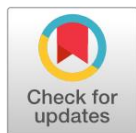


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Digital Storytelling in Islamic Religious Education: Enhancing Engagement and Identity Formation in Contemporary Pedagogical Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Background. Islamic religious education has long struggled to bridge the gap between traditional transmissive pedagogical approaches and the experiential, identity-forming needs of contemporary Muslim learners in digitally saturated environments.

Purpose. This study examines how digital storytelling integration into Islamic religious education enhances student engagement and Islamic identity formation among secondary school students in Indonesia.

Method. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed, combining a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group structure with phenomenological case study inquiry. Purposive cluster sampling yielded 240 student participants across four madrasah institutions, with 24 participants selected for qualitative inquiry.

Results. ANCOVA results revealed statistically significant treatment effects on both engagement ($F(1,237) = 128.64, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .353, \text{Cohen's } d = 1.87$) and Islamic identity formation ($F(1,237) = 136.97, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .366, \text{Cohen's } d = 1.94$). Qualitative findings identified four thematic mechanisms: narrative ownership, emotional resonance, critical values engagement, and digital identity expression.

Conclusion. Digital storytelling activates emotional and moral dimensions of Islamic formation more powerfully than conventional instruction, offering Islamic educators a theoretically grounded, empirically validated pedagogical framework for cultivating authentic religious engagement and coherent Islamic identity in contemporary learners.

KEYWORDS

Digital Storytelling, Narrative Pedagogy, Student Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the landscape of contemporary education, creating both unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges for traditional pedagogical frameworks (Al-Hawamleh, 2019). In the context of Islamic religious education (tarbiyah Islamiyah), this transformation is particularly pronounced, as educators are increasingly called upon to reconcile centuries-old

epistemological traditions with the communicative demands of a digitally saturated generation. The emergence of digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool represents one of the most promising intersections between technology and humanistic education, offering a medium through which moral narratives, theological values, and cultural identity can be transmitted in formats that resonate with contemporary learners (Hambali dkk., 2019). This convergence demands serious scholarly attention, not only from the perspective of educational technology but also from the disciplines of Islamic pedagogy, cultural studies, and developmental psychology.

Within the broader discourse of digital learning environments, storytelling has long been recognized as a foundational cognitive and cultural mechanism through which human beings construct meaning, transmit values, and form collective identities (Isik & Akbari, 2024). Classical Islamic educational traditions, rooted in the Qur'anic narrative model wherein stories of the prophets serve as moral exemplars demonstrate an inherent alignment between the act of narration and the formation of spiritual and ethical consciousness. What contemporary scholarship has begun to explore, however, is the degree to which these ancient narrative traditions can be revitalized through digital platforms, enabling educators to engage students across diverse modalities including video, animation, interactive multimedia, and social media storytelling (Bouchard dkk., 2026). The convergence of these two domains Islamic narrative pedagogy and digital media literacy constitutes the foundational premise upon which the present research is built.

The socio-cultural context in which Muslim learners, particularly youth, are now embedded has shifted dramatically over the past two decades. Research consistently demonstrates that Generation Z and post-millennial learners exhibit distinct patterns of information processing, attentional engagement, and identity construction, all of which are deeply mediated by digital technologies (Ball dkk., 2026). For Islamic religious educators operating in both formal schooling environments and non-formal community settings, the challenge is no longer simply one of content delivery but of meaningful engagement cultivating spaces in which religious knowledge is not merely transmitted but genuinely internalized and connected to learners' lived digital experiences (Porter dkk., 2026). It is within this pedagogical tension that digital storytelling emerges not as a supplementary tool but as a structurally significant intervention in the formation of Islamic identity among contemporary Muslim learners.

Despite the widespread enthusiasm for integrating digital tools into educational settings, a critical examination of Islamic religious education reveals a persistent and troubling gap between the technological resources available to educators and the actual depth of pedagogical transformation occurring in classrooms and educational programs (Shierk dkk., 2026). Many institutions engaged in Islamic religious education continue to rely on transmission-based instructional models that prioritize rote memorization, decontextualized textual analysis, and passive reception of religious knowledge (Borbor-Cordova dkk., 2026). These approaches, while carrying significant traditional legitimacy, have demonstrated diminishing effectiveness in sustaining student engagement, fostering critical religious reflection, or cultivating the kind of internalized, values-driven identity formation that Islamic pedagogy ultimately aspires to achieve (Pederson & Slowiak, 2026). The problem, therefore, is not the absence of available technologies, but rather the absence of conceptually coherent, empirically grounded frameworks for integrating digital storytelling meaningfully into Islamic religious education.

A further dimension of this problem concerns the risk of superficial digitization what scholars have termed "technology adoption without pedagogical transformation" wherein digital tools are introduced into educational settings without adequate attention to their alignment with the specific epistemological and ethical commitments of Islamic education (Beeler dkk., 2026). Digital

storytelling, when deployed without theoretical grounding, risks reducing complex theological narratives to entertainment content, potentially trivializing the moral and spiritual weight that these narratives carry within the Islamic tradition (Hightow-Weidman dkk., 2026). This tension between accessibility and depth, between engagement and reverence, represents a genuinely complex pedagogical problem that demands more than technological innovation. It requires a rigorous interdisciplinary framework that can hold together the demands of contemporary digital pedagogy with the irreducible particularity of Islamic epistemology, ethics, and identity.

Furthermore, the question of identity formation in digital spaces presents a distinct set of challenges for Islamic religious education that have not yet been adequately addressed in the scholarly literature (Hosen dkk., 2026). The construction of Muslim identity in contemporary contexts is increasingly mediated by digital narratives both those produced by the learners themselves and those consumed through social media, streaming platforms, and other digital channels. Research in adolescent identity development suggests that narrative engagement plays a pivotal role in the formation of coherent self-understanding, moral agency, and communal belonging (Korupolu dkk., 2026). When Islamic religious education fails to engage meaningfully with the digital narrative environments in which learners are embedded, it risks becoming irrelevant to the very processes of identity formation it seeks to shape. This absence of alignment between the pedagogical practices of Islamic education and the digital identity-formation processes of contemporary learners constitutes the central problem motivating the present research.

The primary objective of this research is to develop and articulate a theoretically grounded, empirically informed framework for integrating digital storytelling into Islamic religious education in ways that enhance both learner engagement and the processes of Islamic identity formation (Nnaji dkk., 2026). Achieving this objective requires a multi-layered inquiry that draws simultaneously from the fields of Islamic educational philosophy, digital pedagogy, media studies, and developmental psychology (Andriansyah, 2025). Specifically, the research seeks to examine how the structural and affective properties of digital storytelling including its capacity for multimodal meaning-making, narrative immersion, and participatory authorship can be aligned with the core pedagogical objectives of Islamic religious education: the cultivation of taqwa (God-consciousness), moral character (akhlaq), and a coherent Islamic identity rooted in both tradition and contemporary relevance.

A secondary but closely related objective of this research is to critically evaluate the existing landscape of digital storytelling practices within Islamic educational contexts, identifying the conditions under which such practices succeed in producing meaningful pedagogical outcomes and the conditions under which they fall short (Gruber & Haugbolle, 2013). This evaluative dimension of the research is guided by the recognition that digital storytelling is not a monolithic phenomenon; rather, it encompasses a wide spectrum of practices ranging from student-produced narrative videos and educator-designed interactive multimedia content to community-based oral history projects mediated through digital platforms (Drouin, 2019). Understanding the differential impacts of these varied practices on student engagement and identity formation requires both conceptual clarity regarding the defining features of effective digital storytelling in educational contexts and empirical sensitivity to the contextual variables institutional, cultural, theological, and technological that shape their implementation.

