

The Influence of Christian Religious Education on the Development of Ethics and Morals Among Generation

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji pengaruh Pendidikan Agama Kristen (PAK) terhadap pengembangan etika dan moral Generasi Z, yaitu kelompok generasi yang tumbuh di tengah konektivitas digital yang meluas serta sistem nilai yang semakin dinamis. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif melalui systematic literature review (tinjauan pustaka sistematis), sebanyak dua puluh lima sumber ilmiah yang telah melalui proses peer review dan dipublikasikan terutama pada periode 2021–2026 dianalisis untuk mengidentifikasi tema-tema utama yang menghubungkan pendidikan agama, keterlibatan keluarga dan gereja, serta pembentukan moral. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Pendidikan Agama Kristen tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai sarana transmisi doktrin, tetapi juga sebagai proses pembentukan yang holistik yang mengintegrasikan pemahaman kognitif terhadap nilai-nilai Alkitab, keteladanan relasional dari orang tua dan guru, serta praktik spiritual yang secara bersama-sama memperkuat penalaran etis dan kemampuan pengendalian diri. Paparan terhadap dunia digital muncul sebagai faktor yang dapat meningkatkan risiko penyimpangan moral, namun sekaligus menjadi media potensial untuk katekese berbasis nilai apabila dimanfaatkan secara terarah dan bertanggung jawab. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada sintesis perspektif teologis-pedagogis dan sosiologis-digital ke dalam suatu kerangka terpadu yang menjelaskan bagaimana Pendidikan Agama Kristen memediasi perkembangan etika Generasi Z melalui ekosistem kolaboratif keluarga, gereja, dan sekolah. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pedagogi Pendidikan Agama Kristen yang bersifat dialogis dan partisipatif, dipadukan dengan penguatan nilai yang konsisten di berbagai institusi sosial, menghasilkan pembentukan karakter moral yang lebih kuat dan berkelanjutan dibandingkan dengan pembelajaran yang hanya berlangsung dalam lingkungan kelas formal. Temuan ini memberikan implikasi praktis bagi gereja, sekolah, dan keluarga dalam mengembangkan pendidikan karakter di era digital.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the influence of Christian Religious Education (CRE) on the development of ethics and morals among Generation Z, a cohort raised amid pervasive digital connectivity and increasingly fluid value systems. Employing a qualitative descriptive method through systematic literature review, twenty-five peer-reviewed sources published mainly between 2021 and 2026 were analyzed to identify recurring themes linking religious instruction, family and church involvement, and moral outcomes. The review finds that CRE functions not merely as doctrinal transmission but as a holistic formation process integrating cognitive understanding of biblical values, relational modeling by parents and teachers, and spiritual practice that together strengthen ethical reasoning and self-regulation. Digital exposure emerges as both a risk multiplier for moral drift and a potential channel for values-based catechesis when intentionally utilized. The novelty of this study lies in synthesizing theological-pedagogical and digital-sociological perspectives into an integrated framework explaining how CRE mediates Generation Z's ethical development within triadic family-church-school ecosystems. Findings suggest that dialogical, participatory CRE pedagogy combined with consistent value reinforcement across social institutions produces more durable moral character than instruction confined to formal classroom settings alone, offering practical implications for churches, schools, and families.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, commonly defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, has come of age in an unprecedented environment of hyperconnectivity, algorithmic information exposure, and rapidly shifting social norms. Unlike previous generations, whose value formation was mediated primarily through family, school, and local community, Generation Z's moral and ethical outlook is shaped simultaneously by these traditional institutions and by a constant stream of digital content whose sources, intentions, and value orientations are often untraceable and unregulated. This dual exposure has generated widespread concern among educators, religious leaders, and parents about a perceived moral crisis: rising incidences of dishonesty in academic settings, declining empathy in interpersonal relationships, susceptibility to online moral panic and misinformation, and an increasingly individualistic and relativistic approach to ethical decision-making (Banda, 2025; Ainun et al., 2025).

