosters moderate Islamic character that is adaptive to global challenges (Siregar, 2022).

Overall, the findings of this study confirm the close relationship between lecturer preparedness, the quality of HOTS-based teaching material design, the internalization of religious moderation, and the use of digital technology. Lecturers with a strong pedagogical understanding and digital literacy are able to design learning that fosters students' Islamic character more effectively (Zuhdi, 2021). Thus, this study confirms that the transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching materials based on HOTS and religious moderation significantly influences the formation of students' Islamic character. This study expands on previous literature by emphasizing the explicit integration of religious moderation values into HOTS, while also testing the effectiveness of digital technology as an innovative learning medium, enabling students to become more critical, tolerant, and adaptive to the challenges of the digital era.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the transformation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teaching materials based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and religious moderation at Pekanbaru Private Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIS) shows a positive direction, although it still faces various challenges in terms of implementation and lecturer readiness. Most lecturers have understood the concept of HOTS and the values of religious moderation, but their application in learning design and digital media is still limited. The integration of digital technology has proven effective in strengthening students' critical reasoning skills, tolerance, and Islamic character, provided it is accompanied by contextual and interactive learning content design. Overall, this research opens up opportunities for further development in the Islamic Religious Education curriculum and pedagogy innovation in Islamic higher education institutions. Going forward, it is crucial for lecturers and institutions to strengthen digital capacity, deepen their understanding of religious moderation, and develop HOTS-based learning designs that foster balanced spiritual, social, and intellectual intelligence. Thus, Islamic Religious Education becomes not only a means of transferring religious knowledge but also a vehicle for transforming values, shaping a generation of critical, tolerant, and noble Muslims in the digital era.

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