

Instilling Character Through the Model of Building Religious and Value-Based Education (BRAVE): Honesty, Courage, Independence

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to create character education innovation through the development of the BRAVE (Building Religious and Value-based Education) Model. The primary focus of this innovation is to integrate religious values—honesty, courage, and independence—into a digital educational game platform to address the lack of adaptive character-learning media for early childhood in the digital age.

Methodology – This research uses the Research and Development (R&D) method with a 4-D procedure (Define, Design, Develop, Disseminate). The Define stage included an analysis of the needs of teachers at Raudhatul Athfal (RA) institutions; the Design stage produced a prototype of an interactive digital game based on moral dilemma scenarios; and the Develop stage involved validation by six experts (in materials, media, and practitioners) with a feasibility score of 89%. The model was tested on a limited basis with 60 students at four partner RAs.

Findings – The study's results confirm that digital educational games in the BRAVE Model significantly transform children's behavior. Pretest-posttest analysis shows a dramatic increase in honesty (58% to 84%), courage (55% to 81%), and independence (60% to 86%), with $p < 0.05$. Qualitative findings reveal that the game's interactivity increases children's emotional involvement, enabling the internalization of religious values to occur more naturally and permanently than with conventional methods.

Contribution – The BRAVE model has proven to be an innovative and applicable solution for early childhood education institutions seeking to strengthen religious character through the measured, systematic use of digital media.

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INTRODUCTION

Character building in early childhood is one of the important pillars in developing human resources with noble character (Hasanah et al., 2020; Suri & Chandra, 2021). According to Santrock, character is a set of traits, values, and habits that influence how individuals think, feel, and act. In early childhood, children are in a golden period of heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli, making this the most appropriate time to instill moral and religious values that will become the foundation of their future lives.

Character education in early childhood is not only about teaching good behavior mechanically, but also about building children's moral understanding and awareness. Research by the World Health Organization shows that children who receive effective character education tend to have more stable mental health and better social skills than those who do not. Thus, character education serves not only to shape behavior but also to foster psychological well-being. In addition, character education plays an important role in preparing children to face the challenges of the modern era, which is fraught with digital distractions and social complexity (Dewi & Alam, 2020; Karmini, 2022). According to the American Psychological Association, children with honest, resilient, and courageous character are better able to cope with social pressures, make ethical decisions, and maintain their mental health. This is relevant to the national education goal of developing students who are faithful, devout, and have noble character.

Facts on the ground show that character building in Indonesia is not yet optimal. Data from the Central Statistics Agency reveals that around 30% of early childhood in Indonesia experience behavioral problems, including aggressive behavior and lack of discipline. This phenomenon is a signal that character education must be provided earlier, in a structured manner, and with methods that are appropriate to the characteristics of child development (Mujahid, 2021).

The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum also emphasizes the importance of strengthening character through the Pancasila Student Profile, which includes the dimensions of faith, piety to God Almighty, and noble character. Thus, religious character building is one of the primary targets of the curriculum that must be integrated into all learning activities, including in early childhood education institutions (PAUD) (Fauzan et al., 2023; Kusumawati et al., 2025).

With technological development, children today live in an unavoidable digital ecosystem. A survey by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) found that 77% of Indonesians use the internet, and children are among the largest user groups. This opens up opportunities to utilize digital technology, including digital-based educational games, as an effective learning medium for instilling religious character.

Digital-based educational games have great potential to increase children's motivation to learn and their engagement. Prasetyo's research shows that children who use educational games show increased social, emotional, and moral skills. Games designed with values can teach cooperation, tolerance, and internalize the values of honesty and responsibility through a fun playing experience. However, the use of digital media for character building has not been widely implemented in a targeted manner. A UNICEF report warns that although technology can support education, uncontrolled use can lead to screen dependency, reduced social interaction, and behavioral problems. Therefore, it is necessary to design appropriate educational games that balance entertainment and learning and align with children's moral development stages (Lennox et al., 2021).

In the context of moral development, Kohlberg's theory emphasizes that children progress through stages from a punishment-obedience orientation to a universal-principle orientation. Digital educational games can be adapted to stimulate moral development by age, for example, by providing scenarios that challenge children to choose honest actions or help friends. Bandura's social learning theory also supports the use of educational games as a medium for character learning. Bandura explains that children learn through observation and imitation (modeling). Thus, the characters featured in the game can serve as role models for children to imitate (Rumjaun & Narod, 2025). In addition, Piaget's constructivist theory emphasizes that children build understanding through active experience (Waite-Stupiansky, 2022). Interactive games provide children with the opportunity to experience, try, and discover moral values through fun activities. Thus, educational games can be an effective way to internalize religious values naturally.