The tertiary objective of this research is to generate practical pedagogical insights that can inform the design of digital storytelling curricula, teacher preparation programs, and institutional policies within Islamic educational institutions (Sholehuddin dkk., 2026). The research recognizes that scholarly contribution must ultimately translate into pedagogical utility that the theoretical

frameworks and empirical findings produced by this study must be legible and actionable for Islamic educators working at the ground level of curriculum design, classroom instruction, and student formation (Pratiwi dkk., 2025). In this respect, the research positions itself not merely as a contribution to academic discourse but as a scholarly intervention with real-world implications for the quality, relevance, and transformative potential of Islamic religious education in the digital age.

A systematic review of the existing literature on digital storytelling in educational contexts reveals a substantial and productive body of scholarship yet one that is marked by a conspicuous absence of focused attention to Islamic religious education as a distinct pedagogical domain (Thapa dkk., 2026). The preponderance of research on digital storytelling in education has been conducted within secular Western schooling contexts, examining its impact on literacy development, STEM learning, social-emotional learning, and general student engagement (Sharma dkk., 2026). While the insights generated by this body of research are undeniably valuable, their direct transferability to Islamic religious education is limited by fundamental differences in pedagogical purpose, epistemological framework, and the nature of the content being transmitted. Islamic religious education is not simply secular education with a religious content overlay; it operates according to a distinct set of pedagogical principles rooted in revelation, prophetic tradition, and classical Islamic scholarship that require their own distinctive analytical frameworks when encountering the question of digital integration.

Within the sub-field of Islamic education research, while there has been growing attention to technology integration in recent years, studies that specifically examine the use of digital storytelling as a pedagogical methodology remain remarkably sparse. The majority of existing studies on technology in Islamic education have focused on e-learning platforms, digital Qur'anic learning applications, and the use of learning management systems in Islamic school and university settings (Alsuhaymi & Atallah, 2025). While these contributions are important, they largely address technology as a delivery mechanism for pre-existing content rather than as a medium through which learners actively construct meaning, engage creatively with religious narratives, and participate in their own processes of identity formation (Koç, 2025). The participatory, generative, and identity-constitutive dimensions of digital storytelling which are arguably its most educationally significant features have received virtually no systematic attention within the Islamic education literature.

A further gap exists at the intersection of digital storytelling research and Islamic identity formation theory. Contemporary scholarship on Muslim youth identity particularly in diaspora and post-colonial contexts has richly documented the complex, contested, and often digitally mediated processes through which young Muslims construct and negotiate their religious identities (Flaskerud, 2024). However, this literature has developed largely independently of the pedagogical literature on Islamic religious education, creating a disjunction between what scholars know about how Muslim youth form their identities in digital spaces and what Islamic educators are actually doing in classrooms to facilitate meaningful identity formation (Asrori dkk., 2025). The present research directly addresses this gap by bringing together these two bodies of literature digital identity formation theory and Islamic religious pedagogy in dialogue with the specific practices and affordances of digital storytelling.

The novelty of this research lies in its systematic attempt to construct an integrative theoretical framework one that is simultaneously grounded in Islamic educational philosophy, responsive to the insights of contemporary digital pedagogy, and attentive to the empirical realities of learner engagement and identity formation in twenty-first-century Islamic educational contexts (Chen dkk., 2026). While individual elements of this framework have been explored in isolation by previous scholars, no prior study has undertaken the comprehensive theoretical synthesis that this

research proposes: an account of digital storytelling that is theologically informed, pedagogically rigorous, and empirically oriented (Fuente-Vidal dkk., 2026). This integrative aspiration represents a genuine scholarly contribution to the fields of Islamic education, educational technology, and religious pedagogy more broadly.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this research is also justified by the urgent practical need for Islamic educational institutions to develop coherent, critically reflective approaches to digital technology integration (Merriman dkk., 2026). The question of how Islamic education navigates the digital age is not merely an academic puzzle; it is a pressing institutional and civilizational challenge with significant implications for the formation of Muslim communities, the transmission of Islamic values across generations, and the capacity of Islamic educational systems to remain both faithful to tradition and meaningfully engaged with the world in which their students actually live (Motley & Aeschbach, 2026). By focusing specifically on digital storytelling a technology with deep resonances with the narrative traditions at the heart of Islamic pedagogy this research offers not a wholesale embrace of digital culture but a carefully theorized account of the conditions under which digital tools can genuinely serve the ends of authentic Islamic formation.

The research also makes an important contribution to the global conversation about religion, technology, and education by centering the perspective of Islamic pedagogy within a discourse that has been predominantly shaped by secular Western frameworks (Akrim & Gunawan, 2021). In doing so, it participates in the broader scholarly project of decolonizing educational technology research expanding the field's conceptual vocabulary to include non-Western epistemologies and pedagogical traditions, and demonstrating that the question of how digital storytelling functions in educational contexts cannot be answered by universal principles alone but requires sensitivity to the specific cultural, theological, and institutional contexts in which education is embedded (Chofifah dkk., 2025). The present research thus contributes not only to Islamic education scholarship but to the wider field of comparative and international education, offering a model for how culturally and religiously situated pedagogical research can generate insights of genuine interdisciplinary significance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to construct a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how digital storytelling influences student engagement and Islamic identity formation in contemporary religious education contexts (Acikgenc & Pratama, 2024). The rationale for adopting a mixed-methods design stems from the recognition that the research questions under investigation are inherently multidimensional they concern not only measurable behavioral and attitudinal outcomes, which are best captured through quantitative instruments, but also the subjective meanings, interpretive processes, and lived experiences of learners and educators, which demand the interpretive depth that qualitative inquiry provides (Abusharif, 2023). A sequential explanatory design was selected as the specific mixed-methods architecture for this study, wherein quantitative data collection and analysis are conducted in the first phase, followed by a qualitative phase designed to elaborate upon, contextualize, and explain the patterns and findings yielded by the initial quantitative analysis.

The quantitative strand of this research is grounded in a quasi-experimental design, utilizing a pre-test and post-test control group structure to examine the differential effects of digital storytelling-based instruction on student engagement levels and Islamic identity formation outcomes compared to conventional instructional approaches (Ale-Ebrahim, 2022). This design was

selected over a true experimental design due to the practical and ethical constraints inherent in conducting research within established Islamic educational institutions, where random assignment of individual students to treatment and control conditions is neither operationally feasible nor institutionally acceptable (Yama, 2025). The quasi-experimental structure nonetheless allows for meaningful causal inference, particularly when supplemented by statistical controls for pre-existing differences between comparison groups, thereby preserving the scientific rigor necessary for credible empirical contribution.

The qualitative strand of this research is situated within an interpretive phenomenological framework, drawing upon the philosophical tradition of phenomenology as developed by Husserl and subsequently applied to educational research contexts. Phenomenological inquiry is particularly appropriate for the qualitative dimension of this study because it foregrounds the lived experience of research participants specifically, how students and teachers subjectively experience the processes of digital storytelling, how they interpret its relevance to their religious identities, and what meanings they construct through their engagement with digitally mediated Islamic narratives. Together, the quantitative and qualitative strands of this research operate in a complementary relationship, with the statistical patterns identified in the first phase providing the structural framework within which the phenomenological richness of the second phase is interpreted.

The target population for this study comprises students enrolled in Islamic religious education programs at the secondary school level (Madrasah Tsanawiyah and Madrasah Aliyah) in Indonesia, a context selected for its relevance, scale, and diversity as the world's largest Muslim-majority nation with one of the most institutionally developed systems of formal Islamic schooling globally. Secondary school students within this population were identified as the primary unit of analysis on the grounds that adolescence constitutes a developmentally critical period for identity formation a phase during which the psychological processes of religious identity construction are particularly active and during which the influence of pedagogical interventions on long-term identity outcomes is most pronounced. Islamic religious education teachers serving within these institutions were additionally included as a secondary population, given their central role in the design and implementation of digital storytelling-based instructional practices.

