

The Concept of Character Education In The Digital Era: A Comparative Study of Imam Az-Zarnuji and Jean Piaget

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ABSTRACT

Digital era marked by an overflow of information, instant culture, and moral decline character education that relies solely on normative and authoritarian approaches is increasingly inadequate. This study aims to compare and synthesize the educational thoughts of Imam Az-Zarnuji and Jean Piaget to develop a more integrative approach to character education. This study utilizes a qualitative research method with a literature review approach. The data sources comprise scholarly works relevant to the character education perspectives of Imam Az-Zarnuji and Jean Piaget. Results of this research are Az-Zarnuji stressing the importance of spirituality, ethical conduct (adab), and sincerity in seeking knowledge, while Piaget focuses on moral autonomy, social responsibility, and the development of ethical reasoning. The synthesis of their perspectives offers a more holistic framework for character education suited to contemporary challenges. The study recommends that future research build a contextualized character education framework and examine its practical implementation in educational institutions to assess its effectiveness in fostering students' moral development.

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Introduction

Digitalization has become an integral part of children's lives today. Access to gadgets, the internet, social media, and online learning platforms from an early age has transformed children's mindsets, behavior, and social interactions. On one hand, digitalization broadens learning horizons; on the other hand, it also poses risks to moral values, empathy, and social responsibility. (Rahmatullah et al., 2022)

Adolescence is a critical phase in the formation of self-identity and moral character. At this stage, individuals are highly vulnerable to environmental and technological influences. The digital era offers various conveniences in communication, learning, and self-expression. However, behind these benefits lie challenges that potentially weaken character values such as responsibility, discipline, empathy, and social ethics. Therefore, it becomes essential to identify and understand the negative impacts of the digital era on adolescents' character in order to design more holistic educational approaches. (Lyytinen, 2022)

Adolescents who are excessively exposed to digital media tend to have limited real-life social interactions. Studies have shown that rapid and superficial communication through social media reduces adolescents' ability to read emotions and respond empathetically to others. They become more egocentric and less sensitive to the feelings of peers and family members. (Stavropoulos et al., 2021)

Addiction to mobile phones, online games, and social media reduces productive time and healthy interactions. Adolescents spend more time in virtual spaces than in building

meaningful relationships in the real world. This weakens their academic and social discipline as well as their sense of responsibility. (Paat & Markham, 2021)

Digital content does not always align with moral educational values and local culture. Exposure to violence, pornography, hate speech, and hedonistic lifestyles on social media can shape shallow, permissive, and materialistic worldviews. This significantly influences the formation of adolescents' moral and spiritual character. (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2022)

The phenomenon of cyberbullying is increasingly prevalent among adolescents. Both perpetrators and victims experience a crisis of character: perpetrators lose empathy and self-control, while victims lose self-confidence and the will to live. This reflects a lack of social control and ethical awareness in digital spaces. (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2022)

The aforementioned issues are highly serious as they negatively affect the future of adolescents and the next generation of the nation. Therefore, a solution is needed to instill character values in the nation's youth. (Pamuji et al., 2024)

One way to educate adolescent character is by examining the thoughts of educational thinkers such as Jean Piaget and Imam Az-Zarnuji. These figures have received recognition from many educational scholars for their credible views on character development. Azzarnuji is known as a Muslim scholar whose thoughts tend to be theological, while Jean Piaget emphasizes rationalism, which leans toward liberalism.

Basically, there have already been many studies on character education in the digital era, such as: *First*, The Importance of Character Education in the Digital Era for the Future. (Pamuji et al., 2024) This article reveals the important role of ethics in addressing issues in the digital era. *Second*, Character Education in the Digital Era: Conceptual Analysis of Technology Integration in the Formation of Student Morals. (Edukatif et al., 2024) This article offers a concept of character by integrating local customs with technology.

The two studies above discuss character in general as it develops in society and its relevance in the digital era. In contrast, this study constructs a concept of character education by combining theological and secular approaches through the study of two figures, Azzarnuji and Jean Piaget. Based on the above problems, the researcher is interested in exploring the ideas of both figures regarding the construction of character education in addressing the challenges of the digital era.

