



The Role of Christian Religious Education in Shaping Student Character in the Digital Era

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Abstract

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed educational practices and students' moral environments. While digitalization offers broad access to information and learning resources, it also poses serious challenges to students' character formation, including moral relativism, declining empathy, and unethical online behavior. In this context, Christian Religious Education (CRE) plays a strategic role in nurturing faith-based character and ethical awareness among students living in the digital era. This study aims to analyze the role of Christian Religious Education in shaping students' character amid digital challenges. The research employs a qualitative approach using a literature study design. Data were collected from scholarly journals, academic books, and relevant research publications published between 2018 and 2025. The data were analyzed using content analysis through stages of data reduction, thematic organization, and interpretation. The findings indicate that Christian Religious Education contributes significantly to character formation by integrating Christian values with digital literacy, ethical reflection, and contextual pedagogy. CRE teachers act as moral change agents who model Christian virtues and guide students in applying faith-based principles to their digital behavior. The study concludes that CRE, when implemented through contextual, creative, and reflective approaches, can effectively form students' moral resilience, ethical digital citizenship, and Christ-centered character in the digital era.



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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has brought significant changes to all aspects of life, including education. This transformation affects not only learning methods but also the formation of students' character who now live amid an unlimited flow of information (Siregar et al., 2025). On one hand, technological progress opens new opportunities for digital literacy and access to knowledge; on the other hand, it presents moral challenges such as misuse of social media, declining empathy, and value crises among youth (Boiliu, 2025). In this context, religious education plays a crucial role as a means of internalizing spiritual and moral values to balance technological advancement with humanity.

Christian Religious Education (CRE) has a fundamental responsibility to shape Christian character rooted in faith and love for others (Yando et al., 2025). Through CRE, students are

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encouraged to develop integrity, responsibility, and honesty as an expression of a Christ-centered life (Wowor et al., 2022). In the digital era, the role of the CRE teacher is not only to teach doctrine but also to be a moral role model and mentor who helps students apply their faith values wisely in their use of technology (Simanungkalit, 2025).

Nevertheless, moral degradation among Christian youth indicates that character formation through CRE has not been entirely effective. Many students face moral dilemmas influenced by the fast-paced and permissive digital culture (Tambunan et al., 2024). This challenge demands a new approach that adapts to the digital context without diminishing the essence of Christian values (Widjaja et al., 2022). Therefore, Christian Religious Education must become a space for character formation that nurtures moral resilience, ethical digital literacy, and strong faith amid the vast flow of global information (Darianti & Tafonao, 2021).

In addition, faith-based character education has strategic relevance for shaping a generation that is not only intellectually capable but also ethical and service-oriented in its use of technology. CRE teachers act as facilitators who integrate digital literacy with faith formation, instilling values of love, responsibility, and justice within the context of educational digitalization (R. P. Gulo & Tapilaha, 2024; Nurcahyo, 2024). This approach enables students to internalize Christian values through practical acts such as digital empathy, online social responsibility, and faith reflection in virtual activities (Amelia & Wening, 2024).

The urgency of this research lies in the pressing need to reaffirm the strategic role of Christian Religious Education as the foundation for character formation in the digital era. Without a strong spiritual foundation, young people risk losing moral direction and becoming victims of a permissive digital culture. Therefore, this study is essential to reassess the approach of Christian Religious Education in the digital context so that it can effectively cultivate faith-rooted and ethically grounded character.

Previous studies have shown that Christian Religious Education significantly contributes to forming students' Christian character through teacher modeling, Christian counseling, and Bible-based learning (SARI & WENING, 2023; Sari & Sari, 2025). However, these studies have not specifically examined how CRE's role transforms pedagogically and spiritually amid digital disruption.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze and describe the role of Christian Religious Education in shaping students' character in the digital era. The focus is on how CRE teachers can become moral change agents who instill Christian values through contextual, creative, and relevant approaches that address contemporary digital challenges. The results of this research are expected to contribute to developing effective CRE learning strategies that form a digitally literate generation grounded in faith, ethics, and responsibility.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with the type of literature study (library research). This approach was chosen because the purpose of the study is to explore, understand, and analyze in depth the concepts, theories, and empirical findings related to the role of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in shaping students' character in the digital era. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research allows researchers to interpret meanings from various data sources contextually to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2014). The literature study design was applied because the researcher did not collect data directly from the field, but rather reviewed a variety of scientific works, books, journals, and other academic sources relevant to the topic to construct a comprehensive theoretical analysis (Zed, 2018).