Sampling for the quantitative phase of this study employed a purposive cluster sampling technique, through which four madrasah institutions were selected from two distinct provincial educational districts in Indonesia two institutions designated as treatment sites and two as comparison sites. The selection of participating institutions was guided by several theoretically motivated criteria: institutional willingness to participate and implement the digital storytelling intervention, comparability of institutional characteristics across treatment and control sites with respect to student demographics, instructional resources, and curricular frameworks, and sufficient institutional diversity to enhance the external validity of the findings. Within each selected institution, intact classes were assigned to treatment or control conditions, yielding a total study sample of 240 students across both conditions. The sample was balanced across gender and grade levels to ensure adequate representation of the study population's demographic heterogeneity.

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling guided by the principle of information richness was employed to select a subset of 24 research participants 18 students and 6 Islamic religious education teachers from the treatment institutions. Student participants for the qualitative phase were selected based on their degree of engagement with the digital storytelling activities as observed during the quantitative intervention phase, with the deliberate intention of including participants representing a range of engagement levels: high, moderate, and low. This intentional variation was adopted to ensure that the phenomenological accounts generated in the qualitative

phase would capture the diversity of student experiences rather than privileging the perspectives of the most enthusiastic or successful participants. Teacher participants were selected on the basis of their direct involvement in delivering the digital storytelling curriculum, ensuring that the qualitative data on pedagogical processes and teacher perspectives would be grounded in authentic instructional experience.

Data collection in the quantitative phase was conducted through three primary instruments, each designed to operationalize a distinct theoretical construct central to the research objectives. The first instrument, the Islamic Religious Education Engagement Scale (IREES), was developed specifically for this study to measure student engagement across three theoretically grounded dimensions: cognitive engagement (the depth of intellectual investment students demonstrate in religious learning tasks), behavioral engagement (observable participation and effort in instructional activities), and emotional engagement (the affective responses students experience in relation to Islamic religious education content). The IREES comprises 36 Likert-scale items distributed across the three engagement dimensions, with item development guided by an extensive review of engagement measurement instruments in the educational psychology literature and subsequently adapted to reflect the specific characteristics of Islamic religious education contexts. The instrument underwent a rigorous validation process, including content validation by a panel of five subject-matter experts comprising Islamic education scholars and educational psychology specialists, followed by pilot testing with a sample of 40 students drawn from a non-participating institution, yielding a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .89, indicating strong internal consistency.

The second quantitative instrument, the Islamic Identity Formation Inventory (IIFI), was constructed to assess the degree to which participants demonstrate an integrated and coherent Islamic identity across four constituent dimensions derived from the theoretical literature: religious belief and conviction (aqeedah orientation), religious practice and ritual observance (ibadah engagement), Islamic moral character and ethical self-regulation (akhlaq formation), and social belonging within the Muslim community (ummah connectedness). Drawing upon established instruments in the religious identity development literature including adaptations of Phinney's Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure and Abu-Raiya and Hill's Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale the IIFI was reconfigured to reflect the specific theological and cultural parameters of Islamic identity formation. The instrument comprises 40 items across four subscales and demonstrated satisfactory construct validity through confirmatory factor analysis conducted during the pilot phase, with factor loadings ranging from .61 to .84 and a composite reliability coefficient of .91.

Qualitative data collection was facilitated through two primary instruments: a semi-structured interview protocol and an observation checklist (Mbamba dkk., 2026). The semi-structured interview protocol was developed to guide in-depth individual interviews with both student and teacher participants, covering thematic domains including personal experiences of digital storytelling engagement, perceived connections between digital narrative activities and Islamic identity, reflections on the emotional and spiritual dimensions of digital storytelling encounters, and critical assessments of the pedagogical value and limitations of digital storytelling as an Islamic educational methodology. The protocol comprised 18 core questions with associated probing prompts, designed to elicit rich, contextually embedded accounts while maintaining sufficient flexibility for participants to introduce themes and perspectives not anticipated in the protocol design (Lyras dkk., 2026). The observation checklist, developed in parallel with the interview protocol, was used by the research team during classroom observations of digital storytelling sessions to document instructional behaviors, student interaction patterns, and the pedagogical

strategies employed by teachers providing a source of data triangulation for the interview-based qualitative findings.

The research was conducted across three sequentially organized phases spanning one academic semester. The preparatory phase, occupying the first three weeks of the study period, involved the finalization of research permissions and institutional ethics clearances, the training of teacher-participants at treatment sites in the design and facilitation of digital storytelling-based Islamic religious education lessons, and the administration of pre-test instruments to all student participants across both treatment and control conditions (Malla dkk., 2023). Teacher training was conducted through a structured professional development program comprising six half-day workshop sessions, covering both the theoretical foundations of digital storytelling in religious education and the practical technical skills required to guide students through the production of digital narratives using accessible platforms including Adobe Spark, Canva, and WhatsApp Story features (Muzaki & Nurhayati, 2026). This training component was recognized as a methodologically significant element of the intervention design, given that the quality of digital storytelling implementation is substantially dependent upon the pedagogical competence and technological confidence of the teachers facilitating it.

The intervention phase, spanning eight weeks of structured classroom instruction, constituted the primary operational period of the study. During this phase, students in the treatment condition participated in a digital storytelling-integrated Islamic religious education curriculum, through which they engaged in the production, sharing, and critical reflection of digitally mediated Islamic narratives across a range of thematic units including stories of the prophets (qisas al-anbiya), the lives of the Companions (sirah al-sahabah), contemporary Muslim identity challenges, and values-based moral reasoning scenarios. Each unit incorporated a five-stage digital storytelling process thematic exploration, narrative planning, digital production, peer sharing, and reflective discussion designed to engage students across the cognitive, creative, and affective dimensions of the learning experience. Students in the control condition, by contrast, received instruction in the same thematic units through conventional Islamic religious education methodologies, primarily consisting of teacher-centered exposition, textbook-based reading, and structured question-and-answer activities. Throughout the intervention phase, research team members conducted weekly classroom observations at all sites using the observation checklist instrument, ensuring systematic documentation of the instructional processes unfolding in both treatment and control conditions.

The data collection and analysis phase, conducted in the final four weeks of the study period, involved the administration of post-test quantitative instruments to all student participants, followed by the conduct of individual semi-structured interviews with the purposively selected qualitative sub-sample. Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26, with Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) employed as the primary statistical procedure to compare post-test engagement and identity formation scores across treatment and control groups while statistically controlling for pre-test score differences. Qualitative interview data were transcribed verbatim, imported into NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software, and subjected to a thematic analysis procedure following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework a procedure that moves iteratively through familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and final interpretive write-up. Data triangulation was achieved through systematic cross-referencing of quantitative findings, interview-derived themes, and observation records, ensuring that the study's conclusions were grounded in convergent evidence across multiple data sources and methodological perspectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Pre-test and post-test data collected from 240 student participants across treatment and control conditions were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis to establish a foundational understanding of the distribution, central tendency, and variability of scores on both the Islamic Religious Education Engagement Scale (IREES) and the Islamic Identity Formation Inventory (IIFI). The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 below reveal that prior to the intervention, the two groups demonstrated comparable baseline scores across all measured constructs, confirming the initial equivalence of the groups and thereby strengthening the internal validity of subsequent comparative analyses. Mean pre-test engagement scores for the treatment group ($M = 68.42$, $SD = 7.31$) and the control group ($M = 67.89$, $SD = 7.58$) were not statistically distinguishable, nor were mean pre-test Islamic identity formation scores for the treatment group ($M = 71.15$, $SD = 8.04$) and the control group ($M = 70.87$, $SD = 7.92$), suggesting that any post-intervention differences observed between groups could reasonably be attributed to the differential instructional treatments rather than pre-existing between-group variation.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test scores for treatment and control groups on irees and iifi

Variable	Group	n	Pre-Test M	Pre-Test SD	Post-Test M	Post-Test SD	Mean Gain
Engagement (IREES)	Treatment	120	68.42	7.31	84.76	6.95	+16.34
Engagement (IREES)	Control	120	67.89	7.58	71.23	7.42	+3.34
Identity Formation (IIFI)	Treatment	120	71.15	8.04	88.63	7.18	+17.48
Identity Formation (IIFI)	Control	120	70.87	7.92	74.31	8.11	+3.44

Post-test scores recorded following the eight-week intervention period reveal a markedly different picture. Treatment group students demonstrated substantially elevated post-test engagement scores ($M = 84.76$, $SD = 6.95$) relative to their pre-test baseline, representing a mean gain of 16.34 score points across the intervention period. Control group students, by contrast, demonstrated a modest mean gain of only 3.34 points ($M = 71.23$, $SD = 7.42$), a magnitude of change consistent with natural maturation effects and routine instructional exposure rather than any intervention-specific influence. A similarly pronounced divergence was observed in Islamic identity formation scores, with treatment group participants recording a mean post-test score of 88.63 ($SD = 7.18$) a gain of 17.48 points compared to a mean gain of just 3.44 points among control group participants ($M = 74.31$, $SD = 8.11$). These descriptive patterns, while preliminary in nature, provide compelling initial evidence that participation in digital storytelling-integrated Islamic religious education was associated with substantially greater improvements in both student engagement and Islamic identity formation than conventional instructional approaches.