Theoretical Framework Character at Digital Era

Character education in the digital era faces a range of complex challenges arising from changes in interaction patterns, technological developments, and shifts in societal values. These challenges can be categorized into five main aspects:

First, value disruption through digital content. The digital era introduces a rapid and unfiltered flow of information. Children and adolescents have free access to content that does not necessarily align with the moral and character values expected of them. Information containing violence, pornography, hate speech, and hedonistic lifestyles spreads easily across platforms, disrupting the internalization process of values such as honesty, responsibility, and politeness. (Juanda et al., 2025)

Second, the weakening of character formation through direct social interaction. Ideally, character education is shaped through direct interaction among students, teachers, and the social environment. However, online learning and virtual communication tend to reduce authentic social experiences. This weakens the reinforcement of values such as empathy, tolerance, and social awareness. Instant and superficial digital interactions have given rise to an "alone together society," a condition in which individuals are digitally connected yet emotionally disconnected. As noted by Livingstone & Helsper (2007), a lack of digital literacy makes children more vulnerable to content that contradicts character values. (Surahman et al., 2022)

Third, technological dependence and declining discipline. While technology offers convenience, it also fosters instant gratification and dependence. Children and adolescents

who spend excessive time on digital devices often show decreased discipline, reduced focus in learning, and diminished responsibility in both academic and social tasks. OECD research (2020) found a correlation between excessive screen time and declining behavior quality and learning outcomes. (Syawali & Sary, 2025)

Fourth, a disparity in the roles of educators and parents. Digital transformation has not been accompanied by adequate preparedness among all educators and parents in guiding children holistically. Many teachers remain focused primarily on cognitive aspects of online learning, while character development receives less attention. On the other hand, not all parents possess sufficient digital or pedagogical literacy to be effective partners in character education at home. (Hutchison et al., 2020)

Fifth, a crisis of role models in digital spaces. The digital realm is now largely populated by public figures and influencers who do not necessarily embody positive character traits. As a result, adolescents are more inclined to imitate the lifestyles of online celebrities rather than emulate morally upright and educational role models. (Hutchison et al., 2020)

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research method, which involves analyzing data derived from various literature sources. (Tisdell, 2025) The purpose of this study is to analyze and compare the construction of character education concepts according to Jean Piaget and Imam Az-Zarnuji within the context of the challenges and dynamics of the digital era.

The data sources in this research include both primary and secondary sources. (Creswell & Guetterman, 2024) The primary sources consist of original works by Jean Piaget, such as *The Moral Judgment of the Child* and *The Psychology of Intelligence*, and the work of Imam Az-Zarnuji, namely the classic text *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*. Secondary sources include nationally and internationally indexed journal articles (Scopus), books on character education, relevant dissertations, and conference proceedings.

Data collection was conducted using documentation techniques, which involved gathering, identifying, and organizing various types of literature. (Kirsty Williamson, Lisa M. Given, 2018) The literature selected is specifically related to the concept of character education according to Jean Piaget and Imam Az-Zarnuji, character education approaches in the digital era, and comparative studies of character education across traditions (Western and Islamic). All documents were critically and systematically analyzed to uncover the interrelation between the ideas of both figures and the current realities of character education. (Robert Bogdan Taylor Steven J, 2016)

The data were analyzed using content analysis, which involved several stages:

1. Data reduction, selecting relevant information from various literature sources;
2. Categorization, grouping data based on key themes such as: core principles of character, learning methods, the role of educators, and views on morality;
3. Interpretation, conducting a critical and in-depth analysis of the similarities, differences, and relevance of Piaget's and Az-Zarnuji's ideas in the context of character education in the digital era;
4. Synthesizing findings, formulating an integrative model of character education that reflects a synthesis of both traditions. (Robert Bogdan Taylor Steven J, 2016)

Result

Imam Azzarnuji's Theory of Character Development Biography of Imam Az-Zarnuji

Imam Burhanuddin Az-Zarnuji is believed to have lived during the 12th to early 13th century CE in the region of Transoxiana (modern-day Uzbekistan and Central Asia), an area known as a significant intellectual and spiritual center of the classical Islamic civilization. He is thought to have originated from the small town of Zarnuj, located near Bukhara and

Samarkand—two major cities that, at the time, served as hubs for Islamic knowledge and education. (Nata, 2020)