Data Sources

The data sources in this study consisted of both primary and secondary data. The primary sources included scientific journal articles, academic books, and conference proceedings that directly discuss Christian Religious Education, character formation, and educational challenges in the digital era. The secondary sources included previous research, church documents, educational reports, and supporting literature that enriches the discussion from a broader perspective. The selection of data sources was based on three main criteria: topic relevance, publication year (mainly 2018–2025), and the credibility of the publisher or journal in which the source was published (Sugiyono, 2022).

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection technique in this study consisted of three stages: identification, selection, and documentation of literature.

1. The identification stage involved searching for references using keywords such as Christian Religious Education, character formation, and digital era through academic databases including Google Scholar, Garuda, and Consensus.
2. The selection stage involved filtering and choosing literature that was most relevant, academically credible, and aligned with the focus of the research.
3. The documentation stage involved recording, organizing, and categorizing the gathered data based on main themes such as Christian character values, the role of CRE teachers, and the challenges of digitalization in education (Moleong, 2022).

This systematic approach ensured that the collected data were both comprehensive and contextually relevant to the research objectives.

Data Analysis Method

The data analysis method used in this study was content analysis. This technique aimed to systematically examine and interpret the contents of various documents to identify patterns, meanings, and relationships among concepts. The analysis was conducted through three stages:

1. Data Reduction – selecting and focusing only on information relevant to the research objectives;
2. Data Display – organizing the findings into thematic descriptions to facilitate interpretation;
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification – interpreting the analyzed data to derive an in-depth understanding of the role of Christian Religious Education in shaping students' character in the digital era (Miles et al., 2020).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, source triangulation was used by comparing findings from different sources and confirming consistency across the reviewed literature (Patton, 2002).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Transformative Role of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in the Digital Context

In the digital era, the landscape of education and socialization has shifted dramatically due to widespread access to digital technologies and online environments that influence youth's daily moral choices. Christian Religious Education (CRE) is increasingly recognized not only as a curriculum subject but as a transformative moral foundation that contributes holistically to character formation (Uchiyama, 2025). CRE goes beyond transmitting doctrinal or theological content; it embeds ethical reflexivity, spiritual identity, and moral agency into learners, equipping them to discern meaning and moral choices within vast digital networks where moral relativism and algorithm-driven content can overwhelm traditional ethical anchors.