However, the challenges faced by early childhood education institutions remain significant. The results of a survey by the Indonesian Early Childhood Education Association (APAUDI) show that 65% of parents find it difficult to find digital games aligned with religious values. The content of games on the market mainly focuses on cognitive and motor aspects, so the need for games with religious values remains unmet. The problems faced in instilling religious character in early childhood can be seen from various national data and the series of data above, which are visualized in the following graph to facilitate understanding of the urgency of the research problem.

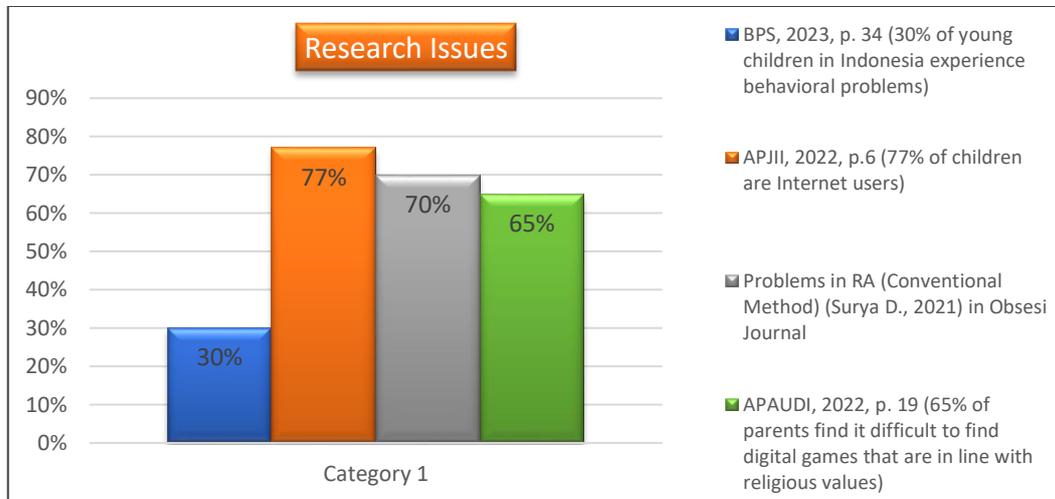


Figure 1. Issues in Instilling Religious Character in Early Childhood

This condition shows a gap between the need for religious character development and the availability of suitable media. So, we need innovation in developing digital educational games that explicitly integrate religious values such as honesty, courage, and independence. Against this backdrop, this study aims to develop the BRAVE (Building Religious and Value-based Education) model, which is a digital-based educational game specifically designed to instill the characteristics of honesty, courage, and independence in early childhood. This model is expected to be an innovative solution that supports the implementation of character education in RA (Raudhotul Athfal) and aligns with the objectives of the Merdeka Curriculum (Kar et al., 2025; Ford et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses the Research and Development (R&D) method. The R&D method was chosen because it is suitable for producing digital educational media products that can be practically implemented in the field (Gustiani, 2019). According to Sugiyono, research and development is a method used to produce specific products and test their effectiveness through a series of systematic steps. In the context of this study, the product in question is a digital-based educational game that serves to instill religious character in early childhood (Eisenhardt, 2021).

This study applied the Research and Development (R&D) method using a 4-D development model consisting of the Define, Design, Develop, and Disseminate stages. In the Define stage, activities focused on needs analysis through a study of the early childhood education curriculum documentation, observations at four partner RA schools, and in-depth interviews with teachers, which resulted in the identification of the problem of the low availability of digital religious media (Sarpong et al., 2023; Okpatrioka, 2023). The design stage involved creating a prototype of the BRAVE digital game, including a storyboard, moral dilemma scenarios, and a reward system to guide visual development (Gu et al., 2025; Yuan et al., 2025). Entering the development stage (Develop), the product underwent validation by six experts in materials, media, and

practice, who assigned it an 89% feasibility score. This was followed by limited trials on 60 children to produce a final product that effectively improved the characters of honesty, courage, and independence. Finally, the dissemination stage was implemented through media-use training for teachers at partner schools and the distribution of child character development reports to parents, to ensure that the values taught were consistently applied in the home environment.