Christian Religious Education (CRE), known in the Indonesian context as Pendidikan Agama Kristen (PAK), has historically functioned as one of the primary institutional mechanisms for transmitting ethical and moral values within Christian communities. Rooted in biblical anthropology and theological ethics, CRE is designed not only to communicate doctrinal knowledge but to cultivate character honesty, love, justice, self-control, and social responsibility as lived dispositions rather than abstract propositions (Park et al., 2025; Paparang & Marjono, 2024). Scholars have long argued that religious education exerts influence through multiple simultaneous pathways: cognitive instruction in scripture and doctrine, relational modeling by teachers, parents, and clergy, participation in worship and spiritual disciplines, and embeddedness within a moral community that reinforces shared norms (Karo, 2024; Jacob, 2025).

However, the effectiveness of CRE in shaping the ethical and moral development of Generation Z specifically has become an increasingly urgent research question for at least three interrelated reasons. First, Generation Z's primary socialization space has partially migrated from physical to digital environments, meaning that the traditional CRE classroom or Sunday school setting now competes for attention and moral authority with social media influencers, online communities, and algorithmically curated content whose value orientations may directly contradict biblical teaching (Rolando et al., 2024; Missier, 2025). Second, empirical studies across multiple religious traditions not only Christianity but also Islam and other faiths report converging evidence of a generational moral vulnerability associated with heavy digital media consumption, including diminished capacity for sustained ethical reflection, greater susceptibility to peer-driven moral relativism, and difficulty distinguishing authoritative religious guidance from decontextualized online content (Ainun et al., 2025; Hopid et al., 2023). Third, family structures that once reliably reinforced religious instruction are themselves under strain, with rising rates of dual-income households, geographic mobility, and reduced face-to-face religious practice, placing greater weight on formal CRE institutions to compensate for diminished informal moral transmission (Purba & Retno, 2023; Naibaho & Sormin, 2024).

Existing literature on CRE and Generation Z can be broadly grouped into three streams. The first stream focuses on theological and pedagogical foundations, articulating what biblical or doctrinal content should underpin moral education without extensively testing its empirical effect on behavioral outcomes (Park et al., 2025; Jakandar et al., 2025). The second stream examines digital challenges and risks facing religious education broadly, often treating Generation Z as a demographic category defined primarily by technology use rather than by the specific mechanisms through which religious instruction interacts with digital exposure (Aprilia & Wahab, 2025; Kaya & Köseoğlu, 2023). The third stream consists of localized case studies frequently from Indonesian congregations, schools, or families that document CRE's perceived contribution to student character but rarely synthesize findings across multiple settings or connect them to a broader theoretical framework explaining why certain pedagogical approaches succeed while others do not (Lende, 2025; Saragih, 2025; Theodorus, 2025).

What remains comparatively underdeveloped in the literature is an integrative synthesis that connects these three streams: theological-pedagogical foundations, digital-era risk factors, and empirical case evidence, into a coherent explanatory account of how CRE mediates ethical and moral development specifically for Generation Z as a distinct cohort. Most existing studies address only one dimension in isolation either theological content, digital risk, or localized outcome without articulating the interactive pathway through which family, church, school, and digital environment jointly shape moral character formation. Furthermore, comparative literature from Islamic religious education on Generation Z's moral crisis offers useful cross-tradition insight (Ainun et al., 2025; Sobarina, 2025 as cited in related literature) that has rarely been placed in explicit dialogue with Christian religious education scholarship, despite substantial structural parallels in the challenges both traditions face.