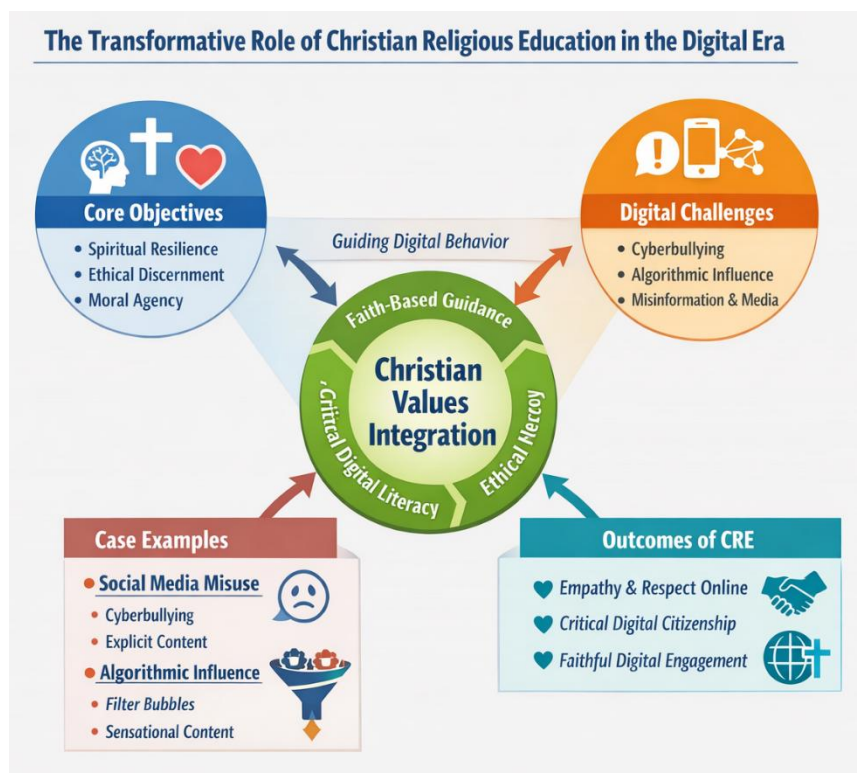


Figure 1. Christian Values Integration in the Digital Era

From this perspective, CRE’s role becomes not merely academic but existential and moral—fostering spiritual resilience, ethical discernment, and a value-centered worldview that enables students to interpret and respond to digital stimuli through a Christian lens. Studies on religious education in digital contexts highlight that religious education, when intentionally framed for digital engagement, helps students internalize values such as love, honesty, and responsibility not only as abstract precepts but as lived practices in online interactions, content creation, and digital citizenship (Wilhelm & Firmin, 2008).

Moreover, experts in digital theology note that digital spaces themselves are formative environments that shape identity. Campbell’s work on digital religion explains that new media platforms do not merely transmit messages; they influence how individuals construct religious identity and community in virtual spaces, blurring the boundary between offline and online moral life. Thus, CRE must actively engage with these digital environments to foster moral integrity, agency, and authentic Christian witness (H. Campbell, 2010).

1. Case Example 1: Misuse of Social Media and Moral Erosion

A documented real-world case illustrates this transformative need: In multiple Southeast Asian countries, research has observed patterns of adolescents engaging in cyberbullying, digital harassment, and exposure to explicit content due to uncritical social media use. Without structured moral guidance, students tend to normalize harmful online behaviours, such as trolling and spreading misinformation, which erode empathy and spiritual discernment. Effective CRE programs that integrate ethical reflection with digital practice have been shown to reduce these behaviours by helping students interpret their online conduct in light of biblical values of love and respect for human dignity (Hasugian & Saragih, 2025).

2. Case Example 2: Algorithmic Influence and Value Choices

Another significant concern in the digital era is the influence of algorithms that prioritize engagement over morality—exposing students to polarizing or morally ambiguous content that may contradict Christian teachings. For example, digital platforms often recommend sensational or emotionally charged content, which can fuel instant gratification and reduce students’ ability to engage in thoughtful ethical reflection. CRE approaches that include critical digital literacy alongside faith formation encourage students to interpret digital media critically and responsibly, aligning their digital choices with values of compassion and truth rather than impulsive interactions (Sutrisno, 2025)s.

Educational initiatives documented in Indonesia (e.g., research on integrating Christian values into curriculum and pedagogical design) show that when teachers intentionally embed discussions about technology use, digital ethics, and character virtues into CRE teaching, students demonstrate increased awareness of the moral implications of their online behaviour—such as recognizing the spiritual impact of time spent on entertainment platforms versus digital service or fellowship (Sitepu & Munthe, 2025).

In summary, CRE in the digital era must engage both theologically and pedagogically with digital culture. It must cultivate moral agents who are wisely and faithfully present in online spaces, exercising critical thought, virtuous behaviour, and spiritual maturity. This transformative approach positions CRE not as a competitor to technology but as a contextual moral compass that guides students to integrate Christian values into all dimensions of life—including digital participation.