Imam Az-Zarnuji lived during the golden age of Islamic civilization, a period in which educational institutions such as madrasahs and halaqah circles were flourishing. He was known to be a student of the renowned scholar Sheikh Burhanuddin Al-Marghinani, the author of *Al-Hidayah*, a prominent work in Hanafi jurisprudence. This connection illustrates that Az-Zarnuji was nurtured in a rich intellectual environment, especially within the tradition of Islamic legal thought and moral education. (Nata, 2020)

His most famous work, *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, remains a foundational text in traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and madrasahs across the Muslim world, including Indonesia. It serves as a vital reference in the development of classical Islamic educational theory. In this book, Az-Zarnuji systematically outlines the ethics of seeking knowledge, the roles of teachers and students, the importance of intention, and the mental and spiritual attitudes that students should embody. (Wahyuni, 2018)

Socially, Az-Zarnuji lived in a religious and tightly knit community in which scholars held an esteemed position. Education was not merely an academic pursuit but an integral part of moral and spiritual development. The relationship between teacher and student was deeply respectful and laden with *adab* (etiquette), a value system vividly reflected in *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*. (Herawati & As'ari, 2023)

However, Az-Zarnuji also observed various moral deviations and misguided motivations among students of his time, such as studying merely for social status, wealth, or popularity. As a response to such social phenomena, he wrote his book to redirect students towards proper *adab* and sincere intentions in the pursuit of knowledge. (Habsy et al., 2024)

Politically, Az-Zarnuji lived during the post-golden age of the Abbasid Caliphate. In Central Asia, power was held by the Khwarazmian Dynasty (Khwarezm Shah), which, in the early 13th century, faced increasing pressure from the expanding Mongol Empire. Political tensions and instability were growing, particularly in the lead-up to the Mongol invasion of the Islamic world that began in 1219 CE. (Afwadzi et al., 2023)

Despite rising political instability, Islamic educational centers in Central Asia remained vibrant and active. Madrasahs continued to develop under the support of both the state and religious scholars, serving as meeting places for students from across the Muslim world. The educational landscape of the 12th–13th centuries was marked by the advancement of the madrasah system, with teaching methods that included halaqah-based discussions, memorization, and direct instruction by scholars. Teachers were not only instructors but also spiritual and moral guides. (Afwadzi et al., 2023)

Institutions like the Nizamiyah Madrasah in Baghdad served as models for madrasahs in Central Asia, including those in Bukhara and Samarkand. The curriculum typically included religious sciences (*fiqh*, *tafsir*, *hadith*), logic, and Arabic and Persian language studies. Within this context, Az-Zarnuji emphasized the importance of pure intention, respect toward teachers, and proper learning methods to ensure that knowledge becomes beneficial both in this world and the hereafter. (Hidayah et al., 2024)

The Construction of Character Education According to Imam Az-Zarnuji

The educational thought of Imam Az-Zarnuji was significantly influenced by the socio-political conditions of his time. Although the Islamic world was experiencing economic and intellectual growth, the period was also marked by both internal and external conflicts, particularly in the years leading up to the Mongol invasions that devastated the Islamic world including the fall of Baghdad in 1258 CE. (Lapidus, 2002)

Geographically, Imam Az-Zarnuji lived in a small town in the region of Transoxiana, a cultural crossroads of Persian, Arab, and Turkic traditions, and a vibrant center of Islamic civilization during its golden age. This rich intercultural interaction shaped Az-Zarnuji's perspective on education as a means of both individual and societal transformation. (Harahap, 2023)

These socio-political dynamics influenced Az-Zarnuji's educational orientation, which emphasized the internalization of adab (ethics), proper learning behavior, and spiritual stability as the foundational pillars of Islamic education. He believed that political chaos should be counterbalanced with strong character education. (Halil & Anwar, 2016)

The intellectual tradition of his era also deeply impacted Az-Zarnuji's thinking. The Islamic world was at its peak in terms of scientific and scholarly activity, with the flourishing of madrasahs and Islamic study centers in cities such as Baghdad, Nishapur, Bukhara, and Samarkand. This tradition gave rise to many great scholars in fields such as jurisprudence, Sufism, theology (kalam), and philosophy. (Halil & Anwar, 2016)