Novelty of this study. This article addresses this gap by offering an integrative literature synthesis that (1) maps CRE's influence on Generation Z ethics and morals across cognitive, relational, spiritual, and behavioral dimensions rather than treating these as separate literatures; (2) explicitly incorporates the

digital-era mediating variable as a factor that simultaneously threatens and potentially channels moral formation, rather than treating digital exposure merely as a background risk; and (3) proposes a triadic family-church-school ecosystem framework, grounded in twenty-five recent peer-reviewed sources, that explains why CRE's effect on moral outcomes is contingent on institutional reinforcement rather than classroom instruction alone. This synthesis is intended to provide both theoretical clarity for religious education scholarship and practical guidance for churches, Christian schools, and families seeking to strengthen ethical formation among the youth generation most exposed to digital moral ambiguity.

The findings of this review have practical implications for early childhood education and family health services. Mindful parenting practices can be integrated into parenting programs, preschool family engagement activities, and maternal and child health services through simple activities that strengthen parental emotional awareness, reduce parenting stress, and improve responsive interactions with children. Such programs should also encourage the involvement of fathers and other caregivers to create a more supportive family environment for children's emotional development.

In addition, collaboration among parents, early childhood educators, and health professionals is important to ensure the consistent application of mindful parenting practices across home and educational settings. Culturally appropriate educational materials and accessible digital resources may further support parents in applying mindfulness-based strategies in everyday interactions with young children. These efforts can help strengthen the practical application of mindful parenting as a preventive approach to supporting children's emotional regulation and overall family well-being.

Based on this background, the present study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How does Christian Religious Education influence the cognitive, relational, and spiritual dimensions of ethical and moral development among Generation Z? (2) What role does the interaction between family, church, school, and digital environment play in mediating or moderating this influence? (3) What pedagogical and institutional strategies emerge from the literature as most effective in strengthening CRE's contribution to Generation Z's moral character in the digital era? Answering these questions is intended to consolidate a fragmented body of literature into an actionable framework that can inform both scholarly discourse and practical ministry and educational strategy.

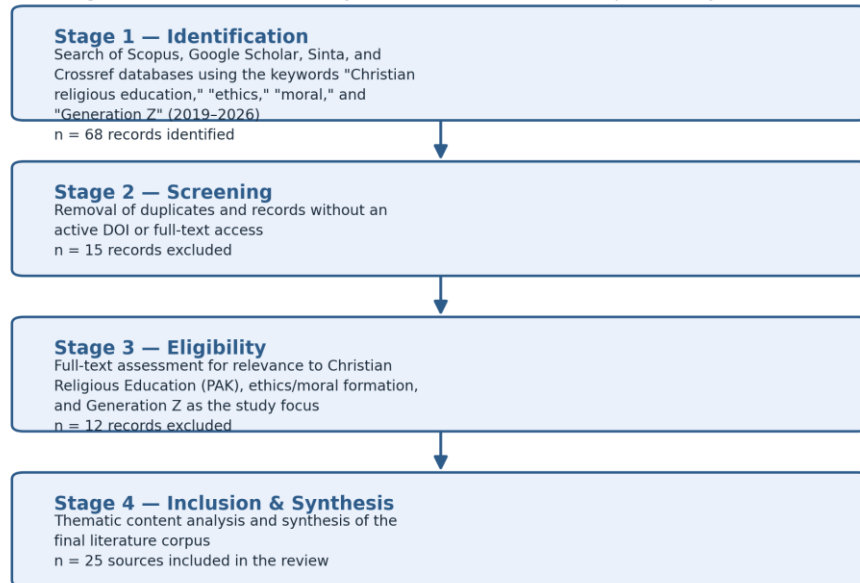
2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method through systematic literature review (library research), appropriate for synthesizing conceptual and empirical findings distributed across a fragmented body of scholarship on Christian Religious Education, ethics, and Generation Z. Rather than collecting new primary data, the study systematically identifies, screens, and analyzes existing peer-reviewed journal articles to construct a coherent explanatory synthesis, following an adapted identification-screening-eligibility-inclusion procedure comparable to PRISMA-informed review protocols commonly used in education and social-science research.