CRE Teachers as Moral Change Agents

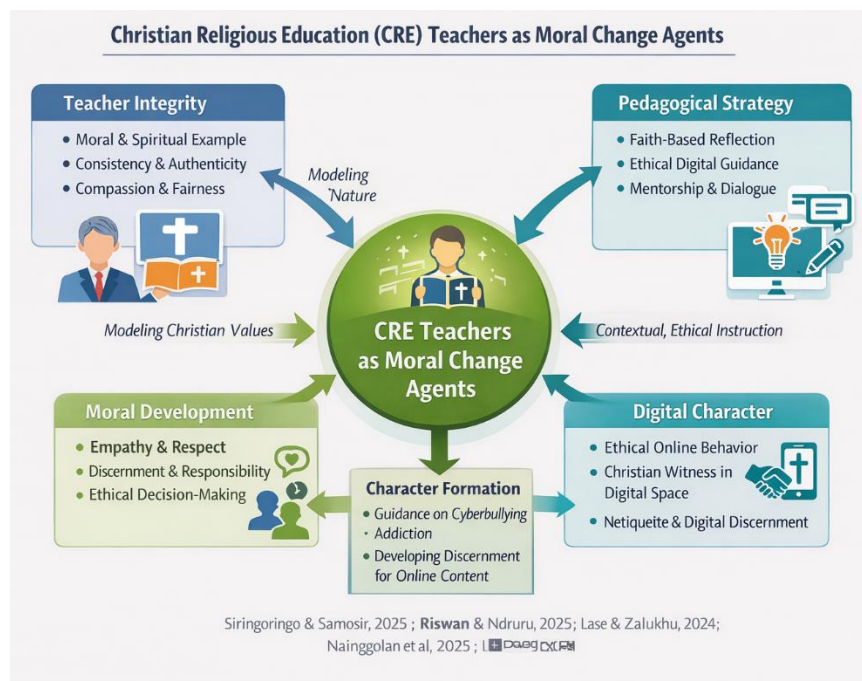


Figure 2. CRE Teachers as Moral Change Agents Framework

1. The Transformative Role of Teachers in Character Formation

Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers function not merely as instructors of religious content but as moral exemplars who significantly shape students’ ethical and spiritual development. Research indicates that Christian education teachers act as primary moral and

spiritual references for students, guiding them to live out Christian values in real life rather than simply absorbing theoretical knowledge. Their personal integrity, emotional maturity, and spiritual consistency play a crucial role in shaping students' moral reasoning and behavioral choices. A study conducted at SMP Negeri 001 Pasar Doloksanggul, Indonesia, found that teachers' personality competence—including moral integrity, emotional stability, and responsibility—showed a strong positive correlation with students' moral development (Siringoringo & Samosir, 2025). When teachers consistently demonstrate honesty, fairness, and compassion, they create a learning environment that supports students in internalizing these same virtues, confirming that teacher modeling is one of the most effective methods of moral education.

This aligns with social learning theory, which posits that moral behaviors are learned through observation and imitation of role models. In the context of Christian Religious Education, this means that teachers' authentic behavior communicates the Gospel more powerfully than words alone. According to Riswan and Ndruru (2025), teachers embody Christian virtues such as love, forgiveness, patience, and honesty, making them living testimonies of the values they teach (Paparang & Marjono, 2024). Students, in turn, are more likely to emulate those behaviors in their social and digital interactions. Thus, CRE teachers serve as transformational moral agents, bridging the gap between biblical teaching and lived ethical practice in modern society.

2. Real-World Case: Digital Challenges and Teachers' Moral Leadership

In today's digital environment, teachers face unprecedented moral challenges in guiding students who are immersed in online media. Studies show that the overuse of gadgets and social media has led to declining moral sensitivity and increasing exposure to unethical online behaviors such as cyberbullying, pornography, and misinformation. For example, research among students in Christian schools in Medan, Indonesia, found that uncontrolled digital consumption negatively affected students' self-discipline and empathy, both of which are core Christian virtues (Samosir, 2024). In response, CRE teachers have adopted contextual strategies that combine moral reasoning and faith-based reflection to help students evaluate the ethical implications of their online behavior.

One effective example is when a teacher uses classroom discussions to address issues of love and forgiveness through real-life digital conflicts—for instance, conflicts on social media or negative comments in online groups. By connecting biblical principles such as loving one's neighbor or speaking truth in love to actual online interactions, teachers help students see the relevance of faith in digital life. Similarly, when teachers demonstrate patience, empathy, and discernment in their own digital engagement, students learn that Christian character extends beyond the classroom into the digital sphere of everyday communication (E. Gulo et al., 2024).

Furthermore, collaboration between teachers, parents, and the school community has proven essential in sustaining moral development. When teachers model responsible technology use and transparency in online interactions, students become more capable of navigating digital moral dilemmas with reflection and responsibility. In this way, CRE teachers act not only as educators but also as moral mentors and spiritual guides, equipping students to integrate faith-based values into their digital identities.

3. Analytical Synthesis

In essence, the role of CRE teachers in shaping students' moral character in the digital era is holistic, relational, and contextual. Teachers become moral agents who influence students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions through example, mentorship, and contextualized pedagogy. Their leadership extends beyond doctrinal instruction into ethical digital formation, teaching students to be discerning, compassionate, and responsible

participants in online communities. This aligns with (Nelson & Yang, 2023) findings that a teacher’s religious beliefs strongly influence classroom practices, particularly in moral and value-laden instruction. Therefore, in the digital age, the effectiveness of Christian Religious Education depends not only on curricular content but on the authenticity and integrity of its teachers, who embody Christian character both offline and online.