Az-Zarnuji emerged within this wave of educational development, particularly in the context of the madrasah system. Through his renowned work, Ta'lim al-Muta'allim, he codified effective methods of learning—including proper manners toward teachers, the intention behind seeking knowledge, and strategies for memorization and discussion. His work represents a deep ethical intellectualism, resonant with the thought of his contemporaries such as Imam al-Ghazali and al-Mawardi. (Makdisi, 1981)

Imam Az-Zarnuji's concept of character education can be categorized into several key aspects:

a. Intention in Seeking Knowledge

The concept of intention (niyyah) appears at the very beginning of Ta'limal-Muta'allim, where Az-Zarnuji writes:

When studying, one must intend to seek the pleasure of Allah, happiness in the hereafter, to combat one's own ignorance and that of others, to uphold the religion, and to preserve Islam, for its endurance depends on knowledge. Even zuhd and taqwa are not valid without knowledge. (Az-Zarnuji, 2007)

Az-Zarnuji emphasizes that students must organize their intentions properly. In his view, intention is the most crucial aspect of learning, serving as the foundation of all actions. Therefore, students should study with sincere goals: seeking Allah's pleasure, dispelling ignorance, and protecting and revitalizing the Islamic faith.

b. Selecting Knowledge, Teachers, and Companions

Az-Zarnuji advises learners to carefully choose the types of knowledge they pursue, particularly knowledge derived from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Companions, and the Tabi'in. These include the sciences of the Qur'an, Hadith, jurisprudence (fiqh), creed (aqidah), and ethics (akhlak). (Az-Zarnuji, 2002)

In selecting a teacher, Az-Zarnuji recommends choosing a spiritually enlightened, experienced, and senior scholar—someone religious, wise, socially aware, and patient. Students are encouraged to reflect on their teacher selection for at least two months and to seek counsel from trusted figures to avoid frequently changing instructors.

He also highlights the importance of maintaining a patient and committed relationship with teachers and books, treating both with reverence. Facing learning challenges with patience, he argues, is a key to academic success. In choosing friends, students should associate with those who are meticulous, devout, morally upright, and understanding. (Az-Zarnuji, 2007)

c. Exalting Knowledge and Its Bearers

A true seeker of knowledge must honor and appreciate both knowledge and its scholars. Az-Zarnuji argues that learning cannot be fruitful unless students show reverence toward knowledge, teachers, and scholars:

Know that a seeker of knowledge will never attain knowledge or benefit from it unless they respect knowledge and honor its scholars, show reverence to their teachers, and glorify them. (Az-Zarnuji, 2007)

He contends that failure in learning is often due to the lack of respect and appreciation toward educators and the discipline of knowledge itself.

d. Diligence, Consistency, and Noble Aspirations in Learning

Az-Zarnuji encourages learners to be diligent and consistent, and to review their lessons regularly, as repetition sharpens understanding. He writes:

Make your nights your vehicle, and you will reach your aspirations. A student should never say 'I cannot' or 'I do not want to review.' The best times for reviewing lessons are between Maghrib and Isha, and during the pre-dawn hours (sahur). (Az-Zarnuji, 2002)

e. Practicing Wara' (Religious Caution)

Wara' refers to abstaining from actions and speech that are doubtful or prohibited. Az-Zarnuji highlights wara' as a form of self-protection, quoting the Prophet Muhammad:

Whoever does not practice wara' while learning, Allah will test them with one of three things: early death, being placed among the ignorant, or being made a servant of rulers. (Az-Zarnuji, 2007)

He advises learners to avoid excessive eating, oversleeping, and discussing useless knowledge, as these are distractions from meaningful learning:

Among the practices of wara' is avoiding a full stomach, too much sleep, and excessive speech. (Az-Zarnuji, 2007)

This practice of wara' reflects a high moral standard and extreme attentiveness to ethical boundaries, including lifestyle, habits, and environment.