Participant

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling techniques to ensure data representation from various stakeholders in the early childhood education ecosystem. The leading participant group consisted of 60 Raudhatul Athfal (RA) students in West Java aged 5-6 years as product test subjects, as well as 4 classroom teachers from four research locations (RA Al-Amanah, RA Nurul Amal, RA Nasrullah, and RA Al-Wafi) who acted as learning facilitators and child behavior observers. In addition, this study involved 6 experts as validators, including 2 digital media experts, 2 character education material experts, and 2 early childhood education practitioners with more than 5 years of experience, to ensure the pedagogical and technical quality of the BRAVE model. To strengthen the validity of the policy and its implementation, key stakeholders, including school principals and RA supervisors, were also involved to provide input on managerial aspects, as well as policymakers who evaluated the model's compliance with the Merdeka Curriculum standards.

Data Collection

The data collection techniques in this study were structured based on the 4-D development stages to ensure product validity at each stage. In the Define stage, data were collected through questionnaires and in-depth interviews to analyze teachers' needs and identify student profiles at partner RA schools. Entering the Design stage, data collection was conducted through a review of the PAUD curriculum documentation and expert consultation, which served as the theoretical basis for designing game scenarios and religious value indicators aligned with educational standards. In the Develop stage, data were collected through expert judgment and limited trials to assess the model's technical feasibility and effectiveness in improving children's character. Finally, in the Disseminate stage, data were collected through teacher and parent feedback forms to evaluate the sustainability of BRAVE model implementation in school and home environments (Yuan et al., 2025).

Instrument

This study used several key instruments that had been tested for validity and reliability to ensure the accuracy of product development data. Data collection instruments included a teacher needs analysis questionnaire, in-depth interview guidelines, and expert validation sheets compiled based on indicators of religious character (honesty, courage, and independence) and technical aspects of digital media. The expert validation sheet uses a four-point Likert scale to assess the suitability of materials and media, including ease of use, visual appeal, and the accuracy of value integration. Before being used in the trial phase, the child character assessment instruments (pretest-posttest) underwent content validation by early childhood education experts and reliability testing to ensure the statements consistently measured behavioral changes. Specifically for measuring the traits of honesty, courage, and independence, the instrument was designed as a behavior observation sheet with operational indicators, making it easier for teachers to provide objective scores during children's interactions with the BRAVE digital game (Swan et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

The data analysis technique in this study combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure the quality of the final product. Qualitative data from interviews and expert advice are analyzed through reduction and categorization to improve specific aspects of the media, such as interface design and scenario flow. Meanwhile, quantitative data from validation sheets are processed using descriptive statistics with a

"Highly Feasible" criterion threshold of > 81%, as well as a paired-samples t-test ($p < 0.05$) to assess the effectiveness of the BRAVE Model intervention in improving children's character. Although this combination of methods provides a strong scientific basis for product revision decisions, this study has limitations due to the small scale of the trial across four RA locations, so the generalizability of the results must be done with caution. Therefore, future research is recommended to conduct trials with a broader, more geographically diverse population and to evaluate the long-term retention of children's character traits after using the model, to ensure the sustainability of this digital education innovation's impact. (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012).

FINDINGS

This study aims to develop the BRAVE (Building Religious and Value-based Education) Model as an innovative learning medium specifically designed to instill religious character values, namely honesty, courage, and independence, in early childhood. This model is expected to address the challenges of character education in the digital age, where children are more interested in technology-based media than conventional learning methods. Research data was collected through pre-tests and post-tests, direct classroom observations, and in-depth interviews with RA teachers as research subjects. Preliminary analysis results indicate that most teachers still rely on conventional lecture and assignment methods, resulting in an optimal process of internalizing character values (Syafika & Marwa, 2024; Joshi Prem Lal, 2025; Tikader & Mandal, 2025).

The study's results show that applying the BRAVE Model positively impacts character development in early childhood. Based on quantitative data from a limited trial involving 60 students, there was a significant increase in the three indicators of religious character measured. The average honesty score increased from 58% in the pre-test to 84% in the post-test. The courage indicator increased from 55% to 81%, while the independence aspect increased from 60% to 86%. Statistical test results (paired sample t-test) confirmed that these increases were significant with a p -value < 0.05 . In addition to the numerical data, the observation results showed that the children were able to complete the challenges in the BRAVE digital game and exhibited behavior in line with the values taught, such as admitting mistakes (honesty), trying new activities without hesitation (bravery), and tidying up their own learning tools (independence) (Rohman, 2024).