Data sources were drawn from indexed academic databases and aggregators, including Google Scholar, Crossref, Sinta, and publisher repositories, using combinations of the keywords "Christian Religious Education," "Pendidikan Agama Kristen," "ethics," "morality," "character formation," and "Generation Z," restricted primarily to publications from 2021 to 2026 to ensure contemporaneity, alongside a small number of earlier foundational sources retained for theological grounding. Inclusion criteria required that a source (a) be published in a peer-reviewed journal with an active, resolvable DOI, (b) directly address Christian religious/character education, general religious education, or Generation Z moral development, and (c) be accessible in full text for content analysis. Sources lacking a verifiable DOI, duplicated across databases, or tangential to the study focus were excluded.

The final corpus comprised twenty-five sources, ranging from Indonesian and international journals in Christian theology and education (e.g., *Pharos Journal of Theology*, *Journal Didaskalia*, *Caritas et Veritas*) to comparative religious-education and digital-sociology journals (e.g., *Frontiers in Psychology*, *Religions*, *ISPEC International Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*), allowing triangulation between theological-pedagogical and empirical-sociological perspectives. Data analysis followed a thematic content-analysis procedure: each source was coded for its primary claims regarding CRE's mechanism of influence, the institutional actors involved (family, church, school, digital media), and the reported or theorized moral/ethical outcome. Codes were then grouped inductively into six recurring thematic categories, which form the structure of the Results and Discussion section. Figure 1 illustrates the four-stage literature search and synthesis flow applied in this study

Figure 1. Literature Search and Synthesis Flow (Qualitative Descriptive Library Research)



3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the twenty-five reviewed sources produced six recurring dimensions through which Christian Religious Education appears to influence the ethical and moral development of Generation Z: cognitive-moral knowledge, family–church–school synergy, digital-era vulnerability, the teacher/catechist role, work-ethic and integrity outcomes, and spiritual–psychological wellbeing. Table 1 summarizes these themes alongside representative findings and sources before each is discussed in turn.

Table 1. *Thematic Synthesis of CRE's Influence on Generation Z Ethics and Morals*

Theme / Dimension	Key Finding from Reviewed Literature	Representative Sources
Cognitive-moral knowledge	CRE instruction consistently strengthens students' understanding of biblical ethical principles (honesty, justice, love, responsibility), forming the cognitive base for moral reasoning.	Park et al. (2025); Karo (2024); Paparang & Marjono (2024)
Family–church–school synergy	Moral formation is strongest when religious instruction in the family, congregation, and school reinforces the same values; parental modeling is a decisive mediating factor.	Purba & Retno (2023); Naibaho & Sormin (2024)
Digital-era vulnerability	Generation Z's constant social-media exposure correlates with weakened self-regulation and blurred moral boundaries, making digital literacy a required companion to CRE.	Rolando et al. (2024); Ade & Nazara (2023); Aprilia & Wahab (2025); Missier (2025)
Teacher / catechist role	Teachers who model Christlike character and use participatory, dialogical pedagogy (not rote memorization) produce more durable ethical internalization than lecture-based instruction.	Saragih (2025); Jacob (2025); Prawiromaruto et al. (2026)
Work-ethic and integrity outcomes	CRE graduates report higher self-assessed diligence, honesty, and accountability in academic and early-career settings, linking religious formation to applied social ethics.	Theodorus (2025); Banda (2025); Jakandar et al. (2025)
Spiritual–psychological wellbeing	Integration of spiritual practice with moral instruction is associated with improved emotional regulation and resistance to peer-driven moral compromise.	Fristyarini et al. (2025); Liu et al. (2025); Kaya & Köseoğlu (2023)

Cognitive-Moral Knowledge as the Foundational Layer

Across the reviewed literature, CRE's most consistently documented effect is on cognitive-moral knowledge students' explicit understanding of biblical ethical principles such as honesty, justice, compassion, and self-control. Park et al. (2025) argue that theological content taught through CRE provides students with a stable normative vocabulary that allows them to name and evaluate ethical dilemmas rather than responding purely on impulse or peer pressure. Similarly, Karo (2024) and Paparang and Marjono (2024) find that students who receive structured, scripturally grounded moral instruction demonstrate more articulate ethical reasoning when discussing real-life scenarios compared to peers whose religious exposure is informal or inconsistent. This aligns with a long-standing premise in moral education theory that cognitive scaffolding knowing what a value is and why it matters theologically is a necessary, though not sufficient, precondition for consistent ethical behavior.