Jean Piaget Theory of Character Development Biography of Jean Piaget

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) was a Swiss developmental psychologist and epistemologist widely recognized for his theory of cognitive development in children. He was raised in a family with a strong academic discipline his father was a professor of history, and his mother was religious yet emotionally intense. These early life experiences shaped Piaget's deep interest in knowledge and cultivated a disciplined approach to thinking. His independent and reflective personality influenced his research style, which was systematic, observational, and experimental. Piaget was not only an observer of children's behavior but also a pioneer in developing methods to assess their thinking processes. (Gardner, 1981)

At a young age, Piaget studied biology and philosophy, earning his doctorate in zoology at the age of 22. However, he later shifted his interest to psychology and epistemology. His thinking was influenced by key figures such as Théodore Simon and Immanuel Kant. Théodore Simon, a collaborator of Alfred Binet (the developer of the IQ test), worked with Piaget in Paris, where Piaget became intrigued not merely by children's answers, but by the reasoning behind them. Immanuel Kant's ideas about cognitive structures and categories of understanding became a major inspiration for Piaget in formulating his stages of cognitive development. (Phillips & Soltis, 2004)

Piaget made significant contributions to educational psychology, particularly in understanding how children think and learn. His theories emerged from a complex interplay

of modern European socio-cultural context, 20th-century scientific traditions, and his own personal and academic experiences.

Piaget lived during the post-World War I and II era in Europe, a time marked by humanitarian crises, shifts in values, and profound changes in the structure of society and education. In Switzerland, Piaget's homeland political stability and a spirit of neutrality provided a conducive environment for the development of science without interference from totalitarian ideologies. (Ginsburg, 1988) These conditions allowed Piaget the freedom to pursue independent and original research using a purely scientific approach grounded in observation and experimentation, particularly with children.

The 20th century saw a major paradigm shift in science, moving from positivism toward empirical and constructivist approaches. In psychology, behaviorism emerged, emphasizing stimulus-response mechanisms, while Freud's psychoanalysis focused on the unconscious mind. Piaget, however, took a different path, developing what he called genetic epistemology the study of the origins and development of knowledge. He rejected the idea that knowledge is solely shaped by external stimuli (as behaviorists claimed) or unconscious drives (as in Freudian theory). Instead, he argued that knowledge is constructed through the active interaction between the individual and their environment. (Smith, 1992)

Jean Piaget's Concept of Character Education

Jean Piaget adhered to epistemological constructivism, the view that knowledge is actively constructed (not passively received) through interaction between the subject and the object. In the field of education, this is translated into several key principles: learning must be aligned with the child's stages of cognitive development (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational); students must be active participants in the learning process (*discovery learning*); and errors are a natural and essential part of learning. (Meifang, 2024)

Although Piaget was not a political ideologue, his thought was rooted in values of humanism, rationalism, and constructivism. He rejected authoritarian approaches to education, asserting that the child is an active subject in the learning process. Education, therefore, must correspond to the child's cognitive development stage, and the teacher should serve as a facilitator, not as the sole authority of knowledge. (Strecker et al., 2014)

These scientific foundations significantly influenced Piaget's views on character education. Piaget regarded character as part of moral development, which is gradually formed through a child's interaction with their environment. For Piaget, character is not a product of indoctrination, but is actively constructed by the child alongside their cognitive and social development. (Siminiceanu, 2024)

Piaget distinguished two main stages in children's moral development, which reflect the development of heteronomous morality and autonomous morality. *First*, heteronomous morality, in the early stage, children view rules as fixed and coming from authority figures (e.g., parents or teachers). These rules must be followed without question. For example, children obey rules out of fear of punishment and submission to adult authority. Moral reasoning at this stage is rigid and absolute. This stage is typically found in children under the age of 10. *Second*, autonomous morality at this more advanced stage, children begin to understand that rules can be negotiated and that intentions, justice, and cooperation are crucial in evaluating actions. Piaget emphasized that mature character is autonomous, meaning that the child is aware of values and makes judgments based on internal understanding, not just external authority. At this stage, children realize that rules are social agreements and can be modified. Moral judgment is based not only on outcomes, but also on intentions, fairness, and mutual understanding. (Morss, 2020)

To cultivate autonomous moral character, Piaget believed that equal peer interaction is more effective than one-way relationships with authority. Cooperative and dialogic relationships encourage the development of responsibility, empathy, and a sense of justice. In educational settings, teachers should facilitate discussions, group work, and problem-solving

activities. These experiences help children internalize ethical norms through social interaction. (Piaget, 2013)