The pre-test stage was conducted as a preliminary step to measure children's basic abilities in the three aspects of religious character that were the focus of the study: honesty, courage, and independence. This measurement aimed to determine the extent of children's character development before being given treatment using the BRAVE Model. The pre-test results showed that children's average ability remained in the low category. The honesty indicator reached only 58%, indicating that children still often find it difficult to tell the truth or admit their mistakes. In terms of courage, only 55% of children dared to express their opinions or perform in front of their friends, indicating that they still felt fear or lacked confidence. Meanwhile, independence was at 60%, indicating that some children still needed the teacher's help with simple tasks. This condition illustrates the importance of structured, engaging educational interventions to improve these three character traits (Musyawaroh et al., 2021).

The implementation of the BRAVE Model resulted in significant, directly observable behavioral changes among students during the field trial. Observation data revealed that the use of digital games as a medium for character learning consistently attracted students' attention, thereby influencing the internalization of religious values. In general, there was a behavioral transition from the initial stage before the intervention to the final stage after the children interacted with the moral dilemma scenarios presented in the software.

In terms of honesty, field data showed that students began to show the courage to admit their mistakes honestly when faced with conflict simulations in the game. For example, when children made mistakes in game missions that resulted in a reduction in virtual points, they tended to communicate this to their teachers or peers rather than hiding it. This behavior was documented through anecdotal notes indicating an increase in students' openness and responsibility in acknowledging their actions during game sessions.

Furthermore, in terms of courage and independence, student participation in class has increased. Students are observed to be more courageous in expressing their opinions or answering questions when

discussing in small groups after completing challenges in the game. In addition, in terms of independence, students demonstrate the ability to complete game missions and logic challenges independently without relying entirely on the teacher's instructions. This progress was evident in the reduced number of verbal instructions needed for children to complete the assigned tasks.

These behavioral achievements were technically supported by interactive features in the BRAVE Model, such as attractive animations and a direct feedback system. This feedback feature provides immediate audio and visual responses to every decision the child makes, helping them understand the consequences of their actions independently. The integration of instructional design elements and religious content is a key factor that reinforces the quantitative observations regarding the model's effectiveness in shaping the character of early childhood. Product validation was carried out systematically by six experts, comprising two media experts, two material experts, and two PAUD practitioners with more than 5 years of experience in early childhood education. The validators were given assessment sheets covering aspects of media display, material suitability with the curriculum, character value integration, and ease of use by teachers and children. The validation results showed an average score of 89%, placing the product in the "highly feasible" category for testing in the next stage. This score indicates that the BRAVE Model design aligns with sound pedagogical and technical principles of learning media.

After the validation process was completed and product revisions were made, the next stage was a limited trial involving 60 children from four partner RA research institutions, namely RA Al-Amanah, RA Nurul Amal, RA Nashrullah, and RA Al-Wafi. The trial was conducted over four weeks, with the digital game being used twice a week for 30 minutes per session. The post-test data collected after the trial showed a significant increase in all three religious character indicators. Children's honesty scores increased from 58% to 84%, courage from 55% to 81%, and independence from 60% to 86%, indicating a positive effect of using the BRAVE Model in the learning process.

Field observations show a noticeable change in behavior, with children becoming more active in discussions and consistently following the rules of the game honestly. During game sessions, researchers noted that children were no longer simply chasing victory but began to consider the moral consequences of each choice. Specific observations at RA Nurul Amal show that when a child accidentally pressed the wrong button, he openly reported it to the teacher, reflecting the internalization of the value of honesty in real situations.

The validity of these findings is reinforced by direct quotes from classroom teachers who observed these changes daily. This statement confirms that the digital media successfully bridges abstract values to concrete behavior. One teacher at RA Al-Amanah stated:

"Previously, it was tough to get children to admit their mistakes without fear. However, through simulations in the BRAVE Model, they learned that honesty is more valued than simply winning. Now they are much more courageous in expressing their opinions during reflection sessions at the end of class."

In addition to honesty, the researcher's anecdotal notes also document courage. Children who were previously passive began to show initiative in leading the group in completing game missions. A teacher from RA Nasrullah provided a similar testimony:

"This model is very structured. I see children who are usually shy starting to raise their hands and explain the reasons behind their decisions in the game to their friends. This is a big step forward in their confidence."