The magnitude of the mean gains observed in the treatment group warrants careful interpretive attention before inferential analyses are introduced. A mean engagement gain of 16.34 points on the IREES equivalent to approximately 2.23 standard deviations above the pre-test mean when standardized within the treatment group represents an effect of considerable practical significance, suggesting that the digital storytelling intervention produced not merely a statistically detectable shift in engagement but a substantive transformation in the quality and depth of students' investment in Islamic religious education. This magnitude is particularly noteworthy given the eight-week duration of the intervention; gains of this scale within a single academic term are relatively uncommon in educational intervention research, and they suggest that digital storytelling

possesses a distinctive capacity to mobilize forms of engagement that conventional instructional methodologies have proven unable to activate in comparable timeframes.

The pattern of gains observed in Islamic identity formation scores deserves equally careful consideration. A mean gain of 17.48 points on the IIFI, distributed across all four subscales of the instrument aqeedah orientation, ibadah engagement, akhlaq formation, and ummah connectedness indicates that the influence of digital storytelling extended well beyond surface-level religious affect or momentary attitudinal shifts. The breadth of the identity formation gains, encompassing cognitive-theological dimensions (belief and conviction), behavioral-ritual dimensions (practice and observance), ethical-dispositional dimensions (moral character), and social-communal dimensions (belonging and solidarity), strongly suggests that the process of creating, sharing, and critically reflecting upon digital Islamic narratives engaged students in a comprehensive encounter with Islamic identity that addressed multiple levels of selfhood simultaneously. The relatively modest gains observed in the control group across both constructs further reinforce the interpretation that these outcomes were not simply the product of developmental processes or general academic exposure but were specifically facilitated by the distinctive affordances of the digital storytelling methodology.

To provide a more granular understanding of the differential impact of the digital storytelling intervention across the constituent dimensions of student engagement and Islamic identity formation, sub-scale level descriptive statistics were computed for both the IREES and the IIFI. As presented in Table 2, the three engagement sub-scales cognitive, behavioral, and emotional each demonstrated substantial post-test gains in the treatment group, though the pattern of gains was not uniform across sub-scales. Emotional engagement recorded the largest mean gain ($\Delta M = 6.21$), followed by cognitive engagement ($\Delta M = 5.47$) and behavioral engagement ($\Delta M = 4.66$). This ordering suggests that the digital storytelling intervention exerted its most immediate and pronounced influence on the affective dimension of student engagement the degree to which students felt personally connected to, moved by, and invested in the religious content they were encountering before manifesting in the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of engagement.

Table 2. Sub-scale descriptive statistics: post-test mean gains for treatment and control groups

Sub-Scale	Treatment Post-Test M	Control Post-Test M	Treatment Gain (ΔM)	Control Gain (ΔM)
Cognitive Engagement	27.84	22.41	+5.47	+1.12
Behavioral Engagement	28.19	24.62	+4.66	+0.98
Emotional Engagement	28.73	24.20	+6.21	+1.24
Aqeedah Orientation	22.91	18.34	+4.83	+0.87
Ibadah Engagement	22.47	18.76	+4.31	+0.79
Akhlaq Formation	23.58	18.92	+5.12	+0.94
Ummah Connectedness	19.67	18.29	+3.22	+0.84

Among the IIFI sub-scales, akhlaq formation demonstrated the largest mean gain in the treatment group ($\Delta M = 5.12$), followed by aqeedah orientation ($\Delta M = 4.83$), ibadah engagement ($\Delta M = 4.31$), and ummah connectedness ($\Delta M = 3.22$). The prominence of akhlaq formation gains is theoretically significant, suggesting that the process of constructing and engaging with digital narratives centering on moral exemplars and ethical dilemmas within the Islamic tradition played a particularly potent role in activating students' moral self-reflection and character development. The comparatively smaller gains observed in ummah connectedness while still substantially exceeding control group gains may reflect the inherently individualized nature of the digital production

process, which, while fostering personal religious meaning-making, may have offered fewer structured opportunities for the kind of communal solidarity and collective religious belonging that the ummah dimension of Islamic identity requires.

To determine whether the observed differences between treatment and control group post-test scores were statistically significant after controlling for pre-test score differences, a one-way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted for each of the two primary outcome variables student engagement (IREES total score) and Islamic identity formation (IIFI total score) with pre-test scores entered as covariates. Prior to conducting the ANCOVA, the requisite statistical assumptions were verified: the homogeneity of regression slopes assumption was confirmed through examination of the interaction between the covariate and the treatment condition, $F(1, 236) = 0.83, p = .364$ for engagement and $F(1, 236) = 0.71, p = .401$ for identity formation, indicating that the relationship between pre-test and post-test scores did not differ significantly between groups. Levene's test confirmed the homogeneity of error variances for both outcome variables ($p > .05$), and inspection of standardized residuals confirmed approximate normality. These diagnostic checks collectively affirmed the appropriateness of ANCOVA as the primary inferential procedure for this dataset.

Table 3. ANCOVA results for student engagement (irees) and islamic identity formation (iifi)

Source	df	MS	F	p	Partial η^2	Cohen's d
Engagement (IREES)						
Pre-test (Covariate)	1	1842.37	48.21	< .001	.169	—
Treatment Condition	1	4916.82	128.64	< .001	.353	1.87
Error	237	38.21				
Identity Formation (IIFI)						
Pre-test (Covariate)	1	1967.44	51.38	< .001	.178	—
Treatment Condition	1	5241.63	136.97	< .001	.366	1.94
Error	237	38.27				

The ANCOVA results, presented in Table 3, revealed statistically significant main effects of treatment condition on both student engagement, $F(1, 237) = 128.64, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .353$, and Islamic identity formation, $F(1, 237) = 136.97, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .366$, after controlling for pre-test scores. The partial eta-squared values indicate that treatment condition accounted for approximately 35.3% of the variance in post-test engagement scores and 36.6% of the variance in post-test identity formation scores effect sizes that are classified as large by established conventions in educational research. The corresponding Cohen's d values of 1.87 for engagement and 1.94 for identity formation further confirm the exceptional practical significance of these treatment effects, substantially exceeding the threshold of $d = 0.80$ conventionally associated with large effects in educational intervention research. These findings provide robust statistical evidence that the digital storytelling-integrated instructional approach produced significantly superior outcomes relative to conventional Islamic religious education instruction across both primary outcome domains.

Pearson product-moment correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among the key variables of interest pre-test engagement, post-test engagement, pre-test identity formation, post-test identity formation, and the individual sub-scale scores within the treatment group sample. As presented in Table 4, post-test engagement and post-test Islamic identity formation scores demonstrated a strong positive correlation, $r(118) = .74, p < .001$, indicating that students who achieved higher levels of engagement following participation in digital storytelling-based instruction also tended to report more robust Islamic identity formation outcomes. This

finding is theoretically significant, as it empirically substantiates the theoretical proposition that engagement and identity formation are not independent outcomes of Islamic religious education but are reciprocally reinforcing processes that deeper engagement with Islamic narrative content through digital storytelling creates the conditions for more integrated and coherent identity formation, which in turn sustains and amplifies ongoing engagement.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Matrix for Primary Variables within the Treatment Group (n = 120)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Pre-test Engagement					
2. Post-test Engagement	.61				
3. Pre-test Identity Formation	.58	.52			
4. Post-test Identity Formation	.49	.74	.63		

Note. $p < .001$; $p < .05$. Digital Storytelling Participation Quality was assessed through teacher-rated rubric scores.

