Pietas : Jurnal Studi Agama dan Lintas Budaya
Vol.4, No.1 December 2026, hal.72-96
e-ISSN: 3031-4836
DOI: 10.62282/pj.v4i1.72-96
https://jurnal.yayasanyutapendidikancerdas.com/index.php/pietas

Submitted on 11/10/2026;
Revised on 28/10/2026;
Accepted on 14/11/2026;

Reconstructing Christian Religious Education through Digital Ethics: Forming Generation Z's Religious Identity and Moral Responsibility

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Abstract
Generation Z grows up in a digital ecosystem that shapes how young people understand themselves, relate to others, and practise their faith. Christian Religious Education has often responded to this condition mainly at the level of media, tools, and teacher competence rather than identity and moral formation. This study aims to reconstruct this media-oriented approach into a digital-ethics-based framework for forming the religious identity and moral responsibility of Generation Z. It is a conceptual study based on an integrative literature review of 22 peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2026, combined with theological reflection. The analysis indicates that existing studies address digital literacy, Christian ethics, Generation Z spirituality, and digital discipleship largely in separate clusters, while moral responsibility is rarely theorised as a distinct educational outcome. The study proposes a theological foundation for digital ethics in the image of God, the incarnation, the love commandment, and the glory of God. On this basis, it proposes a conceptual model that integrates three formative axes, namely faith formation, religious identity, and moral responsibility for the self, others, and truth, through four pedagogical movements adapted from shared Christian praxis: discerning, grounding, embodying, and witnessing, supported by the collaboration of school, family, and church. The model contributes a theoretical framework that treats digital space as a formative environment and offers direction for curriculum design, teacher practice, and further empirical testing.

Keywords: Christian religious education; digital ethics; generation z; moral responsibility; religious identity

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed nearly every dimension of human life, including how people learn, communicate, form relationships, and express religious faith. Generation Z, defined in this study as those born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019; Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia [APJII], 2024), is the first generation to grow up with smartphones, social media, and constant internet connectivity from childhood. Twenge (2017) describes this generation as one whose experiences of adolescence, relationships, and well-being have been deeply shaped by the smartphone. This thesis, however, is contested in the empirical literature: large-scale analyses have found only very small associations between digital technology use and adolescent well-being, and reviews caution against attributing broad psychological or moral decline to technology use as such (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). This study therefore does not assume that digital technology causes moral or spiritual decline. It starts from a more modest premise: for this generation, digital space is not

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merely a tool that is used occasionally but a living environment in which identity is negotiated, values are absorbed, and moral decisions are made every day. Campbell and Tsuria (2021) similarly emphasise that digital media have become a space where religious practice, authority, community, and identity are continually reshaped.

This premise is particularly pertinent in Indonesia. The 2024 national survey of the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association reports an internet penetration rate of 79.5% of the population, or about 221.6 million users; Generation Z shows a penetration rate of 87.02% and constitutes the largest share of users, at 34.40% (APJII, 2024). Digital space is therefore part of the everyday environment of most Indonesian Christian adolescents who take part in Christian Religious Education (CRE).

This situation presents a serious challenge for CRE. National and international data indicate that some of the moral problems associated with digital life are real and widespread among Indonesian young people. A UNICEF Indonesia U-Report poll found that 45% of 2,777 respondents aged 14–24 had experienced cyberbullying (UNICEF Indonesia, 2020), and in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018, 41% of Indonesian students reported being bullied at least a few times a month, compared with an OECD average of 23% (OECD, 2019). Indonesian CRE studies interpret such phenomena in terms of declining honesty, cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, and moral relativism (Sari & Bermuli, 2021; Ibrani, 2025), although these interpretations are largely conceptual rather than empirically tested. At the same time, the post-truth climate, in which emotion and personal belief often outweigh facts, requires CRE teachers to possess digital, spiritual, and multiliteracy competencies so that they can respond critically (Karlau & Rukua, 2023). The emergence of generative artificial intelligence adds a new layer of complexity, because tools such as ChatGPT can be useful for learning but may also erode the formative goal of CRE, namely becoming more like Christ (Pantan, 2023; Pasaribu, 2026). Hasiholan (2024) further argues that Indonesian Christian Generation Z tends to neglect its identity as followers of Jesus, while Manik et al. (2026) frame the problem as an identity crisis that CRE must address.

Internationally, the relationship between faith and digital culture has been examined from several angles. Research on digital religion shows that religious communities negotiate new media according to their own values and that digital media reshape religious practice, authority, and identity (Campbell, 2010; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Digital theology reflects theologically on digital culture itself and on how digital technology changes theological practice (Campbell & Garner, 2016; Phillips et al., 2019). The ethics of technology has proposed technomoral virtues, such as honesty, self-control, humility, empathy, and practical wisdom, as necessary for flourishing in a technologically mediated world (Vallor, 2016), while digital citizenship frameworks describe the norms of appropriate and responsible technology use that schools should teach (Ribble, 2015). Within Christian education, international studies have examined the relational limits of digital discipleship (Shirley, 2017), discernment as a guiding concept for technology in a Christian school system (D. I. Smith & Sevensma, 2020), the use of technology for discipleship by churches during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dunlow,

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2021), and the moral formation role of Christian educators in the era of ChatGPT (Condrey, 2024). A recent review concludes that research on Christian digital faith formation among young adults remains scarce (de Kock, 2025). These studies provide important resources, but they are mostly situated in Western contexts and, as far as this review could establish, none of them treats religious identity and moral responsibility as joint outcomes of school-based CRE for Generation Z.