Positive feedback from the teachers involved also underscores the model's practicality in helping them instill character values. Educators agree that the game's gradual structure makes it easier for them to monitor character development regularly without making children feel pressured. By integrating specific observation data and verbatim practitioner support, the qualitative findings in this study demonstrate that the BRAVE Model meets the criteria for an effective and applicable character education tool in the school environment.

Table 1. Results of the pre-test, pre-test–post-test

Character	Pre-testPre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Improvement (%)
Honest	58	84	26
Brave	55	81	26
Independent	60	86	26

The increase in scores across all three characters aspects after the trial shows that the BRAVE Model is highly effective at instilling religious values in early childhood. To test the significance of this increase, the researchers conducted a paired-samples t-test. The analysis showed a p-value of < 0.001 for all three aspects (honesty, courage, and independence), indicating a very significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores. Thus, the improvement in children's character did not occur by chance but was a real impact of the BRAVE Model intervention.

The validity of these findings was based on the use of a structured character measurement instrument consisting of 15 observation statements (5 items for each aspect). This instrument was designed using a four-scale assessment rubric, namely: Not Yet Developed (BB/score 1), Beginning to Develop (MB/score 2), Developing as Expected (BSH/score 3), and Developing Very Well (BSB/score 4). The reported percentage score is the result of dividing the actual score obtained by the ideal maximum score, thus providing an accurate picture of the child's level of achievement.

The measurement indicators in this instrument cover specific and operational behavioral aspects. For example, in the honesty aspect, the indicator measured is "the child admits mistakes when making errors in the game." In the aspect of courage, one indicator is "the child dares to make decisions or choose challenging paths in the game," while in the aspect of independence, the indicator is "the child can complete missions without the help of the teacher." The use of these concrete indicators ensures that character assessment is conducted objectively and accountably.

The consistency of data between quantitative scores and qualitative observation notes also supports the effectiveness of the BRAVE Model in improving character scores. The integration of validated instruments and statistically significant test results supports the claim that this model is suitable as a reliable character education tool. With clear assessment rubrics, teachers can periodically monitor children's progress, so that the process of instilling moral values (knowledge, feelings, and actions) can be adequately measured during the use of this digital game.

The implementation of the BRAVE Model shows varying levels of value absorption among students, with the majority showing significant improvement; however, about 15% of children still needed intensive guidance due to difficulties understanding abstract moral instructions and technical constraints, such as system lag on specific hardware, which sometimes distracted them. In addition, teachers face challenges in dividing roles between behavior observers and technical assistants, especially for children who tend to be more obsessed with the mechanics of the game score than the substance of the religious narrative. These findings provide an objective picture of how the model's effectiveness depends heavily on the stability of the digital infrastructure and on teachers' readiness to serve as adaptive facilitators in the classroom.

DISCUSSION

The success of the BRAVE Model in significantly improving the religious character of early childhood demonstrates that integrating appropriate technology can be a catalyst for moral education. The average increase of more than 20% across all indicators is not just a numerical achievement, but a reflection of the transformation in children's behavior in a fun learning situation. Statistically, the t-test results show a p-value of < 0.05 , confirming that changes in children's behavior in terms of honesty, courage, and independence are a direct result of the model's intervention rather than a coincidence. This provides a strong empirical basis for educators to begin adopting digital media to internalize values (Anser, Shakeela; Ullah, 2025).

In terms of honesty, the increase from 58% to 84% indicates a shift in the children's moral paradigm. Through moral dilemma simulations in games, children learn that honesty has positive consequences in the digital reward system, which gradually helps them understand the concept of truth more concretely. This phenomenon aligns with Jean Piaget's theory of moral development, which posits that children move from heteronomous to autonomous morality. The BRAVE model facilitates this process by allowing children to experience firsthand the risks of dishonesty in a safe virtual environment, so they begin to respect rules not because they fear punishment, but because of their awareness of values (Wilson & Katsos, 2022).

Additionally, Thomas Lickona's proposal of a connection between moral knowing and moral action has proven effective in this model. Children do not just memorize what honesty is; they practice it through direct interaction with the game's features. The increase in courage from 55% to 81% also underscores the importance of providing children with space to make decisions. In the BRAVE Model, challenges that are arranged in stages provide opportunities for children to try new things and face the risk of losing points without feeling psychologically pressured.

This increase in courage reflects the strengthening of self-efficacy according to Albert Bandura's theory. Successful experiences completing game challenges build children's confidence that they can face difficulties, which is reflected in their actual behavior in the classroom. The pedagogical implications of these findings are profound for early childhood educators, as teachers are no longer merely conveyors of moral messages but are now designers of learning experiences that allow children to practice a "brave because it is right" mentality through scenarios relevant to their world (Naqiyah, 2022).