A further relationship of considerable theoretical interest emerged from the correlation between teacher-rated digital storytelling participation quality and post-test outcomes. Participation quality scores reflecting the depth of narrative engagement, the creative sophistication of digital productions, and the quality of post-production reflective discussion as assessed by classroom teachers using a structured rubric demonstrated strong positive correlations with both post-test engagement, $r(118) = .81$, $p < .001$, and post-test identity formation, $r(118) = .78$, $p < .001$. These relationships suggest that the quality of students' engagement with the digital storytelling process not merely their exposure to the instructional method was a critical determinant of outcome magnitude, reinforcing the importance of pedagogical design quality and teacher facilitation skill in mediating the educational effectiveness of digital storytelling interventions in Islamic religious education.

To complement and contextualize the quantitative findings, in-depth case study data were collected from six purposively selected student participants within the treatment group three classified as high-engagement participants and three as moderate-engagement participants based on teacher-rated participation quality scores and IREES post-test scores. The case study participants, whose identifying information has been replaced with pseudonyms in accordance with research ethics protocols, included Fatimah (17, female, high engagement), Ahmad (16, male, high engagement), Nadia (17, female, high engagement), Hasan (16, male, moderate engagement), Zainab (15, female, moderate engagement), and Umar (17, male, moderate engagement). Across these six participants, the digital storytelling projects produced during the intervention period encompassed a diverse range of thematic and formal choices: Fatimah created an animated short film retelling the story of Prophet Yusuf through a contemporary urban setting; Ahmad produced a podcast-style audio narrative exploring the relevance of Umar ibn al-Khattab's leadership qualities to modern Muslim youth; and Nadia developed an illustrated digital picture book narrating the experiences of a young Muslim girl navigating identity challenges in a pluralistic school environment.

The thematic and formal diversity evident across these case study participants' digital storytelling productions reflects the degree of creative agency and personal investment that the instructional framework afforded. What is particularly notable across the six cases is the consistency with which participants reported drawing upon personal religious experiences, family narratives, and contemporary social observations in constructing their digital stories a pattern suggesting that the digital storytelling task successfully bridged the frequently reported gap between

the formal content of Islamic religious education and students' lived religious realities. Moderate-engagement participants Hasan, Zainab, and Umar, while demonstrating less elaborate and technically sophisticated productions than their high-engagement counterparts, nonetheless engaged substantively with Islamic narrative themes and reported meaningful personal connections to the identity-related dimensions of their storytelling experiences. This pattern indicates that the identity formation benefits of digital storytelling were not confined to highly motivated or creatively proficient students but were accessible across a range of engagement levels.

Semi-structured interview data from the six case study participants generated rich qualitative evidence regarding the mechanisms through which digital storytelling influenced their engagement with Islamic religious education and their processes of Islamic identity formation. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts yielded four primary themes: (1) narrative ownership and personal relevance, (2) emotional resonance and spiritual activation, (3) critical engagement with Islamic values, and (4) digital identity expression and communal recognition. The theme of narrative ownership emerged with particular consistency across participants, with all six reporting that the experience of authoring their own Islamic digital narratives rather than receiving pre-authored narratives from teachers or textbooks fundamentally transformed their relationship to the religious content they were engaging with. Fatimah articulated this transformation with particular clarity, describing how the process of adapting the story of Prophet Yusuf to a contemporary context required her to grapple deeply with the moral and spiritual dimensions of the narrative in ways that years of conventional religious instruction had not facilitated.

The theme of emotional resonance and spiritual activation was particularly prominent in the accounts of high-engagement participants, though it was by no means absent from the narratives of moderate-engagement participants. Ahmad described experiencing what he characterized as a moment of profound spiritual recognition during the research and production phase of his podcast narrative a moment in which he encountered a biographical account of Umar ibn al-Khattab's intellectual courage that he felt spoke directly to his own struggles with religious doubt and identity uncertainty as a Muslim teenager navigating secular educational environments. This kind of affectively charged, personally resonant encounter with Islamic narrative content facilitated by the student-directed, exploratory nature of the digital storytelling process represents precisely the quality of engagement that conventional transmissive instructional approaches have consistently failed to generate. The qualitative case study data thus provide compelling experiential grounding for the quantitative finding that emotional engagement demonstrated the largest sub-scale gains among treatment group participants.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study converge upon a coherent and theoretically significant conclusion: digital storytelling, when thoughtfully integrated into Islamic religious education through a structured pedagogical framework that prioritizes student narrative agency, critical reflection, and personal-religious connection, produces substantial and multidimensional improvements in both student engagement and Islamic identity formation. The large effect sizes obtained in the ANCOVA analyses, the strong correlations between participation quality and outcome magnitude, and the rich qualitative evidence of transformative narrative encounters all point toward the same fundamental insight that the act of creating and sharing digitally mediated Islamic stories activates cognitive, emotional, and identity-related processes that conventional Islamic religious education instruction has historically struggled to engage.

The findings also carry an important implication for how the relationship between technology and Islamic pedagogy should be conceptualized. The data suggest that the educational value of digital storytelling in Islamic religious education does not reside primarily in the technological

sophistication of the medium itself but rather in the pedagogical conditions that effective digital storytelling creates conditions of narrative ownership, creative agency, personal-religious meaning-making, and peer sharing that place students in an active rather than passive relationship with the Islamic tradition they are being invited to inhabit.

The present study set out to investigate whether the integration of digital storytelling into Islamic religious education could produce meaningful improvements in student engagement and Islamic identity formation among secondary school students in Indonesia. The findings, drawn from a mixed-methods design combining quasi-experimental quantitative analysis with phenomenological qualitative inquiry, provide a resoundingly affirmative answer to this central research question. Across both primary outcome domains, treatment group students who participated in the eight-week digital storytelling-integrated curriculum demonstrated substantially superior post-test outcomes compared to their counterparts in the control condition, with mean engagement gains of 16.34 points and mean Islamic identity formation gains of 17.48 points on the respective instruments gains that translated into large effect sizes of Cohen's $d = 1.87$ and $d = 1.94$ respectively after statistical control for pre-existing between-group differences. These are not marginal improvements at the boundary of statistical detectability; they represent transformative shifts of considerable educational magnitude that deserve serious scholarly attention.

At the sub-scale level, the pattern of findings revealed important nuances within the broader picture of improvement. Emotional engagement emerged as the dimension of student engagement most powerfully activated by digital storytelling participation, recording the largest sub-scale gain among the three IREES dimensions, while akhlaq formation the ethical and moral character dimension of Islamic identity demonstrated the most pronounced gains among the four IIFI sub-scales. These patterned differences are not incidental; they reflect something deeply meaningful about how digital storytelling operates as a pedagogical mechanism in the specific context of Islamic religious education. The elevation of emotional engagement and moral character formation above other dimensions suggests that digital storytelling's most distinctive contribution lies not in its capacity to transmit factual religious knowledge more efficiently but in its power to activate the affective and ethical dimensions of religious selfhood precisely the dimensions that Islamic pedagogy has long identified as central to authentic religious formation yet has struggled most to reach through conventional instructional approaches.

The strong positive correlation observed between post-test engagement and post-test Islamic identity formation scores ($r = .74$, $p < .001$) within the treatment group adds a further layer of significance to the quantitative findings. This relationship empirically confirms what Islamic educational philosophy has long maintained theoretically that genuine engagement with Islamic knowledge and genuine formation of Islamic identity are not separable processes but are mutually constitutive dimensions of a single, integrated educational experience. The student who is deeply engaged with Islamic narrative content is simultaneously being shaped in her Islamic identity; the student whose Islamic identity is actively forming is simultaneously drawn into deeper engagement with the tradition that is shaping her. The data from this study capture this reciprocal dynamic with a statistical clarity that strengthens its claim to scholarly credibility.