However, several sources caution against equating cognitive mastery with behavioral internalization. Jacob (2025) notes that college students who scored well on doctrinal knowledge assessments did not automatically exhibit correspondingly strong character outcomes, suggesting a persistent gap between what CRE teaches and what students practice a gap that subsequent themes in this review help to explain.

Family Church School Synergy as a Multiplier Effect

A second major theme is that CRE's influence on moral development is substantially amplified or, conversely, undermined depending on the degree of reinforcement it receives from family and congregational life outside the classroom. Purba and Retno (2023) report that parental involvement in daily religious practice, such as family devotion and modeling of ethical behavior at home, is one of the strongest predictors of durable character formation among Generation Z children, often outweighing the effect of formal classroom instruction alone. Naibaho and Sormin (2024) extend this finding to the professional conduct of CRE teachers themselves, arguing that a teacher's personal ethical code functions as an implicit curriculum that students absorb regardless of explicit lesson content.

This finding supports what this study terms a triadic ecosystem model: CRE functions most effectively not as an isolated subject but as one node within an interconnected system of family, church, and school that must communicate consistent values for moral formation to take root. Where any one node is weak or contradictory for example, a family that does not reinforce what is taught in Sunday school, or a school environment that tolerates dishonesty the literature suggests moral formation is correspondingly weaker, regardless of CRE curriculum quality (Purba & Retno, 2023; Naibaho & Sormin, 2024).

Digital-Era Vulnerability as Both Risk and Opportunity

The third theme, and arguably the most distinctive to Generation Z as a cohort, concerns the mediating role of digital media exposure. Rolando et al. (2024) document a measurable association between heavy, unsupervised social-media use and moral degradation indicators among Generation Z, including desensitization to dishonesty and increased susceptibility to online moral panic or misinformation. Ade and Nazara (2023) similarly find that unregulated digital exposure often outpaces the moral guidance students receive through formal CRE, creating a values vacuum that algorithmically driven content readily fills. Cross-cultural corroboration comes from Missier (2025), whose qualitative study across Christian, Hindu, and Muslim Generation Z respondents in Mumbai found convergent evidence that digital platforms are increasingly perceived by youth as more authoritative sources of moral guidance than traditional religious institutions.

Importantly, the literature does not treat digital media purely as a threat. Aprilia and Wahab (2025) and Kaya and Köseoğlu (2023) both argue that intentional, values-based use of digital platforms short-form catechetical content, moderated online discussion groups, and digitally literate CRE teachers can convert the same channels that drive moral erosion into vehicles for reinforcing biblical ethics. Liu et al. (2025), studying digital religious behavior among Chinese Generation Z, similarly found that emotionally resonant, well-designed digital religious content can meaningfully strengthen religious and, by extension, moral engagement rather than displacing it. This suggests that CRE's digital-era effectiveness depends less on whether digital media is present and more on whether religious educators actively shape its moral content.

The Catechist/Teacher as a Relational Anchor

The fourth theme concerns pedagogy and the role of the CRE teacher or catechist. Saragih (2025) and Prawiromaruto et al. (2026) both emphasize that Generation Z responds more strongly to dialogical,

participatory teaching methods discussion-based reflection, mentoring relationships, and experiential spiritual formation activities than to traditional lecture-and-memorization approaches. Prawiromaruto et al. (2026) frame this as "spiritual formation," a pedagogy that treats character development as a relational and experiential process rather than a purely informational one. This finding is consistent with broader educational psychology literature suggesting that Generation Z, having grown up in participatory digital environments, expects a similar degree of interactivity and personal relevance in religious instruction.