Contextual and Creative Pedagogical Approaches in CRE

In the digital era, traditional lecture-based religious instruction alone is insufficient to effectively form Christ-centered character because today’s students—especially digital natives—are shaped by interactive media, visual narratives, and online communication. Contemporary Christian Religious Education (CRE) therefore requires pedagogical strategies that are both contextual (connected to students’ real world experience) and creative (using innovative methods that engage digitally fluent learners). A contextual approach emphasizes making biblical teachings relevant and meaningful in students’ everyday lives, particularly within digital spaces where they increasingly form identity and moral frameworks (Sitepu & Munthe, 2025).

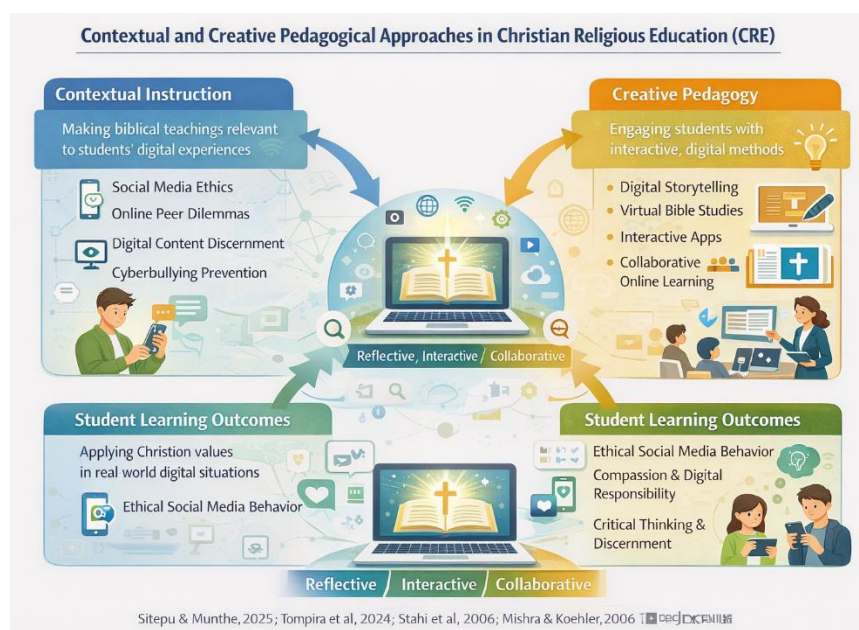


Figure 3. Contextual and Creative Pedagogy in CRE

Integrating technology with Christian pedagogy expands the ways in which students internalize and enact Gospel values. For example, platforms such as interactive online devotionals, digital storytelling, collaborative online projects, and discussion forums create experiential learning opportunities that link Christian ethics with real digital behavior. Studies in CRE contexts show that when teachers employ digital tools purposefully—such as multimedia, online Bible apps, and virtual reflection logs—students exhibit higher engagement, deeper moral reflection, and an improved capacity to apply Christian values such as love, honesty, and empathy beyond the classroom (Tompira et al., 2025).

A creative pedagogical approach also involves leveraging digital storytelling, collaborative online learning, and real-world problem solving. These methods align with educational frameworks that emphasize meaningful interaction, critical thinking, and application of knowledge in authentic contexts. Challenge-based and computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) frameworks

demonstrate that when students actively construct knowledge and engage with peers using technology, they develop not only cognitive skills but also dispositions such as responsibility, empathy, and ethical reasoning—qualities that mirror Christian character ideals (Suthers, 2012).

In a recent qualitative study examining integration of Christian values into education curricula, researchers found that Christian schools which implemented contextual and creative learning methods (e.g., projects linking daily life behavior with Scripture, digital portfolios with reflections on social media experiences, and scenario-based discussions on online ethics) were more successful in helping students transfer Christian values into their lives outside school. For instance, students participated in digital reflection assignments where they logged and interpreted everyday digital interactions (comments, messages, content consumption) through lenses of love, respect, and self-control—leading to measurable increases in ethical awareness and personal responsibility compared to peers with traditional instruction alone.