Research on CRE in the Indonesian digital context has also grown considerably over the past five years. One group of studies focuses on digital competence and learning media, such as digital intelligence in CRE ministry (Santosa, 2022), digital-literacy-based classroom management (Nababan et al., 2024), and digital literacy programmes for church youth (Purba, 2022). A second group addresses Christian ethics and moral character in the digital age (Sari & Bermuli, 2021; Waruwu & Lawalata, 2024; Zamasi et al., 2024; Ibrani, 2025). A third group examines the spirituality and identity of Generation Z (Subowo, 2021; Hasiholan, 2024; Meisyani et al., 2026; Manik et al., 2026), while a fourth group develops the concept of digital discipleship (Darmawan et al., 2024; Topayung, 2025; Gandaputra & Huwae, 2026). The most integrative proposal so far is offered by Boiliu et al. (2025), who formulate a model of digital CRE consisting of theology, ethics, digital literacy, and holistic spirituality.

Despite these contributions, the mapping of the predominantly Indonesian corpus analysed in this study (2021–2026) indicates that the relationship between digital ethics, religious identity, and moral responsibility has not been integrated into a single framework for CRE that is specifically directed at Generation Z. Studies on digital literacy tend to emphasise tools and skills, studies on Christian ethics tend to be normative and rarely specific to Generation Z, and studies on identity are mostly framed within church discipleship rather than CRE as an educational discipline. Moreover, moral responsibility is usually subsumed under general terms such as character or integrity and is rarely theorised as a distinct educational outcome that includes accountability for one's digital footprint, for the well-being of others, and for the truth. This gap claim is limited to the analysed corpus and to the international studies cited above; because the corpus excludes literature published before 2021 and was not drawn from international databases, relevant integrative work may exist outside its scope. Within these limits, the gap is significant because without a clear integrative framework, CRE risks responding to digitalisation in a fragmented way, either by adopting technology without ethical formation or by moralising without engaging the actual digital experience of students.

The problem addressed in this study is therefore how CRE can be reconstructed on the basis of digital ethics so that it forms both the religious identity and the moral responsibility of Generation Z. What is reconstructed is the prevailing, largely instrumental approach to CRE in the digital era, which treats digitalisation mainly as a matter of media, tools, and teacher competence; the study rebuilds this approach into a formation-based framework in which digital ethics shapes the goals, content, and pedagogy of CRE. Accordingly, this study aims (1) to analyse the transformation of CRE in the digital culture of Generation Z; (2) to identify the challenges of forming religious identity and morality in the digital era; (3) to formulate the

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theological foundations of digital ethics in CRE; (4) to explain the integration of digital ethics in forming religious identity and moral responsibility; and (5) to reconstruct a conceptual model of CRE based on digital ethics. These five objectives correspond to the five subsections of the Results and Discussion. The novelty of this study lies in a conceptual framework that integrates Christian faith formation, religious identity formation, and moral responsibility in digital space, in which moral responsibility is articulated as a distinct outcome with three dimensions: responsibility for the self, for others, and for the truth (that is, its personal, relational, and epistemic dimensions). Within the scope of the literature mapped in this study, no previous work was found that combines these elements into a single model for CRE. The study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of CRE in the digital era and practically to the design of curricula, learning practices, and collaboration between schools, families, and churches.

METHODS

This study is a conceptual study based on an integrative literature review. Following Jaakkola (2020), it adopts a model-type conceptual design, namely a design that develops a framework explaining the relationships between constructs. The literature review followed the integrative review logic described by Torraco (2016) and Snyder (2019), which aims to critique and synthesise literature so that new theoretical perspectives can emerge. An integrative review was chosen rather than a systematic review (for example, one following the PRISMA protocol) because the purpose of the study is theory building rather than the aggregation of evidence on a narrowly defined empirical question, and because the relevant literature is heterogeneous, combining conceptual, theological, and a small number of empirical studies. Snyder (2019) nevertheless stresses that integrative reviews require a transparent and documented procedure; this procedure is reported below. The theological component of the study follows the four tasks of practical theology described by Osmer (2008): the descriptive-empirical task (what is going on?), the interpretive task (why is it going on?), the normative task (what ought to be going on?), and the pragmatic task (how might we respond?). In this study, the descriptive-empirical and interpretive tasks are carried out through the literature mapping, the normative task through theological reflection, and the pragmatic task through the construction of the model.

The primary data were peer-reviewed journal articles that discuss CRE in the digital era, Christian or digital ethics, Generation Z religious identity and spirituality, digital discipleship, and artificial intelligence in CRE. The search covered publications from January 2021 up to the time of the search in 2026 and was carried out through Google Scholar, the Garuda portal (Garba Rujukan Digital), and the websites of accredited Indonesian theology and Christian education journals as well as international journals. The keywords were used in English and Indonesian, individually and in combination: Christian religious education, digital ethics, Generation Z, religious identity, digital discipleship, etika digital, and Pendidikan Agama Kristen. Scopus, the ATLA Religion Database, and ERIC were not used as search sources because the study focuses on Indonesian CRE discourse, most of which is published in

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nationally accredited journals indexed in Garuda and Google Scholar but not in these databases. Relevant international literature was instead consulted purposively as secondary data for theoretical dialogue; this choice is acknowledged as a limitation.

Articles were included if they met all of the following criteria: (a) published in a peer-reviewed journal between January 2021 and the time of the search in 2026; (b) addressing CRE, Christian education, Christian formation or discipleship, or Christian ethics and, at the same time, a digital context, such as digital media, social media, digital literacy, artificial intelligence, or the digital life of Generation Z; (c) full text accessible through a working DOI or the official journal page; and (d) written in Indonesian or English. Articles were excluded if they were not peer-reviewed (for example, theses, dissertations, and unreviewed proceedings), were opinion pieces, editorials, or sermons, treated the digital context only incidentally, or were duplicates. The search and selection procedure is summarised in Table 1. The final corpus consisted of 22 articles: 16 conceptual or library-based studies and 6 studies with an empirical component (Appendix 1). The secondary data consisted of foundational books and international articles on digital religion, digital theology, the ethics of technology, faith formation, identity development, biblical interpretation, and conceptual research methodology.