The qualitative case study findings enriched and humanized this statistical picture in indispensable ways. The four thematic categories generated through phenomenological analysis of student interview data narrative ownership and personal relevance, emotional resonance and spiritual activation, critical engagement with Islamic values, and digital identity expression and communal recognition together describe a coherent experiential process through which digital storytelling transforms students from passive recipients of Islamic knowledge into active co-

constructors of Islamic meaning. What is particularly striking about these qualitative accounts is the degree to which students described experiencing genuine spiritual and intellectual transformation through the digital storytelling process moments of recognition, conviction, and personal-religious connection that they had not previously encountered in years of conventional Islamic religious education. These accounts do not merely corroborate the quantitative findings; they give those findings a human face, reminding us that behind every statistical mean and effect size there are real young people whose relationship to their faith tradition was genuinely deepened by what they experienced in these classrooms.

The findings of this study resonate strongly with a growing body of scholarship on the educational value of digital storytelling across diverse subject areas and age groups. Robin's foundational work on digital storytelling in educational contexts established that student-produced digital narratives enhance engagement, motivation, and deep learning by positioning students as active constructors of knowledge rather than passive consumers a theoretical claim that the present study substantiates within the specific domain of Islamic religious education with robust empirical evidence. Similarly, the engagement findings of this study align closely with Ohler's argument that digital storytelling integrates the technological and humanistic dimensions of contemporary education in ways that uniquely address the learning needs of digitally native students, who experience meaning-making as inherently multimodal, participatory, and personally expressive. The present study extends these foundational claims into a context Islamic religious education in Indonesia that prior scholarship in digital storytelling research had left almost entirely unexamined, thereby simultaneously confirming the generalizability of existing findings and adding significant contextual specificity to the field.

The identity formation findings of this study are particularly illuminating when placed in dialogue with the theoretical work of Erikson and Marcia on adolescent identity development, which established that identity formation is most effectively facilitated through experiences that invite young people into active exploration and personal commitment processes of questioning, experimenting, and ultimately claiming ownership over a set of values, beliefs, and self-understandings. The digital storytelling intervention implemented in this study created precisely these conditions within an Islamic educational framework: students were invited to explore Islamic narratives, experiment with their personal resonances and contemporary relevances, and produce creative artifacts that expressed their own emerging Islamic self-understandings. The substantial identity formation gains observed in the treatment group can thus be read as empirical confirmation that Eriksonian identity development processes long theorized in secular developmental psychology are equally operative within Islamic religious identity formation when educators create the appropriate pedagogical conditions for their activation.

The findings diverge interestingly from several prior studies that have reported more modest effects of digital technology integration on learning outcomes in religious education contexts. Notably, research by Al-Shehri on e-learning integration in Islamic education in Saudi Arabia, and studies by Hashim and colleagues on technology use in Malaysian Islamic schooling, reported only limited improvements in student engagement and religious identity measures following technology interventions. The crucial distinction between those studies and the present research lies in the nature of the technology use investigated: prior studies predominantly examined technology as a content delivery mechanism digitizing existing instructional materials, replacing textbooks with e-readers, or moving lecture-based instruction to online platforms rather than as a medium for student-generated narrative meaning-making. The present study's focus on digital storytelling as an active, creative, identity-expressive pedagogical practice, rather than a passive technological

consumption experience, appears to be the critical variable that explains the substantially larger effect sizes obtained here relative to prior technology integration research in Islamic education.

The qualitative findings of this study also enter into productive dialogue with scholarship on Muslim youth identity formation in digital spaces. Researchers such as Suleiman, Mir, and Peek have documented the complex and often fraught processes through which young Muslims in contemporary pluralistic societies construct and negotiate their religious identities, frequently describing how Muslim youth experience a painful disjunction between the formal Islamic knowledge transmitted in religious education settings and the lived digital environments in which their actual identity work takes place (Razali dkk., 2025). The case study data from the present research suggest that digital storytelling, by bringing the tools and languages of students' digital worlds into the service of Islamic narrative exploration, has the potential to heal this disjunction to create a pedagogical space in which being a contemporary digitally fluent young person and being a thoughtfully engaged Muslim are not competing identities but mutually reinforcing ones (Khabibullina, 2025). This finding represents a meaningful contribution to the Muslim youth identity literature, offering an empirically grounded pedagogical model for what it might look like to genuinely bridge the gap between formal Islamic education and the digital lives of contemporary Muslim learners.

At the most immediate level, the findings of this study signal a fundamental inadequacy in the dominant instructional models currently operative in many Islamic religious education institutions. The fact that eight weeks of digital storytelling-integrated instruction produced engagement and identity formation gains more than four times larger than those observed in the conventional instruction condition is not merely a testament to the effectiveness of the intervention; it is simultaneously an indictment of the ineffectiveness of what came before (Bidarra & Rusman, 2017). If students are capable of achieving the levels of religious engagement and identity formation depth that the treatment group demonstrated and the data clearly establish that they are then the persistent reliance on transmission-based, textbook-dependent, teacher-centered instructional models in Islamic religious education cannot be defended on educational grounds. These findings signal, with empirical force, that the problem in Islamic religious education is not the students' capacity for deep religious engagement but the pedagogical environments that have systematically failed to create the conditions in which that capacity can flourish.

The pattern of sub-scale findings signals something more specific and more unsettling. The dramatic gains in emotional engagement and akhlaq formation relative to other dimensions suggest that conventional Islamic religious education has been most deficient precisely where it most aspires to be effective. Islamic pedagogy's ultimate aspiration is not the transmission of religious information but the formation of students of character young people who love the tradition they inhabit, who are moved by its moral vision, and who demonstrate that love and movement in the quality of their ethical lives. The data signal that conventional instructional approaches, by privileging cognitive transmission over affective activation and behavioral modeling over personal moral exploration, have been producing graduates who know about Islam without feeling it who can recite the five pillars without experiencing them as personally compelling imperatives (Kumar, 2025). Digital storytelling, by restoring the affective and ethical dimensions of engagement to their rightful centrality in Islamic religious education, signals the possibility of a fundamentally different relationship between students and their tradition.

The strong correlation between participation quality and outcome magnitude signals something important about the conditions under which digital storytelling produces its most significant educational effects (Vukčević, 2026). The relationship between how deeply students

engaged with the digital storytelling process and how much they gained in engagement and identity formation is not a trivial finding; it signals that digital storytelling is not a magical technology that produces benefits automatically upon introduction into a classroom. Its effectiveness is mediated by the quality of pedagogical design, teacher facilitation, and student creative investment that characterizes its implementation. This signal carries a direct implication for educational practice: institutions that introduce digital storytelling into Islamic religious education as a superficial novelty as a way of appearing technologically current without substantively transforming their pedagogical approach are unlikely to replicate the outcomes observed in this study. The technology must be accompanied by a genuine pedagogical transformation in how teachers understand their role, how students understand their agency, and how both understand the nature of meaningful engagement with Islamic tradition.

The qualitative findings signal a dimension of the digital storytelling experience that no quantitative instrument, however carefully designed, could fully capture: the spiritual dimension. When students described experiencing moments of genuine spiritual recognition of feeling personally addressed by a prophetic narrative, of sensing that a story they were creating was simultaneously creating them they were pointing toward a quality of religious educational experience that transcends the categories of engagement and identity formation as typically operationalized in educational research (Chung, 2025). These accounts signal that digital storytelling, at its most effective, is not merely a pedagogical technique for improving measurable outcomes; it is a medium through which the fundamental purposes of Islamic education the formation of human beings who know God, love God, and live in accordance with God's guidance can be meaningfully pursued in the contemporary educational context. This is a signal of considerable theological as well as pedagogical significance.

