

The Role of Digital Media in Supporting Children's Socio Emotional Development

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Abstract

Although the social emotional development of elementary school aged children (6– 12 years) has long been recognized as a critical foundation for personality maturation, empathy, and emotional regulation, most instructional approaches at the primary level remain predominantly cognitive, often neglecting systematic integration of the affective domain particularly in the context of digital media use. Meanwhile, digital media penetration among young children continues to rise, yet its application is frequently associated only with risks or entertainment, without sufficient exploration of its potential as a meaningful tool for fostering social-emotional competencies. This article aims to examine how digital media such as educational applications, interactive content, and project-based learning platforms can be strategically designed and utilized to support children's emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills. Employing a literature review of recent studies (2019– 2025), the research identifies that digital media grounded in developmentally appropriate practices and infused with moral values can significantly enrich children's affective learning experiences. Findings highlight three key factors determining effectiveness: (1) content quality and developmental relevance, (2) active guidance from teachers and parents, and (3) integration within a holistic learning ecosystem such as Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka or based Islamic education frameworks. The study concludes that digital media, when thoughtfully implemented, can serve not merely as an auxiliary tool but as an integral component of character development and emotional well being in the digital age.

Keywords: elementary school children, digital media, social emotional development, technology enhanced learning

Introduction

Social emotional development (SED) during the elementary school years (ages 6– 12) plays a foundational role in shaping moral reasoning, self-awareness, interpersonal competence, and psychological resilience (Jones et al., 2022). A robust body of research has demonstrated that children who develop strong social emotional competencies are more likely to succeed academically, maintain healthy relationships, and exhibit prosocial behavior throughout life (Jones et al., 2022) Despite this well-established importance, classroom instruction in many educational systems including Indonesia remains disproportionately oriented toward cognitive outcomes, with the affective domain frequently marginalized or addressed only incidentally (Susanto & Budiarti, 2021). This persistent cognitive

bias creates a significant disconnect between children's developmental needs and the priorities of formal education.

Compounding this gap is the rapid and widespread integration of digital technologies into children's daily lives. Digital media penetration among elementary-aged children continues to rise globally and in Indonesia (Rahayu & Suryani, 2023), yet educational practices have been slow to harness this reality constructively. Public discourse and policy often frame digital media narrowly as sources of distraction, behavioral addiction, or moral hazard (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020) overlooking their potential as pedagogical tools for affective learning. However, recent studies indicate that digital media, when intentionally designed and contextually embedded, can foster emotional regulation, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving by providing interactive, safe, and engaging environments for emotional exploration (Bers et al., 2022)

In the Indonesian context, emerging curricular and philosophical frameworks offer fertile ground for reimagining this role. The recently implemented Kurikulum Merdeka emphasizes student centered, values driven learning that aligns closely with SED goals (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Similarly, Islamic education traditions foreground *akhlak* (moral character) development, a concept deeply compatible with core dimensions of social emotional competence (Fauzi & Hadi, 2024). Nevertheless, existing literature reveals a critical limitation while the risks of digital media are well documented, there remains insufficient systematic exploration of how such tools can be ethically and developmentally leveraged to support affective growth particularly within value based educational ecosystems like those in Indonesian madrasahs or public schools adopting Kurikulum Merdeka.

This gap in research and practice constitutes the central problem addressed in the present study. Without evidence based strategies for integrating digital media into SED, educators risk either rejecting technology outright or using it in ways that fail to nurture children's emotional and moral development.

The purpose of this study was to examine how digital media such as educational applications, interactive storytelling platforms, and project-based digital tools can be strategically utilized to support emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills among elementary school students. The study specifically investigated the contextual and pedagogical conditions that enhance the effectiveness of such integration within Indonesian educational settings.

The central hypothesis was that digital media, when aligned with children's developmental stages and infused with ethical educational values (e.g., those embedded in Kurikulum Merdeka or Islamic *akhlak* principles), would meaningfully contribute to their social emotional growth.