For Piaget, character also involves the ability to make independent decisions based on logical and moral reasoning, rather than simply following orders. Character education should stimulate critical thinking, moral reasoning (rather than memorization of norms), and awareness of the consequences of one's actions on others. (Kohnstamm, 2021)

He emphasized that character must be cultivated through awareness, not imposed. Good character cannot be forced—it must emerge from experience, reflection, and healthy social interaction. The goal of education is not to make children blindly obedient, but to help them become ethical and reflective individuals. (Kohnstamm, 2021)

In character education, Piaget rejected indoctrinative approaches that compel children to obey rules without understanding the underlying moral reasons. Instead, he promoted dialogue-based learning, moral discussions, and problem-solving tasks. In the classroom context, the teacher's role is to act as a facilitator, guiding students in analyzing moral situations, expressing their views logically, and discussing the consequences of actions on others. (Nur Hasanah et al., 2023)

Discussion

The digital era has brought significant advancements in information and communication technology, which have directly influenced the field of education. Learning has become more accessible, faster, and more flexible. (Kolaboratif Akademika et al., 2024) However, these advancements also bring new challenges, especially concerning the crisis of character such as the erosion of etiquette, ethics, and the rise of individualism and digital consumerism. (Pastor-Escuredo, 2020)

In this context, classical Islamic educational thought becomes increasingly relevant to revisit—particularly the ideas of Imam Burhanuddin Az-Zarnuji, a prominent 12th-century scholar who authored the renowned book *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim Ṭarīq at-Ta'allum*. This book focuses on the ethics, motivation, methods, and character values in the pursuit of knowledge. (Razali & Mamat, 2024) Many of Az-Zarnuji's educational concepts are notably adaptive to the character challenges faced in the digital era.

a. Character Education Based on Intention and Sincerity.

In the digital age, students often learn motivated by social media presence (followers, likes, views). Az-Zarnuji reminds us that intention (*niyyah*) is an inner character that must be protected from "digital ostentation." He emphasizes that the foundation of seeking knowledge must be sincerity for the sake of Allah, not for worldly gains, praise, or fame. (Firdaus & Hermawan, 2023)

b. Respect for Teachers and Knowledge In digital classrooms.

Learning ethics are often neglected, such as disrespectful comments toward teachers or careless behavior during online classes. Az-Zarnuji's concept of *adab* (respect and ethics) is essential to cultivate humility and reverence in virtual interactions. In Az-Zarnuji's framework, ethics precedes knowledge. He teaches students to honor teachers, avoid interrupting them, obey guidance, and refrain from arrogance due to knowledge. (Wicaksono et al., 2024)

c. Patience, Diligence, and Consistency

Amid a culture of instant gratification, students tend to seek quick results (e.g., via AI tools or online cheating). Az-Zarnuji teaches that the process and perseverance are essential parts of building character in learning. In *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, he reminds learners that true knowledge can only be acquired through

patience, hard work, and dedication over time. He critiques the attitude of haste and the desire to become knowledgeable too quickly. (Wicaksono et al., 2024)

d. Avoiding Negative Peer Influence and Harmful Content

In the age of social media, digital environments influence students profoundly. Az-Zarnuji advises learners to filter their content and choose positive digital communities. This is highly relevant for developing digital character literacy. He warns against choosing lazy, unserious, or morally corrupt companions, as they can ruin the learning process and damage one's character. (Paramansyah et al., 2024)

On the other hand, Jean Piaget's approach to character education in the digital age draws from psychological and social foundations:

a. Encouraging Autonomous Character in Online Learning

In the digital era, students are expected to study independently, manage their time, and evaluate online information. Piaget emphasizes that character is formed when children actively make decisions based on values and reasoning—not merely by obeying commands. Online learning should be designed to foster initiative, responsibility, and reflection, rather than passive assignment completion. (Zhan et al., 2022)

b. Ethics and Morality in the Virtual World

Piaget believed that moral values develop through peer-level social interaction. In the digital context, where virtual interaction is dominant, there is a high risk of digital egocentrism, cyberbullying, and lack of empathy. Character education based on Piaget's theory encourages ethical online discussions, empathy, and understanding of others' perspectives. (Meifang, 2024)

c. Moral Autonomy in Digital Communication

Children who reach the stage of autonomous morality are capable of considering the consequences of their actions, including in digital spaces. Teachers should facilitate ethical discussions around digital media—asking students to consider: Does what I share do good? How might others feel about my digital actions? (Meifang, 2024)

d. Avoiding Authoritarian Character Education.