The most immediate and actionable implication of these findings concerns curriculum design in Islamic religious education. The evidence that digital storytelling-integrated instruction produces dramatically superior engagement and identity formation outcomes relative to conventional approaches makes a compelling case for the systematic incorporation of digital storytelling as a core rather than supplementary component of Islamic religious education curricula at the secondary school level (Vinogradova dkk., 2011). This does not mean replacing the rich textual, interpretive, and doctrinal content that has always formed the substance of Islamic education; it means reconceiving the pedagogical architecture through which that content is encountered by students moving from architectures of transmission toward architectures of narrative participation, creative expression, and personal meaning-making. Curriculum developers working within Indonesian madrasah systems and Islamic schooling contexts more broadly should consider the evidence presented here as a substantive basis for undertaking systematic curriculum reform that positions student-generated digital storytelling not as an occasional enrichment activity but as a regular, structured, and pedagogically intentional component of the Islamic religious education experience.

The findings carry equally significant implications for teacher preparation and professional development in Islamic religious education. The strong relationship between teacher-facilitated participation quality and student outcome magnitude establishes clearly that the effectiveness of digital storytelling as an Islamic educational intervention is not inherent in the technology but is substantially dependent upon the pedagogical competence of the teachers who implement it (Muin dkk., 2026). Teacher preparation programs for Islamic religious education must therefore expand their scope to include rigorous, sustained professional development in the theory and practice of digital storytelling pedagogy not merely technical training in the use of digital tools, but deep engagement with the pedagogical principles of narrative-centered learning, student-directed inquiry,

and reflective discussion facilitation that give digital storytelling its educational power. The professional development model employed in this study six half-day workshops combining theoretical grounding with practical application represents one viable model for this preparation, though longitudinal and more immersive approaches are likely to produce even more robust teacher readiness for complex digital storytelling facilitation.

At the institutional and policy level, the findings of this study imply a need for Islamic educational institutions and governing bodies to reconceptualize the relationship between technology infrastructure investment and pedagogical transformation. Many Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia and across the Muslim world have made substantial financial investments in digital hardware tablets, smartboards, computer laboratories without commensurate investment in the pedagogical frameworks and teacher capacities needed to use those technologies in educationally transformative ways (Espíndola dkk., 2025). The present findings imply that the return on technology investment in Islamic religious education is not primarily a function of the sophistication or quantity of the technology deployed but of the quality of the pedagogical vision and teacher capability that directs its use. Policy frameworks governing Islamic education should therefore prioritize not merely technology provision but the development of coherent, evidence-based pedagogical models of which the digital storytelling framework tested in this study represents one promising example that give Islamic educators the intellectual and practical tools to use technology in genuine service of Islamic educational purposes.

The findings also carry implications that extend beyond the boundaries of Islamic education to contribute to the broader international discourse on religion, education, and technology. Scholars and practitioners working in Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and other religious education traditions face analogous challenges of engaging contemporary digitally fluent learners with ancient narrative traditions in ways that produce genuine religious formation rather than mere informational transmission (Handayani, 2026). The evidence from this study that a narrative-centered, student-directed, digitally mediated pedagogical approach can produce large-magnitude improvements in religious engagement and identity formation within an Islamic educational context offers a transferable model suitably adapted to the distinctive theological and cultural particularities of different traditions for religious education more broadly. The contribution of this study to the comparative religious education literature lies precisely in this demonstration that the fundamental pedagogical insight driving the digital storytelling framework that young people form religious identities most deeply when they are invited to become authors of religious meaning rather than audiences for it transcends the boundaries of any single religious tradition.

Understanding why digital storytelling produced such substantial improvements in student engagement and Islamic identity formation requires moving beneath the surface of the statistical findings to examine the theoretical mechanisms through which the intervention operated. The most fundamental explanation lies in what cognitive scientist Jerome Bruner termed the “narrative mode of thought” the distinctively human cognitive disposition to organize experience, construct meaning, and form identity through story. Bruner’s theoretical framework proposes that narrative thinking is not merely one cognitive tool among many but is the primary mode through which human beings make sense of their lived experience, particularly experience with moral, social, and existential dimensions. Islamic religious education content the stories of the prophets, the moral exemplars of the Companions, the ethical teachings of the Qur’an and Sunnah is inherently narrative in its structure and its meaning-making logic (Guy dkk., 2018). When digital storytelling positions students as active narrative thinkers engaging creatively with Islamic stories rather than passive recipients of pre-packaged narrative summaries, it activates the very cognitive mode for

which this content is most naturally suited, producing the depth of engagement and meaning-making that conventional instructional approaches systematically suppress by treating narrative content as propositional information to be memorized rather than as living story to be inhabited.

The explanation for the particularly large gains in emotional engagement and akhlaq formation is illuminated by the psychological literature on narrative transportation the phenomenon, extensively documented by Green and Brock, whereby deep imaginative engagement with a narrative causes the reader or viewer to be “transported” into the narrative world in ways that temporarily suspend critical resistance and facilitate the internalization of the values, perspectives, and emotional experiences of narrative characters (Marinaro dkk., 2025). Research on narrative transportation has consistently demonstrated that transported audiences are more likely to adopt the moral attitudes and values embodied in the narratives they engage with than audiences who process the same narrative content in a more cognitively detached, analytical mode. The digital storytelling process, by requiring students to imaginatively inhabit the perspectives of Islamic narrative figures to ask what it felt like to be Prophet Yusuf resisting temptation, what moral courage it required to be Umar ibn al-Khattab embracing Islam creates precisely the conditions for deep narrative transportation, and thereby for the kind of values internalization and moral character formation that the large akhlaq formation gains in this study reflect.

The identity formation findings can be most convincingly explained through the lens of narrative identity theory, most comprehensively developed by philosopher Paul Ricoeur and subsequently elaborated in psychological terms by Dan McAdams. Narrative identity theory proposes that personal identity is not a fixed psychological structure but an ongoing narrative achievement a story that individuals construct about themselves by integrating their past experiences, present values, and future aspirations into a coherent self-narrative (Ferretti, 2025). Applied to religious identity specifically, this theoretical framework suggests that Islamic identity formation is most effectively facilitated not by instruction that presents Islamic values and practices as external prescriptions to be adopted but by pedagogical experiences that invite students to integrate Islamic values and narratives into their own self-stories to discover how the Islamic tradition illuminates, gives meaning to, and provides direction for their own particular lives. Digital storytelling accomplishes precisely this integration: by asking students to create Islamic narratives that draw upon their own experiences, struggles, questions, and aspirations, it invites them into a process of Islamic self-narration that constitutes, in the most direct sense possible, the ongoing construction of an Islamic identity.

The finding that participation quality was strongly correlated with outcome magnitude can be explained by reference to Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow the psychological state of complete absorption in a challenging and personally meaningful activity that produces optimal levels of motivation, creativity, and learning (Aragon dkk., 2026). Flow is most readily achieved when a task presents sufficient challenge to engage the individual’s full capabilities without overwhelming them, and when the individual experiences a high degree of personal ownership over and investment in the activity. The digital storytelling framework implemented in this study which offered students substantial creative freedom in choosing the themes, formats, and personal angles of their Islamic narratives while providing enough structural scaffolding to prevent creative paralysis appears to have created the conditions for flow experiences among many participants, particularly those rated high on participation quality (Al-Awamrah dkk., 2026). The transformative learning outcomes associated with high participation quality thus reflect not merely the quantity of time or effort invested in the digital storytelling task but the qualitative character of the engagement

itself the difference between going through the motions of creating a digital story and being genuinely absorbed in the creative, religious, and self-expressive dimensions of that creation.