Another documented case reveals that teachers using blended and interactive methods—such as flipped classrooms where students prepared Scripture-based reflections online before in-class discussions, or use of educational apps to create collaborative faith-based content—reported improvements in students’ spiritual participation and moral reasoning. Students were more likely to act compassionately online, resist peer pressure to share inappropriate content, and articulate Christian ethical principles when encountering digital dilemmas (e.g., cyberbullying or misinformation).

Effective CRE in the digital age therefore must:

1. Contextualize biblical teachings in relation to students’ digital experiences (e.g., social media use, online interactions, digital ethics).
2. Employ creative technologies (multimedia, online platforms, interactive apps) to make learning engaging and relevant.
3. Develop reflective and collaborative learning experiences that encourage application of Christian values in digital practice.
4. Train teachers in blended and contextual methods, bridging faith with modern pedagogy so that students internalize not just knowledge but lived Christian character.

These approaches help move CRE from informational transmission toward transformational formation, where students learn to navigate digital culture in ways that reflect Christlike virtue, moral awareness, and ethical responsibility.

Table 1. Challenges and Ethical Implications in Christian Religious Education (CRE) in the Digital Era

No.	Key Challenge	Description	Proposed Ethical / Pedagogical Response
1	Information Relativism	Students struggle to distinguish between truth and personal opinion due to excessive online content.	Integrate digital literacy and biblical discernment into CRE lessons to strengthen critical thinking.
2	Moral Distraction	Excessive screen time and exposure to unethical media reduce moral focus and spiritual discipline.	Promote balanced technology use and reflection practices grounded in Christian values.
3	Lack of Digital Ethics Awareness	Students often act unethically online (e.g., misinformation, disrespectful posts).	Teach digital ethics as part of faith formation, emphasizing honesty, empathy, and responsibility.

4	Weak Spiritual Guidance Online	Limited educational digital platforms	pastoral presence leads to moral confusion.	or in church communities.	Encourage digital discipleship and online mentoring by CRE teachers and church communities.
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Integrating Faith and Digital Citizenship in Christian Religious Education

The integration of Christian faith with digital citizenship education represents a foundational strategy to prepare students not only to be technologically proficient but also morally grounded and spiritually mature digital participants. Digital citizenship broadly refers to the ability to engage in online environments ethically, responsibly, and safely—skills that become increasingly important as students interact with social media, networked communities, and digital information ecosystems (Ribble, 2015). Within Christian Religious Education (CRE), this integration involves embedding biblical virtues such as justice, compassion, stewardship, and integrity into the framework of digital competence.

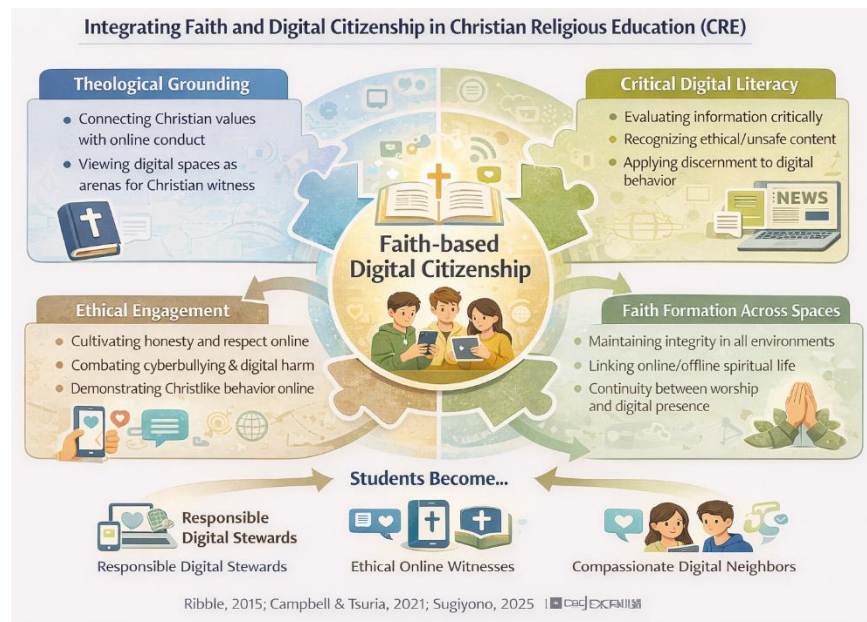


Figure 4. Integrating Faith and Digital Citizenship

A key theoretical contribution to this discourse comes from scholarship on digital religion and Christian educational practice, which argues that digital environments are not neutral spaces but formative contexts where religious identity, moral reasoning, and community engagement take shape (H. A. Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). In this view, CRE does not merely add digital literacy as a technical skill, but reconceives it as part of faith-informed moral formation—where students learn to interpret digital experiences through the lens of Christian teaching and apply ethical discernment online.