Table 1. Search and Selection Procedure for the Main Corpus

Stage	Procedure	Outcome
Identification	Keyword searches in Google Scholar, the Garuda portal, and websites of accredited Indonesian and international journals (2021 to the time of the search in 2026)	Candidate records on CRE, Christian ethics, and Christian formation in digital contexts
Screening	Removal of duplicates; titles and abstracts checked against inclusion criteria (a)–(d)	Records without a Christian education or ethics focus, without a digital context, or outside 2021–2026 excluded
Eligibility	Full texts assessed against the exclusion criteria	Non-peer-reviewed works, opinion pieces or sermons, articles with only an incidental digital context, and inaccessible full texts excluded
Included	Final main corpus	22 articles (16 conceptual or library-based; 6 with an empirical component)

Source: Authors' documentation of the search process (2026).

The analysis was carried out in four stages. First, each article was coded by the authors in an extraction matrix, which is summarised in Appendix 1. Coding combined deductive and inductive procedures. Deductive codes were derived from the five research objectives and from descriptive attributes, namely focus, type of study, method, context, main findings, and stated limitations, while inductive codes emerged during reading, such as identity crisis, post-truth, digital habitus, data protection, and cyber-caring. Second, the codes were grouped into thematic clusters according to the dominant focus of each article; each article was assigned to one primary cluster, which yielded six clusters used to map the state of the art and identify the research gap. The remaining gap for each cluster was determined from the limitations and recommendations stated in the studies themselves and from the absence, in the matrix, of codes linking religious identity and moral responsibility.

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Third, the theological foundations of digital ethics were formulated through theological reflection on biblical themes. Themes were selected according to three criteria: (a) recurrence in the corpus, that is, the theme is used by at least one corpus study as a basis for Christian education or ethics in the digital era; (b) direct bearing on the three constructs of the study, namely identity, relationships with others, and truth or discernment; and (c) centrality in Christian theological anthropology and ethics. Candidate themes that did not meet all three criteria as independent foundations, such as creation care, sin and the fallen use of technology, eschatological hope, and wisdom literature, were either integrated into the selected foundations or noted as directions for further work. The hermeneutical approach followed the fourfold task proposed by Hays (1996): each text was first read descriptively in its literary and historical context with the help of standard commentaries, then placed within the wider canonical witness, then related to the present situation by analogy, and finally applied to concrete practice. Following Hays, the move from first-century texts to digital ethics was made mainly through principles and paradigms rather than direct rules, because the biblical texts do not address digital technology as such.

Fourth, the findings and theological foundations were synthesised into a conceptual model that explains the relationships between faith formation, religious identity, and moral responsibility in CRE. To strengthen credibility, the study applied triangulation across types of sources, comparing conceptual and empirical studies within the corpus and bringing the largely Indonesian corpus into dialogue with international literature on digital religion, digital theology, the ethics of technology, and Christian education, which was used as secondary data rather than as part of the corpus. An audit trail was maintained through the extraction matrix, which records the bibliographic data, type of study, method, context, main findings, and codes of each article; a summary is provided in Appendix 1. The study did not involve human participants; therefore, ethical approval was not required.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mapping of the 22 articles in the main corpus produced six thematic clusters, as summarised in Table 2. The table shows that research on CRE in the digital era has developed rapidly but remains fragmented, with each cluster addressing only part of the relationship between digital ethics, religious identity, and moral responsibility. It also shows that the evidence base is predominantly conceptual: only 6 of the 22 studies include an empirical component, and several of these report limited information on samples or instruments.

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Table 2. Mapping of Previous Studies on CRE in the Digital Era (2021–2026)

Cluster (n)	Representative studies	Type of evidence	Main focus	Remaining gap
Digital competence, media, and literacy in CRE (5)	Santosa (2022); Purba (2022); Karlau & Rukua (2023); Nababan et al. (2024); Gulo & Tapilaha (2024)	2 conceptual; 3 with an empirical component (mixed methods, narrative account, netnography)	Digital intelligence, classroom management, teacher competence, critical reasoning	Limited attention to identity and moral formation
Christian ethics and moral character in the digital era (4)	Sari & Bermuli (2021); Nazara (2023); Waruwu & Lawalata (2024); Zamasi et al. (2024)	3 conceptual; 1 qualitative case study	Christian values, character education, digital ethics in the curriculum	Mostly normative; rarely specific to Generation Z; moral responsibility not theorised
Generation Z spirituality and religious identity (4)	Subowo (2021); Hasiholan (2024); Budiman (2026); Manik et al. (2026)	4 conceptual (including historical and exegetical studies)	Digital spirituality, identity crisis, theology of listening	Mostly church or discipleship framed; weak link to moral responsibility
Digital discipleship and mission (4)	Hia (2023); Darmawan et al. (2024); Topayung (2025); Gandaputra & Huwae (2026)	3 conceptual; 1 qualitative field study (interviews and observation)	Digital discipleship patterns, teacher as spiritual leader, digital habitus	Not developed into an integrated CRE framework
Artificial intelligence and CRE (2)	Pantan (2023); Pasaribu (2026)	1 conceptual; 1 netnography	Risks and ethical principles of AI in CRE	Ethical principles not linked to identity formation
Integrative proposals (3)	Boiliu et al. (2025); Ibrani (2025); Meisyani et al. (2026)	3 conceptual (including 1 systematic literature review)	Multidimensional digital CRE, digital Christian ethics, hybrid discipleship	Identity and moral responsibility not yet treated as linked outcomes for Generation Z

Source: Authors' analysis (2026); type of evidence based on the methods stated in each article (see Appendix 1).