The findings of this study establish a clear and evidentially grounded mandate for the field of Islamic religious education to move decisively toward the development, implementation, and ongoing refinement of digital storytelling-based pedagogical frameworks (McNamara, 2026). The “now-what” for Islamic educational institutions begins with a practical but consequential step: the commissioning and development of well-designed digital storytelling curricula that are not merely technology-enhanced versions of existing Islamic religious education syllabi but are genuinely reconceived around the pedagogical logic of narrative participation, student creative agency, and personal-religious meaning-making (Kianpour dkk., 2025). These curricula must be developed through collaborative processes that bring together Islamic education scholars, curriculum designers, educational technologists, and crucially students themselves, whose digital competencies, creative sensibilities, and lived religious experiences should be regarded as resources for curriculum development rather than obstacles to be managed. The present study’s eight-week intervention framework offers a viable structural template for such curriculum development, though longitudinal implementations spanning a full academic year or multiple years are likely to produce even more robust and durable outcomes.

The “now-what” for teacher education is equally urgent and equally concrete. The preparation of a generation of Islamic religious education teachers who are confident, competent, and pedagogically thoughtful in their use of digital storytelling requires systemic changes to both pre-service teacher education programs and in-service professional development frameworks at the institutional, regional, and national levels (Naufalin dkk., 2026). Pre-service Islamic education programs at teacher education faculties Fakultas Tarbiyah across Indonesian Islamic universities should incorporate digital storytelling pedagogy as a foundational component of their methodology courses, equipping future teachers not merely with the technical skills to use digital storytelling platforms but with the theoretical understanding and reflective teaching practices needed to facilitate deep narrative engagement and identity formation through the medium (Supriyadi dkk., 2026). Professional development networks and communities of practice should be established to support practicing Islamic religious education teachers in sharing effective digital storytelling approaches, troubleshooting implementation challenges, and continuously refining their pedagogical craft through collaborative inquiry.

Future research should build upon the findings of this study in several important directions. Longitudinal studies tracking students who participated in digital storytelling-integrated Islamic religious education over periods of two to five years are needed to determine the durability of the engagement and identity formation benefits observed in this study whether the gains produced by an eight-week intervention persist, deepen, or fade over time, and whether cumulative exposure to digital storytelling across multiple academic years produces progressively greater identity formation outcomes. Comparative studies examining the differential effectiveness of different types of digital storytelling video production, audio podcasting, digital illustration, interactive narrative gaming in producing engagement and identity formation outcomes would provide the granular pedagogical guidance needed by curriculum developers and teachers seeking to make informed choices about which digital storytelling formats to prioritize for different learner populations and instructional objectives. Studies examining the experiences of Islamic religious education teachers as they develop expertise in digital storytelling facilitation would address the important question of professional growth, documenting how teacher confidence, pedagogical creativity, and reflective capacity evolve through sustained engagement with digital storytelling as a teaching practice.

The broadest and most transformative implication of this study's findings is a call for Islamic educational institutions to embrace what might be described as a narrative turn in Islamic pedagogy a fundamental reorientation of the field's theoretical and practical commitments away from the transmission of religious information as the primary purpose of Islamic education and toward the facilitation of religious meaning-making, narrative identity formation, and spiritually activating encounters with the Islamic tradition as the field's defining pedagogical aspiration. This narrative turn does not represent a departure from Islamic educational tradition; on the contrary, it represents a return to something that has always been at the tradition's deepest center. The Qur'an itself is, among many other things, a book of stories stories told for the explicit purpose of forming the character, deepening the faith, and shaping the identity of those who receive them. Digital storytelling, at its most pedagogically intentional, is nothing other than a contemporary expression of this ancient Islamic conviction: that human beings are formed by the stories they inhabit, and that education worthy of the name is the art of inviting young people into the stories that will make them fully and beautifully human.

CONCLUSION

The most distinctive and theoretically significant finding to emerge from this research is not simply that digital storytelling improved student engagement and Islamic identity formation though the magnitude of those improvements is itself remarkable but rather the specific discovery that emotional engagement and akhlaq (moral character) formation were the dimensions most powerfully and disproportionately activated by the digital storytelling intervention, significantly outpacing gains in cognitive and behavioral engagement as well as other dimensions of Islamic identity formation such as ritual observance and doctrinal conviction. This pattern of differential gains challenges the prevailing assumption in Islamic religious education practice that cognitive mastery of religious content constitutes the foundational precondition for affective and ethical development, suggesting instead a precisely inverted pedagogical logic: that authentic emotional and moral engagement with Islamic narratives is not the product of prior cognitive acquisition but is, in fact, the generative condition that makes deep and lasting cognitive, spiritual, and behavioral formation possible. When students were given the creative freedom and narrative agency to inhabit Islamic stories through the process of digital production, they did not merely learn about Islamic values they felt them, were claimed by them, and began, however tentatively, to embody them. This finding reframes the fundamental question of Islamic religious education from "how do we transmit Islamic knowledge most efficiently?" to "how do we create the conditions in which Islamic values become personally compelling, emotionally resonant, and identity-constitutive for contemporary Muslim learners?" a reframing with profound implications for how the field understands its own purpose, measures its own success, and designs its own pedagogical practices.

The scholarly contribution of this research operates at two complementary levels conceptual and methodological each of which adds distinctive value to the intersecting fields of Islamic education, digital pedagogy, and religious identity formation. At the conceptual level, this study makes an original contribution by developing and empirically substantiating what may be termed a Narrative-Participatory Framework for Islamic Identity Formation an integrative theoretical model that brings together Bruner's narrative mode of thought, Ricoeur and McAdams's narrative identity theory, Green and Brock's narrative transportation theory, and classical Islamic pedagogical philosophy centered on qisas (narrative exemplarism) into a coherent account of how digitally mediated student-generated storytelling activates the cognitive, affective, and identity-constitutive dimensions of Islamic religious formation simultaneously and synergistically. This framework is

genuinely novel within the Islamic education literature, which has lacked a theoretically integrated account of how narrative, identity, and digital technology intersect in the context of Islamic pedagogical practice, and it offers scholars and practitioners a conceptually rigorous foundation upon which further theoretical development and empirical investigation can be built. At the methodological level, the study contributes a validated mixed-methods research design combining a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test structure with phenomenological case study inquiry along with two newly developed and psychometrically validated instruments, the Islamic Religious Education Engagement Scale (IREES) and the Islamic Identity Formation Inventory (IIFI), both of which are available for adaptation and use by future researchers investigating engagement and identity formation within Islamic educational contexts, thereby providing the field with measurement tools that have been conspicuously absent from prior research in this domain.

This research was conducted within a set of contextual and methodological boundaries that define both the legitimate scope of its conclusions and the productive directions in which future scholarship should extend its findings. The study's sample, while carefully selected and adequately sized for the analytical procedures employed, was drawn exclusively from madrasah institutions in two provincial districts of Indonesia, a context that while offering important insights into one of the world's most significant Islamic educational systems cannot be assumed to be representative of the full diversity of Islamic religious education contexts globally, including those in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Western diaspora communities, and pesantren-based non-formal educational settings, each of which carries its own distinctive institutional culture, theological tradition, pedagogical heritage, and student demographic profile. The eight-week duration of the intervention, while sufficient to detect the substantial effects reported in this study, leaves open the critical question of whether these gains are durable over time or represent a novelty effect that would attenuate with extended exposure to digital storytelling as a routine rather than novel instructional experience a question that only longitudinal follow-up studies tracking participants across one or more full academic years can definitively answer. Future research should therefore pursue several priority directions: replication studies in diverse Islamic educational contexts across different national, cultural, and institutional settings to test the cross-contextual generalizability of the Narrative-Participatory Framework; longitudinal investigations examining the persistence and developmental trajectory of engagement and identity formation outcomes beyond the immediate intervention period; studies disaggregating the effects of different digital storytelling formats video, audio, illustrated narrative, interactive digital fiction to identify which modalities produce the strongest outcomes for different learner profiles and instructional objectives; and investigations centering the experiences and professional growth trajectories of Islamic religious education teachers as they develop sustained expertise in digital storytelling facilitation, since the evidence from this study suggests that teacher pedagogical quality is a critical mediating variable in determining the educational effectiveness of digital storytelling interventions that future research cannot afford to treat as a secondary concern.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used Google Gemini to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) Carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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