1. Why Faith + Digital Citizenship Matters

In the digital age, students are frequently exposed to a wide range of moral hazards: misinformation, cyberbullying, harmful content, manipulation, and privacy risks. Without ethical anchors, students may adopt online behaviors that conflict with Christian values of love, truth, and respect for human dignity. For instance, research in Christian school systems shows that when schools intentionally cultivate Christian discernment in relation to technology, students

develop stronger moral frameworks for evaluating digital content and social conduct, thus reinforcing their faith formation in digital practice.

Integrating faith and digital citizenship means teaching students to see their digital behavior as part of their Christian witness—not simply a neutral activity. A guideline developed for Christian schools in Europe, for example, frames digital citizenship starting from a biblical foundation: viewing online actions in relation to God’s design for human community, human dignity, and stewardship of creation rather than just secular norms of etiquette or law.

2. Real-World Case: Christian School Context

A documented case that illustrates this integration occurred in a Christian school system where educators implemented a discernment-based digital curriculum. Rather than teaching digital skills in isolation, Christian teachers combined instruction on digital safety and media literacy with reflective questions rooted in Scripture. For example, when students encountered conflicting information online, teachers guided them to ask: “Does this content uphold truth?” and “How would my response reflect Christlike compassion and integrity?” Over time, students reported greater ability to filter digital content ethically, resist provocation, and support peers online in ways consistent with Christian teachings—evidence that digital citizenship education grounded in a faith framework strengthens both digital behavior and spiritual maturity.

Another example is ongoing curriculum development efforts in Christian education that integrate digital ethics as part of CRE pedagogy, where students are taught online privacy, respectful communication, and responsible use of technology alongside theological reflection on identity, community, and stewardship of digital resources. These integrative programs result in students who not only navigate digital environments competently but also embody Christian character in their digital presence (Sugihyono, 2025).

3. Pedagogical and Moral Implications

The integration of digital citizenship and Christian faith involves four interconnected dimensions:

- a. Theological grounding – Students learn that digital spaces are arenas for Christian witness and ethical action, not just technology consumption.
- b. Ethical engagement – Digital citizenship instruction includes Christian moral principles such as honesty, respect, justice, and love for neighbor in online interactions.
- c. Critical digital literacy – Students are equipped to evaluate online content critically, discern misinformation, and align digital behavior with Christian values.
- d. Faith formation across spaces – CRE programs encourage continuity between offline spiritual disciplines (prayer, worship) and online behavior—helping students maintain moral coherence across contexts.

This integrated approach enables students to view themselves as digital disciples—ethical agents who reflect Christian virtues not only in church or school contexts but also in their everyday digital engagements.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Christian Religious Education plays a vital and transformative role in shaping students’ character in the digital era. CRE is not merely a subject that transmits doctrinal knowledge, but a holistic process of moral and spiritual formation that equips students to navigate digital environments with ethical discernment, responsibility, and faith-based integrity. The findings show that effective CRE emphasizes teacher modeling, contextual pedagogy, and the integration of Christian values with digital literacy, enabling students to internalize virtues such as love, honesty, responsibility, and self-control in both offline and online contexts.

Practically, this study suggests that CRE teachers should position themselves as moral mentors and digital role models who consciously demonstrate ethical behavior in technology use. Schools are encouraged to integrate digital ethics, reflective learning, and faith-based digital citizenship into CRE curricula. Teacher training programs should also emphasize pedagogical creativity and contextual strategies that connect biblical teachings with students' real-life digital experiences.

Future research is recommended to conduct empirical studies using qualitative or mixed methods to examine the lived experiences of students and teachers in CRE classrooms. Comparative studies across different educational settings and longitudinal research on character development outcomes would further strengthen understanding of CRE's effectiveness in the digital era.

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