Table 2 shows that the integrative cluster is among the most recent. Boiliu et al. (2025) offer a four-dimensional model, Ibrani (2025) connects identity, desire, and ethics, and Meisyani et al. (2026) recommend a curriculum combining digital literacy and theology. However, none of these studies treats religious identity and moral responsibility as two interrelated outcomes of CRE for Generation Z. As explained in the Methods, the remaining gaps were identified from the limitations and recommendations stated by the studies themselves and from the absence of codes linking these two constructs in the extraction matrix. Beyond summarising the clusters, the mapping reveals two patterns that shape the analysis below. First, identity and morality are discussed in different clusters and rarely within the same study. Second, because most studies are conceptual, the claims they make about Generation Z remain largely untested. The syntheses presented in the following subsections should therefore be read as propositions derived from the literature rather than as empirical generalisations.

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Transformation of Christian Religious Education in the Digital Culture of Generation Z

The synthesis suggests that CRE is undergoing a transformation in three areas, namely the learning environment, the role of the teacher, and the understanding of digital space. Regarding the learning environment, the reviewed studies describe a movement from classroom-centred practice towards hybrid practice that utilises learning management systems, digital materials, and social media. Because this description rests on a small and largely conceptual set of studies, it should be read as a trend reported in the literature rather than as an established description of CRE practice in Indonesia. Nababan et al. (2024), combining a literature study with netnography, argue that collaborative classroom management based on digital literacy requires accessible digital materials, the use of learning management systems, and the strengthening of digital skills for both teachers and students. Gulo and Tapilaha (2024) further argue that the integration of digital tools can increase student engagement, especially when combined with critical reasoning, so that students understand Christian values more deeply.

Regarding the role of the teacher, the literature describes a shift of the CRE teacher from a transmitter of religious knowledge to a spiritual leader and mentor in a digitally saturated environment. Santosa (2022) argues that both teachers and students in CRE need digital intelligence, while Karlau and Rukua (2023) argue that many Indonesian CRE teachers still lack digital competence and therefore need digital, spiritual, and multiliteracy competencies to respond critically to post-truth. Topayung (2025) adds that CRE teachers respond to social media influence and low student interest by using technology for spiritual learning, building close relationships with students, and involving parents and the church. Read together, these studies indicate that the role of the CRE teacher in the digital era is not only technical but also pastoral and formative. The synthesis adds a further point that the individual studies do not make explicit: this pastoral role is directed at the digital lives of students themselves, not only at the use of digital tools for teaching.

Regarding the understanding of digital space, a more fundamental transformation is taking place. Earlier responses tended to view digital space either as a neutral instrument or as a profane area separate from spiritual life. Campbell (2010) documents such suspicion and selective negotiation of new media among religious communities, and Subowo (2021) criticises the sacred and profane dichotomy that makes the Indonesian church neglect cyberspace, even though cyberspace has already become part of Generation Z spirituality. Darmawan et al. (2024), in one of the few field-based studies in the corpus, find that digital media became an important space for youth discipleship during the pandemic, although their use declined after restrictions were lifted, while Gandaputra and Huwae (2026) use the concept of habitus to show how digital practices shape the missional identity of Indonesian Christian Generation Z. Campbell and Tsuria (2021) likewise show that digital media do not simply transmit religion but reshape religious practice and identity.

This transformation implies that CRE can no longer treat digitalisation merely as a matter of media selection. If digital space is a formative environment that shapes habits, desires, and

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identity, then CRE must engage it as a space of formation. J. K. A. Smith (2009, 2016) argues that human beings are formed not primarily by ideas but by repeated practices that shape what they love. Smith develops this liturgical anthropology mainly with reference to worship and cultural practices and applies it to technology only partially (J. K. A. Smith, 2016), whereas Crouch (2017) and Vallor (2016) relate habit formation to technology more directly. Extending this lens, the present study proposes that digital routines such as scrolling, posting, liking, and responding can function as such formative practices. Consequently, the transformation of CRE in the digital culture of Generation Z requires a shift from a media-based approach to a formation-based approach, in which digital technology is used and at the same time critically examined in the light of Christian faith.

Challenges of Forming Religious Identity and Morality in the Digital Era

The synthesis groups the challenges of forming religious identity and morality among Generation Z into four categories: identity fragmentation, moral relativism, the post-truth condition, and the shift of authority to algorithms and artificial intelligence.

The first challenge is identity fragmentation. Erikson (1968) describes adolescence as a period in which young people search for a coherent identity amid various roles and expectations. More recent work refines this picture. Arnett (2000) shows that identity exploration extends into the late teens and twenties, and Fowler (1981) describes adolescent faith as synthetic-conventional, that is, strongly shaped by the expectations of significant others, who in digital space increasingly include peers and online audiences. Research on networked teenagers (boyd, 2014) shows that adolescents present themselves to multiple and overlapping audiences, so that the search for identity takes place across platforms where they present different versions of themselves. Manik et al. (2026) describe this condition as an identity crisis among Generation Z, which requires CRE to help adolescents understand who they are before God. Hasiholan (2024) similarly argues that Indonesian Christian Generation Z tends to neglect its identity as followers of Jesus and therefore needs discipleship that helps them recognise their life purpose and confused values. Meisyani et al. (2026), drawing on the concept of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism introduced by C. Smith and Denton (2005), identify a further threat in the form of a vague religiosity that reduces faith to being nice, feeling good, and calling on God only when needed. Because this construct was derived from a national study of American teenagers, its transfer to Indonesian Christian youth should be treated as a hypothesis that requires empirical examination rather than as an established description.