Work-Ethic and Integrity as Applied Outcomes

A fifth theme addresses CRE's downstream effects on applied social ethics, particularly work ethic and integrity in academic and early-career contexts. Theodorus (2025) finds that Christian students who received sustained CRE report higher self-assessed diligence, punctuality, and honesty in academic tasks, attributing this to internalized theological convictions about stewardship and accountability before God. Banda (2025) situates this within a broader pedagogical framework for fostering ethical decision-making and social responsibility, arguing that religious education's comparative advantage over secular character education lies in grounding ethical behavior in a transcendent, non-negotiable rationale rather than a purely consequentialist one. Jakandar et al. (2025), examining religious values integration more broadly, corroborate that students exposed to religiously grounded character education demonstrate more consistent integrity across contexts, including situations where they are unsupervised.

Spiritual Psychological Wellbeing as a Reinforcing Mechanism

Finally, several sources point to a reinforcing relationship between spiritual practice, psychological wellbeing, and moral behavior. Fristyarini et al. (2025) find that children exposed to religious-based education alongside supportive spiritual practices exhibit stronger emotional regulation, which in turn supports more consistent ethical decision-making under social pressure. This is broadly consistent with Liu et al. (2025) and Kaya and Köseoğlu (2023), who argue that spiritually and ethically integrated education correlates with lower vulnerability to peer-driven moral compromise. Taken together, this theme suggests that CRE's influence on morality operates partly through an affective-psychological pathway students who feel spiritually secure and emotionally supported are better equipped to resist digital-era pressures toward relativism or dishonesty rather than through doctrinal instruction alone.

Integrated Discussion

Synthesizing these six themes, this study proposes that CRE's influence on Generation Z's ethical and moral development is best understood not as a single direct causal pathway from instruction to behavior, but as a mediated, ecosystem-dependent process. Cognitive-moral knowledge provides the normative vocabulary; family-church-school synergy provides consistent reinforcement; digitally literate, values-based use of online platforms neutralizes what would otherwise be a competing and often contradictory moral authority; relational, dialogical pedagogy translates doctrine into lived example; and spiritual-psychological wellbeing supplies the emotional resilience needed to act on internalized values under social pressure. Where these five conditions align, the reviewed literature consistently reports stronger, more durable ethical and moral outcomes among Generation Z; where one or more conditions are absent particularly family reinforcement or digital-values integration CRE's effect appears attenuated even when curriculum content itself is theologically sound. This integrative account addresses the gap identified in the introduction by explicitly connecting theological-pedagogical, institutional, and digital-sociological literatures that prior studies have largely treated in isolation

4. CONCLUSION

This literature review concludes that Christian Religious Education exerts a substantial and multidimensional influence on the ethical and moral development of Generation Z, operating through cognitive, relational, spiritual, and institutional pathways rather than through classroom instruction in isolation. The reviewed sources converge on the finding that CRE is most effective when reinforced consistently across family, church, and school, and when digital media rather than being ignored or merely restricted is actively and intentionally engaged as a channel for values-based catechesis. Dialogical, relationally grounded teaching methods and emotionally supportive spiritual practices further strengthen students' capacity to internalize and enact biblical ethical principles amid competing digital-era value systems. These findings carry practical implications: churches and Christian schools are encouraged to

strengthen parent-involvement programs and teacher mentoring capacity, while CRE curricula should deliberately incorporate digital literacy and participatory pedagogy rather than relying solely on traditional transmission methods. Future research employing mixed-methods or longitudinal designs is recommended to empirically test the triadic ecosystem framework proposed in this study and to measure its comparative explanatory power against single-factor models of religious moral education.

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