Much of today's character education remains normative ("do this, don't do that"). Yet Piaget argued that true morality arises from thinking and experience, not indoctrination. In the digital age, character education should provide real-life moral dilemmas (e.g., fake news, online plagiarism) for students to analyze, and encourage dialogue, reflection, and logical reasoning. (Siminiceanu, 2024)

Based on the table above, it can be concluded that both figures share several key similarities: the importance of learning motivation, the upholding of ethical values in society, resilience against the negative impacts of technology, and the ability to utilize technology for character development. Both Az-Zarnuji and Jean Piaget emphasize that character is formed through internal processes rather than merely through external rules.

However, the main difference lies in their approach to character education. Imam Az-Zarnuji tends to emphasize theological aspects, influenced by the Islamic scholarly tradition at the time, which prioritized the sciences of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and tasawwuf (Islamic mysticism). In contrast, Jean Piaget focuses on rational-psychological aspects in character formation, shaped by the modern philosophical thought prevalent during his era.

Based on the explanation of the character education concepts of the two figures, several similarities (points of convergence) and differences can be identified. The following table presents a comparison of the educational thoughts of Imam Az-Zarnuji and Jean Piaget.

Table 1. Comparison of Character Education between Azzarnuji and Jean Piaget

Aspects	Imam Azzarnuji	Jean Piaget
Philosophical Foundation	Islamic ethics, spiritual intention (<i>niyyah</i>), and classical adab tradition	Constructivism, cognitive development, and moral autonomy
Goal of Character Education	To attain God's pleasure, preserve Islam, and cultivate adab and spiritual discipline	To develop autonomous moral reasoning, critical thinking, and responsible decision-making
Role of the Teacher	Moral and spiritual guide (<i>murabbi</i>); source of both knowledge and character mode	Facilitator of learning; supports critical thinking and social interaction
Approach to Moral Development	Normative-religious; focuses on spiritual and behavioral formation through discipline and tradition	Psychological-developmental; focuses on moral reasoning built through experience and discussion
Digital Relevance	Emphasizes sincerity over digital show-off, respect in online learning, and moral self-contro	Promotes critical use of digital media, ethical digital behavior, and active reflection

This difference in approach has significant implications, particularly in the nature of interaction between teacher and student. Az-Zarnuji emphasizes the importance of obedience, discipline, and unwavering adherence to the teacher's guidance. A student's loyalty is measured by how closely they follow their teacher's views. This stands in contrast to Piaget's concept, which promotes student creativity and encourages learners to generate new ideas. In this model, the teacher functions as a facilitator, while students take an active role in developing their creativity.

Conclusion

In the digital era, which presents numerous challenges for character education, there is a growing need to synthesize the thoughts of Az-Zarnuji and Jean Piaget. This synthesis can produce a model of character education for the digital age that is both autonomous and ethical. The concept combines Az-Zarnuji's emphasis on spiritually grounded learners connected to divine values, with Piaget's focus on developing critical rationality and socially responsible behavior. In the digital era, characterized by an overflow of information, a culture of instant gratification, and a crisis of values, character education that relies solely on normative and authoritarian approaches is no longer sufficient. Therefore, synthesizing the thoughts of Az-Zarnuji and Piaget into an integrative approach is essential. A comparative study of the character education concepts of Imam Az-Zarnuji and Jean Piaget reveals that, despite coming from different cultural, religious, and historical backgrounds, both emphasize the importance of character formation through internal processes and real-life experiences. Az-Zarnuji highlights the values of spirituality, proper conduct (*adab*), and sincerity in the pursuit of knowledge, while Piaget focuses on moral autonomy, social responsibility, and the development of ethical reasoning.

Based on the findings above, it is recommended that future researchers should develop a comprehensive framework for character education and explore its implementation across

various educational institutions. This would allow for an evaluation of how effectively character education contributes to the moral development of students.

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