The second challenge is moral relativism and moral decline. Sari and Bermuli (2021) link the moral decline of students in the digital era to technology use and moral relativism. Ibrani (2025) argues that the moral crisis of young people in the digital era is fundamentally a problem of identity, desire formation, and character, not merely a problem of rules. Purba (2022), reflecting on his own outreach among church youth, describes integrity issues through four contrasts: producing versus losing, cyberbullying versus cyber-caring, flexing versus humility, and cursing versus blessing. These contrasts suggest that digital behaviour can be read as a

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concrete expression of moral character and religious identity.

The third challenge is the post-truth condition. Karlau and Rukua (2023) argue that the disruption of information technology has created a post-truth climate in which hoaxes and misinformation spread easily. In such a climate, Generation Z is not only a consumer of information but also a producer and distributor of content. This means that moral responsibility in digital space includes responsibility for the truth of what is shared. Budiman (2026) proposes a theology of listening that cultivates patience, relational humility, discernment, and responsive obedience as a response to digital distraction, indicating that the ability to discern truth is a spiritual as well as a cognitive virtue.

The fourth challenge is the shift of authority to algorithms and artificial intelligence. Research on algorithmic culture shows that platform algorithms shape what becomes visible to users and thereby influence their attention, preferences, and social relations (Bucher, 2018), and digital religion research notes that digital systems participate in reshaping religious authority (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). Within the CRE corpus, Pantan (2023), on the basis of a netnographic study, finds that ChatGPT can be useful for general overviews but risks eroding the CRE goal of becoming like Christ. Pasaribu (2026) proposes principles of artificial intelligence ethics, namely justice, transparency, and responsibility, and recommends faith-based digital literacy for teachers and the protection of student data. Taken together, these studies indicate that algorithms and artificial intelligence increasingly influence what students see, believe, and desire, so that CRE must help students remain critical and responsible users rather than passive objects of technology.

Read together, these four challenges suggest that the problem of Generation Z in digital space is not simply a lack of digital skills or of moral knowledge. The synthesis proposes that the core problem lies in the relationship between identity and moral action. When religious identity is weak or fragmented, as Hasiholan (2024), Manik et al. (2026), and Meisyani et al. (2026) argue, moral behaviour in digital space may tend to follow the logic of the platform, such as popularity, instant gratification, and self-display, which Purba (2022) describes as flexing and Gandaputra and Huwae (2026) analyse as digital habitus. Conversely, when moral responsibility is not cultivated, religious identity may remain private and fail to shape public digital behaviour, a pattern that Ibrani (2025) relates to the formation of desire and character. This argument is offered as a proposition derived from the synthesis rather than as a demonstrated causal relationship, because the supporting studies are largely conceptual. It nevertheless suggests the need for a framework that addresses both dimensions at the same time.

Theological Foundations of Digital Ethics in Christian Religious Education

Digital ethics in CRE requires a theological foundation so that it does not become merely a set of technical rules or general civic norms. Applying the selection criteria and the hermeneutical approach described in the Methods, this study proposes four theological foundations of digital ethics in CRE. Each recurs in the corpus, bears directly on at least one of

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the constructs of identity, relationship, and truth, and is central to Christian theological anthropology and ethics. Other candidate themes were considered. Sin and the fallen use of technology are treated within the first and fourth foundations, as a distortion of the image of God and as conformity to the pattern of this world; eschatological hope is reflected in the doxological orientation of the fourth foundation; creation care and the wisdom literature, although relevant to a theology of technology (Brock, 2010), bear less directly on the three constructs and are left for further work. The four foundations are also placed in dialogue with digital theology, which reflects theologically on digital culture rather than merely applying doctrine to it (Campbell & Garner, 2016; Phillips et al., 2019).

The first foundation is the *imago Dei*. In its literary and historical context, Genesis 1:26–27 presents human beings as created in the image of God and entrusted with representative rule over creation; Middleton (2005) shows that, against the background of ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, this language extends royal dignity and vocation to all human beings. The text therefore grounds both the dignity of every person and a responsible agency in the use of what God has entrusted, including cultural products such as technology. Sari and Bermuli (2021) use the *imago Dei* and the character of Christ as the philosophical basis for character education in the digital era. By analogy, in the context of digital ethics the *imago Dei* means that the worth of a person is not determined by the number of followers, likes, or online visibility, but by the fact that God has created and loved that person. This foundation addresses the identity crisis of Generation Z by locating identity in God rather than in digital recognition. At the same time, it requires respect for the dignity of others, so that practices such as cyberbullying, body shaming, and the distribution of degrading content are understood as violations of the image of God and as expressions of the sin that distorts, though does not erase, that image.

The second foundation is the incarnation. The confession that the Word became flesh and dwelt among humanity (John 1:14) uses language that recalls the tabernacle presence of God among Israel (Keener, 2003), showing that God engages humanity within its concrete and embodied culture. This foundation provides a theological basis for CRE to engage digital culture rather than reject it. Subowo (2021) argues that cyberspace should not be treated as a profane area outside the work of God, and Gandaputra and Huwae (2026) speak of phygital koinonia, namely fellowship that integrates physical and digital presence. However, the incarnation also implies embodiment. Theological and educational work on digital presence suggests that mediated presence is real but partial: Campbell and Garner (2016) argue that a theology of digital culture must account for the embodied and communal character of Christian faith, and Shirley (2017) shows that relational discipleship requires attention to what digital tools cannot provide. Digital presence therefore cannot fully replace embodied relationships, so CRE must maintain a balance between digital engagement and embodied community.