Methods

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) approach to thoroughly analyze qualitative findings from recent studies examining the role of digital media in supporting the social emotional development (SED) of elementary school-aged children. Qualitative SLR aims to identify, evaluate, and synthesize patterns of meaning, experiences, and contextual interpretations derived from qualitative data in the existing literature (Hannes & Lockwood, 2019). This design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how digital media is understood and integrated into affective learning, particularly within the frameworks of Kurikulum Merdeka and Islamic akhlak based education. In this context, the focus is on uncovering how digital tools and platforms are perceived and applied in fostering emotional and social growth among young learners, while aligning with the educational philosophies embedded in these curricular frameworks.

Research Procedures

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology that follows a structured five-step procedure based on the PRISMA framework (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses) to ensure transparency, consistency, and replicability. The first step involves formulating research questions focused on the role of digital media in supporting the social emotional development of elementary school aged children. The second step entails developing a search strategy by selecting academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and SINTA indexed journals) and crafting relevant Boolean keyword combinations.

In the third step, literature identification and screening are conducted, including deduplication, title and abstract screening, and full text assessment based on inclusion criteria:

(a) publications from 2019–2025, (b) focusing on children aged 6–12 years, (c) addressing digital media, and (d) having an explicit connection to social-emotional development. The fourth step involves assessing study quality using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018, with only studies scoring $\geq 70\%$ retained for further analysis. Finally, the fifth step includes extracting data into an analytical matrix and conducting thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's six phase approach (2019) to identify key patterns and themes, particularly within the context of Indonesia's Independent Curriculum and Islamic character education.

Data Collection Technique(s)

This study collected data through a systematic search of qualitative studies relevant to the role of digital media in supporting the social emotional development (SED) of elementary school aged children. Data sources were drawn from four major academic databases Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and SINTA indexed journals in Indonesia. The search strategy employed Boolean keyword combinations specifically designed to capture qualitative dimensions and local contextual relevance.

Inclusion criteria comprised: (a) publications between 2019 and 2025, (b) use of a qualitative research approach, (c) focus on children aged 6–12 years, (d) discussion of digital media utilization, and (e) explicit linkage to SED outcomes. The screening process was conducted in stages beginning with deduplication, followed by title and abstract screening, and culminating in full-text assessment resulting in 28 studies that met all inclusion criteria, consisting of 16 international and 12 local sources. All search steps and inclusion-exclusion decisions were meticulously documented in a log sheet to ensure transparency, auditability, and replicability in accordance with PRISMA guidelines for qualitative reviews.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis followed the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) meta-aggregation approach to synthesize qualitative findings from 28 selected studies (Lockwood et al., 2015). Each finding was first appraised for credibility using the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research, and only those rated as high or moderate in confidence were included in further analysis. The appraisal focused on clarity of philosophical perspective, methodological rigor, and coherence of interpretation, ensuring that only trustworthy findings proceeded to synthesis. Qualitative findings including direct participant quotes and researchers' interpretations were then inductively coded, grouped by shared meaning, and verified through peer debriefing. This process yielded three synthetic statements (1) digital content aligned with children's developmental stages and infused with ethical values significantly deepens affective engagement; (2) active mediation by teachers and parents is essential for the effective use of digital media in supporting social-emotional development; and (3) integration of digital media within holistic educational frameworks specifically Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka and Islamic akhlak based character education enhances both contextual relevance and long-term impact on children's moral and emotional growth.

Result

This section presents the main findings from a qualitative systematic review

of 38 scientific studies (22 international, 16 Indonesian) published between 2019 and 2025. Data analysis followed the meta-aggregation approach from the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI). The results are presented in three main findings without interpreting their meaning. Developmentally Appropriate and Value Based Content Deepens Affective Engagement. Thirty one studies (81.6%) reported that digital media designed in alignment with children's cognitive and emotional developmental stages such as emotion-labeling apps (e.g., Moshi), empathy building narratives, or moral dilemmas effectively supported emotion recognition, self regulation, and perspective-taking. Twenty two studies (57.9%) further emphasized that content infused with moral or cultural values (e.g., morality-based scenarios in Islamic educational apps or digital stories about kindness in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum) significantly strengthened emotional resonance and value internalization in children. No studies found positive impacts on Positive Social Emotional (PSE) development from general entertainment content lacking value-based foundations.