Meanwhile, the independence indicator achieved the highest score of 86%, driven by the game's level design, which required completing missions without constant adult assistance. This independence grew because children felt they had complete control (sense of agency) over their characters in the game. This strategy is very much in line with Maria Montessori's principle of independence, which emphasizes that children should be given the freedom to choose and take responsibility for their choices. The BRAVE model provides clear boundaries while still giving children room to explore solutions autonomously.

The limited scaffolding support provided in the game, in line with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), has proven highly effective. Help only appears when children really need it, so they are encouraged to try their best before seeking outside help. The use of reward systems such as points, stars, and appreciation animations in this model is not just a sweetener but a reinforcement tool in line with Skinner's behaviorism. Positive reinforcement that appears immediately after children behave well helps accelerate the formation of new habits.

However, this study also notes that the extrinsic motivation of digital rewards is only the starting point. As the intensity of use increases, children begin to feel inner satisfaction when they succeed in acting honestly or independently, indicating the beginning of intrinsic motivation, as described by Deci & Ryan. From an operational perspective, the BRAVE Model's flexibility across different school infrastructure conditions is a significant added value. Its ability to run on simple devices ensures that this character education innovation is inclusively accessible to various RA educational institutions.

The presence of teachers as facilitators remains a key, irreplaceable element in this model's success. Observations show that the model's effectiveness increases sharply when teachers reflect on play sessions, helping children connect what happens in the game with the realities of daily life at school and at home. This reinforces social learning theory, which holds that adult guidance helps children abstract from play experiences into broader moral concepts. Teachers act as a bridge to ensure that the game's religious messages are conveyed accurately.

The synergy between schools and parents was also an important finding in this research, as revealed by the character development reporting feature. This feature allows parents to provide consistent reinforcement at home, fostering a harmonious educational ecosystem aligned with Epstein's family partnership principle. However, the objectivity of this study also highlights technical constraints and variations in children's abilities as evaluation materials. Obstacles such as device lag or children's excessive obsession with scores are

important notes for the development of the next model to be more stable and focused on the substance of values (Puspitasari et al., 2021).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on character education in the digital age by proving that technology does not always hurt children's moral development (Budiyono et al., 2024). On the contrary, if designed with a strong theoretical foundation, digital games can be a very effective medium for internalizing values. In conclusion, the BRAVE Model offers a holistic approach that integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of character education. With a strong statistical data foundation and support from classical to modern theories, this model is worthy of becoming a new reference in the development of an adaptive early childhood education curriculum that keeps pace with the times.

In addition, expert suggestions were used to make minor revisions to the game interface design to make it more child-friendly, such as choosing more contrasting colors and simplifying game instructions. According to Borg & Gall, expert validation is an important stage in the research and development (R&D) product development process because it helps ensure the product's suitability to the predetermined learning objectives. Thus, the validation stage provides quality assurance before the product is tested with a broader range of students, while also serving as a basis for developers to improve the product's effectiveness (Firman & Mirnawati, 2023; Purba, 2024).

These findings support Lickona's research, which emphasizes that effective character education must involve knowledge, emotions, and actions simultaneously to foster consistent moral behavior. Thus, it can be concluded that the BRAVE Model significantly optimizes religious character learning by engaging children in digital play experiences appropriate to their developmental stages (Hafizallah, 2024). These results align with previous findings that interactive digital media can increase children's engagement in learning activities that instill moral values, enabling them not only to understand these concepts but also to practice them in play (Huang et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study successfully developed the BRAVE Model as a practical, digital game-based learning media innovation to instill religious character in early childhood. The main contribution of this research lies in integrating moral dilemma scenarios with a reward system that has been proven capable of transforming abstract values into concrete behaviors, particularly in honesty, courage, and independence. Practically speaking, this model offers educators a way to use technology to build children's character in the digital age through active involvement and direct experience. Although the pilot test results show a significant improvement in behavior, the effectiveness of this model remains limited to four Raudhatul Athfal (RA) institutions and a small number of participants, so these findings cannot be generalized to other geographical contexts without further testing. In the future, the BRAVE Model has the potential to serve as a reference for the development of an adaptive character education curriculum, provided that the implementation scale is expanded and the stability of the technological infrastructure in schools is strengthened.

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