The third foundation is the love commandment. In Matthew 22:37–40, Jesus joins Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 and declares that all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments, making love of God and neighbour the interpretive key of the law (France, 2007). In digital space, love of neighbour takes the form of speaking the truth in love

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(Ephesians 4:15), using words that build up rather than destroy (Ephesians 4:29), and caring for those who are vulnerable online. In Ephesians, both exhortations concern the upbuilding of the community as the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–16, 25–32), so they apply by analogy to the communities that students form and inhabit online (Lincoln, 1990). Waruwu and Lawalata (2024) identify honesty, justice, and love as Christian values that must be integrated into the practices of an ethical digital society, and Purba (2022) translates this into the contrast between cyberbullying and cyber-caring. Thus, the love commandment provides the relational dimension of digital ethics.

The fourth foundation is the call to do all things for the glory of God. In 1 Corinthians 10:23–31, Paul concludes his discussion of food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8–10) by subordinating Christian freedom to the edification of others: not everything that is permissible is beneficial or edifying, and whatever believers do should be done for the glory of God (see also Colossians 3:17). Thiselton (2000) and Hays (1996) show that this passage functions as a paradigm of freedom limited by love for the neighbour, and it is this paradigm, rather than a direct rule, that is transferred here to digital freedom. Paul also urges believers not to be conformed to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of the mind so that they can discern the will of God (Romans 12:2), a call set within the logic of whole-life worship in Romans 12:1 (Moo, 2018), and to think about whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, and commendable (Philippians 4:8), a list that draws on widely recognised moral virtues of its time (Fee, 1995). These texts provide criteria for discernment in digital life: whether a digital action is beneficial, whether it edifies others, whether it is true, and whether it glorifies God. This foundation supports what Gulo and Tapilaha (2024) call the integration of spirituality and critical reasoning and what Budiman (2026) describes as the virtue of discernment. It is also close to what Vallor (2016) calls technomoral wisdom, although here discernment is oriented toward God rather than toward human flourishing alone.

Together, these four foundations show that digital ethics in CRE is not an external addition to faith but an expression of Christian faith in digital space. Boiliu et al. (2025) place theology as the foundation and ethics as responsible digital citizenship in their model. This study builds on that position and specifies the theological foundation in four dimensions: anthropological (*imago Dei*), incarnational, relational (love commandment), and doxological (glory of God). In dialogue with digital theology (Campbell & Garner, 2016; Phillips et al., 2019) and with Christian ethics of technology (Brock, 2010), the contribution lies less in the individual themes, which are familiar in Christian ethics, than in their explicit connection to the formative axes of the model: the anthropological dimension grounds religious identity and responsibility for the self, the incarnational dimension grounds embodied engagement with digital culture, the relational dimension grounds responsibility for others, and the doxological dimension grounds discernment and responsibility for the truth. These dimensions become the basis for forming both religious identity and moral responsibility.

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Integration of Digital Ethics in Forming Religious Identity and Moral Responsibility

Building on the preceding synthesis, this study proposes that religious identity and moral responsibility are two sides of the same formative process. This is a conceptual proposition of the authors rather than a finding reported by the reviewed studies, which, as Table 2 shows, generally discuss identity and morality separately. Religious identity answers the question of who I am before God, while moral responsibility answers the question of how I should act before God and others. In digital space, the two are inseparable, because digital behaviour constantly expresses and at the same time shapes identity.

With regard to religious identity, the reviewed literature expects CRE and discipleship to help Generation Z locate identity in God rather than in digital performance. Manik et al. (2026) emphasise that CRE should teach adolescents who they are before God, and Hasiholan (2024) proposes discipleship based on teaching and personal encounter with Christ. Meisyani et al. (2026) recommend hybrid discipleship that connects digital and physical faith communities. On this basis, the study proposes that religious identity is formed through three processes: knowing, namely understanding Christian teaching about the self, God, and the world; belonging, namely experiencing participation in a faith community both online and offline; and practising, namely expressing faith consistently in daily life, including digital life. This triad is the authors' adaptation of existing frameworks rather than an entirely new construct. It resembles the triad of believing, behaving, and belonging used in the study of contemporary Christianity (Bass, 2012) and Groome's (2011) emphasis that faith education should engage the whole person, including head, heart, and hands, so that faith becomes a lived identity rather than mere information. Knowing is used instead of believing to emphasise the educational task of understanding Christian teaching, and practising is used instead of behaving to emphasise the habitual and formative character of action (J. K. A. Smith, 2016).

With regard to moral responsibility, this study proposes that moral responsibility in digital space should be understood in three dimensions, which constitute the core conceptual contribution of this article. The first dimension is responsibility for the self, which includes managing time and attention, protecting one's privacy, and being aware that every digital activity leaves a footprint that reflects one's identity as a follower of Christ; it was derived from codes on attention, privacy, data protection, and digital footprint (Purba, 2022; Budiman, 2026; Pasaribu, 2026). The second dimension is responsibility for others, which includes respecting the dignity of others, refusing cyberbullying, protecting the vulnerable, and using digital media to build up others; it was derived from codes on dignity, cyberbullying, edification, and care (Sari & Bermuli, 2021; Purba, 2022; Waruwu & Lawalata, 2024). The third dimension is responsibility for the truth, which includes verifying information before sharing it, rejecting hoaxes and manipulation, and using artificial intelligence honestly in learning; it was derived from codes on post-truth, hoaxes, and honest use of artificial intelligence (Karlau & Rukua, 2023; Pantan, 2023; Pasaribu, 2026). This threefold articulation responds to the research gap identified earlier, in which moral responsibility is usually subsumed under general terms such as character or integrity (Zamasi et al., 2024; Ibrani, 2025).