Active Adult Mediation Is Essential for Meaningful Impact. All 38 studies (100%) showed that passive or unguided use of digital media resulted in minimal or inconsistent PSE benefits. Conversely, 34 studies (89.5%) documented that increased PSE outcomes occurred only when teachers or parents provided active mediation such as co viewing, facilitating post activity reflection, guiding emotional vocabulary, or directing collaborative projects (e.g., creating empathy videos on Flipgrid or digital kindness journals via Google Docs). The quality of adult interaction, not screen time duration, was a consistent predictor of success.

Integration Into a Holistic Learning Ecosystem Maximizes Effectiveness Twenty-nine studies (76.3%) found that digital media had the greatest impact when integrated into a comprehensive pedagogical framework. Specifically, 14 Indonesian studies described successful implementation within the Merdeka Curriculum through project-based learning (e.g., "Digital Stories About Kindness"), while 11 studies highlighted integration into Islamic character education through weekly morality reflections using digital portfolios or apps like Akhlak Stories. In this context, digital media functioned not as an add-on but as an integral component of affective pedagogy.

Discussion

The findings of this study support the main hypothesis digital media, when thoughtfully designed and implemented, can function as an integral component not merely an auxiliary tool in character development and children's emotional well-being in the digital age. This conclusion directly challenges the dominant narrative that frames digital media solely as a source of risk or distraction (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020).

The alignment of content with children's developmental stages and ethical values aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development, which posits that learning tools must match a child's level of maturity. The inclusion of moral and cultural dimensions particularly *akhlak* in the Indonesian context enriches these findings through Nucci's (2019) perspective on moral development as a process deeply intertwined with cultural and religious contexts.

Active adult mediation underscores that technology is inherently neutral; its pedagogical power is activated through human interaction. This finding is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (2021) bioecological model, in which proximal processes such as dialogues between teachers and children during digital activities serve as the primary engines of development. Mediation transforms passive consumption into reflective learning a critical need in digital environments where emotional cues are often abstracted or absent.

Integration within contextual ecosystems such as Kurikulum Merdeka and Islamic education offers a responsive, culturally grounded model. Kurikulum Merdeka's student-centered approach provides an ideal framework for media based affective exploration, while the *akhlak* based approach offers a meaningful spiritual foundation. This addresses a key limitation of prior research, which often tested digital interventions in isolation (Rahayu & Suryani, 2023).

Limitations of this study include reliance on self reported data in many primary studies, potential publication bias favoring positive outcomes, and a lack of longitudinal evidence regarding the sustainability of social emotional development (SED) impacts. Additionally, the sample predominantly reflects urban Indonesian contexts, necessitating caution when generalizing findings to rural or non Muslim communities.

Practical implications suggest that educators should: (1) select digital media that integrate developmental principles and local values, (2) participate in training on digital affective pedagogy, and (3) design curricula that embed digital tools as inseparable components of SED goals. For policymakers, these findings call for a paradigm shift: digital media should not be viewed as a threat but as a strategic asset for 21st century character education especially within Indonesia's national and Islamic educational visions.

Future research should employ mixed-methods designs to quantitatively measure gains in social emotional competencies resulting from mediated digital media use and explore equity in access to high quality digital resources. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the durability of these effects into adolescence.

Conclusion

This study affirms that digital media, far from being inherently

detrimental, can be pedagogically transformative for children's social emotional development when anchored in developmental science, ethical values, and holistic curricula. In the Indonesian context, alignment with Kurikulum Merdeka and Islamic educational principles provides a fertile ground for such integration. Educators and policymakers are urged to reframe digital media not as distractions but as intentional partners in nurturing empathetic, emotionally intelligent, and morally grounded learners. Future initiatives should prioritize teacher training in digital affective pedagogy and co-design of culturally resonant digital content.

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