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The articulation is related to, but distinct from, existing frameworks. Ribble's (2015) elements of digital citizenship, such as digital etiquette, digital rights and responsibilities, digital health and wellness, and digital security, describe norms of appropriate technology use but organise them by domains of civic behaviour rather than by the persons and goods to which one is responsible. Floridi's (2013) information ethics locates moral responsibility within the whole informational environment and offers a strong account of responsibility for information, but it does not address religious identity. Vallor's (2016) technomoral virtues, such as honesty, self-control, empathy, and care, are close to the content of the three dimensions, but they are grounded in a philosophical account of human flourishing rather than in Christian faith. The proposed triad differs in organising responsibility according to its three objects, namely the self, the neighbour, and the truth, in grounding each object in a theological foundation, and in linking it explicitly to religious identity as an educational outcome. Its novelty therefore lies in this integration for CRE rather than in any single element.

The three dimensions of moral responsibility are also interrelated. Responsibility for the self without responsibility for others may turn into self-centred self-care, while responsibility for others without responsibility for the truth may lead to well-intentioned but misleading content. Conversely, responsibility for the truth without love for others may become harsh and judgemental. Therefore, the integration of digital ethics in CRE must hold the three dimensions together, so that the formation of moral responsibility reflects the wholeness of Christian love that rejoices in the truth (1 Corinthians 13:6).

The integration of digital ethics in forming religious identity and moral responsibility requires learning practices that connect faith with concrete digital experience. Zamasi et al. (2024) propose ethics discussions on collaborative platforms and the inclusion of digital ethics in the CRE curriculum. Ibrani (2025) offers four components, namely moral literacy, character discipline, discipleship community, and digital witness. Nazara (2023) suggests the use of social media as a channel for teaching Christian ethics to Generation Z, while Hia (2023) emphasises the use of church social media for mission. This study integrates these proposals selectively. It adopts the inclusion of digital ethics in the curriculum (Zamasi et al., 2024) and the components of discipleship community and digital witness (Ibrani, 2025). It modifies the use of social media as a channel for teaching and mission (Hia, 2023; Nazara, 2023): in the model, social media are not only channels for content but also objects of theological reflection. It does not adopt approaches that rely mainly on rules or on adult monitoring, because these do not by themselves form an internal disposition of responsibility. Digital ethics should therefore not be taught only as content but also cultivated as practice, so that students learn to discern, decide, and act responsibly within real digital situations.

This integration also requires the collaboration of the main formative communities of Generation Z. Topayung (2025) highlights the involvement of parents and the church in the role of CRE teachers as spiritual leaders, and Sari and Bermuli (2021) recommend that parents and teachers jointly monitor children's digital activity, which the model reframes as accompaniment rather than surveillance. Therefore, the formation of religious identity and moral responsibility

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in digital space cannot be carried out by the school alone. It requires an educational ecosystem in which the school, the family, and the church share a common vision and consistent practices.

In Indonesia, this ecosystem must be adapted to different school settings. Many Christian students attend public or non-Christian private schools, where they are entitled to religious education according to their own religion taught by an educator of the same religion (Republik Indonesia, 2003, Article 12(1)(a)), but where the CRE teacher works in a multireligious setting, often with small groups, and the school may have limited contact with local churches. In such settings, the role of the teacher as a bridge becomes more important: the teacher can coordinate with the families and congregations of students, for example through church youth programmes, while digital ethics at school also includes respectful engagement with people of other faiths online. The model can also be connected to the national curriculum. In the Kurikulum Merdeka, the learning outcomes (Capaian Pembelajaran) of Christian Religious Education and Character are organised in four elements: God at work (Allah Berkarya), humanity and Christian values (Manusia dan Nilai-nilai Kristiani), the church and plural society (Gereja dan Masyarakat Majemuk), and nature and the environment (Alam dan Lingkungan Hidup) (Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan [BSKAP], 2025). The theological foundations of the model relate mainly to the first element, the formation of identity and moral responsibility to the second, and responsibility for others in multireligious digital space to the third. The model also supports the national graduate profile, formerly formulated as the Profil Pelajar Pancasila and now as eight graduate profile dimensions, notably faith and piety towards God, citizenship, critical reasoning, and communication (Kementerian Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah, 2025).

Reconstruction of a Conceptual Model of Christian Religious Education Based on Digital Ethics

Drawing the preceding subsections together, the study proposes a reconstructed conceptual model of CRE based on digital ethics. The model is constructed from the synthesis of the transformation, challenges, theological foundations, and integration discussed above. It consists of four interrelated components: a theological foundation, three formative axes, four pedagogical movements, and an educational ecosystem. The overall structure of the model is presented in Figure 1.

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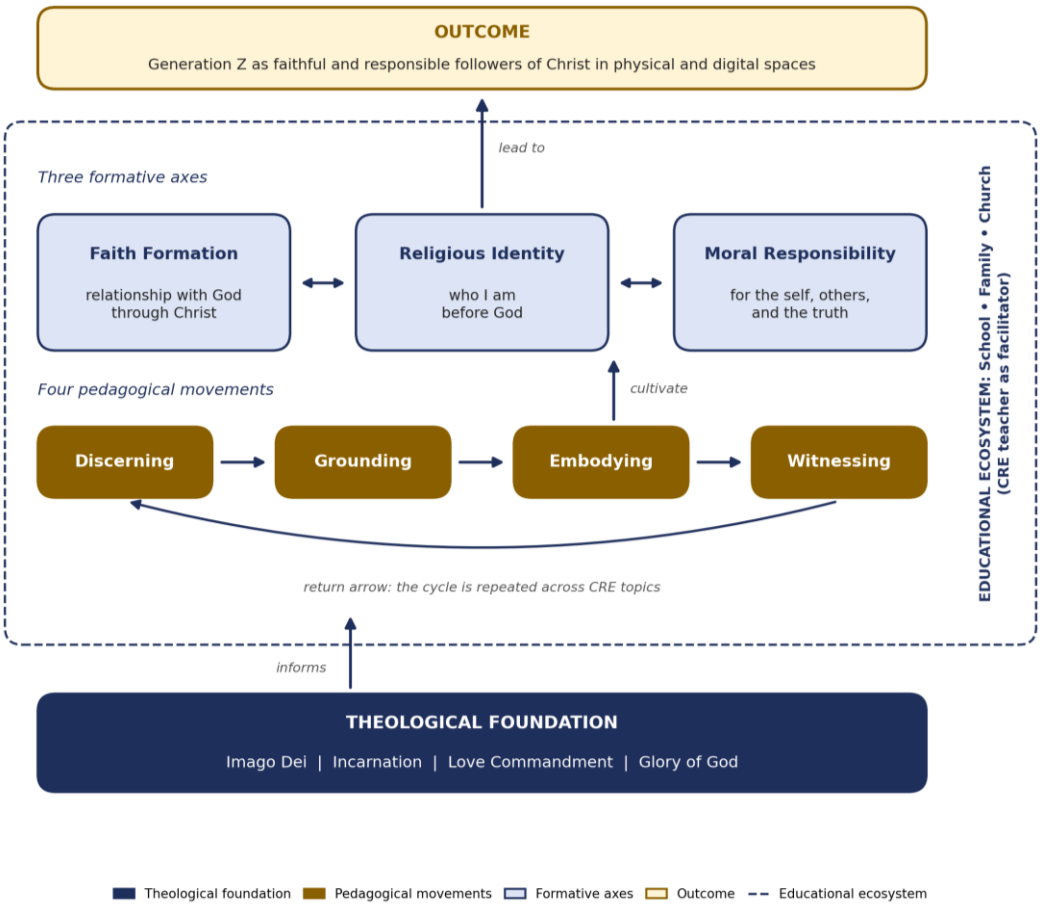


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Digital-Ethics-Based Christian Religious Education
Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis (2026).

As shown in Figure 1, the theological foundation forms the base of the model and consists of the *imago Dei*, the incarnation, the love commandment, and the glory of God. This foundation ensures that digital ethics in CRE is rooted in Christian faith rather than in general norms alone. Above this foundation stand three formative axes. The axis of faith formation concerns the relationship of students with God through Christ. The axis of religious identity concerns how students understand and present themselves as followers of Christ in both physical and digital spaces. The axis of moral responsibility concerns how students act responsibly toward themselves, others, and the truth. The three axes are interrelated: faith formation grounds religious identity, religious identity motivates moral responsibility, and moral responsibility expresses and strengthens faith and identity. The vertical arrows in the figure show that the foundation informs the pedagogical movements, that the movements cultivate the three axes, and that the axes, supported by the educational ecosystem, lead to the intended outcome; the return arrow indicates that the four movements form a repeatable cycle.

The formative axes are realised through four pedagogical movements, which adapt shared Christian praxis as developed by Groome (1980, 1991, 2011) to the digital context. In Groome's

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approach, a focusing act that establishes a generative theme is followed by five movements: naming present praxis, critical reflection on present praxis, making the Christian Story and Vision accessible, dialectical appropriation of the Story and Vision to the lives of participants, and decision or response for lived Christian faith (Groome, 1991). The model adapts this structure in three ways. First, the focusing act and the first two movements are merged into discerning, because in the digital context naming one's habits and critically reflecting on the platform logic that shapes them are inseparable. Second, the third and fourth movements are merged into grounding, in which Scripture and theology are both made accessible and brought into dialogue with the digital experience of students. Third, the fifth movement is divided into embodying and witnessing, in order to distinguish the cultivation of formative habits, which J. K. A. Smith (2009) emphasises, from responsible public action and testimony, which Ibrani (2025) calls digital witness. The resulting sequence also resembles the see, judge, act method associated with Joseph Cardijn (Sands, 2018): discerning corresponds to seeing, grounding to judging, and embodying and witnessing to acting. Its distinctive feature is the separation of inward habit formation from outward witness, which reflects the concern of this study with both religious identity and moral responsibility. The details of each movement are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Pedagogical Movements of Digital-Ethics-Based CRE

Movement	Adapted from shared Christian praxis	Focus	Example learning activities	Formative outcome
Discerning	Focusing act; Movements 1 and 2	Naming and critically reflecting on actual digital experience	Digital habit audit; reflective journal on social media use	Awareness of identity and digital habits
Grounding	Movements 3 and 4	Dialogue between experience and Scripture and theology	Study of Genesis 1:26–27; Ephesians 4:15, 29; 1 Corinthians 10:23, 31; Romans 12:2	Theologically grounded identity and values
Embodying	Movement 5 (habit formation)	Cultivating formative digital practices	Digital sabbath; pause and pray before posting; fact-checking before sharing	Christian habits and the virtue of discernment
Witnessing	Movement 5 (public response)	Responsible action and testimony in digital space	Edifying content projects; anti-cyberbullying campaigns	Moral responsibility for self, others, and truth

Source: Authors' analysis (2026), adapted from Groome (1991).

The first movement, discerning, invites students to name and reflect on their actual digital experiences, such as how they use social media, what content they consume, and how digital interactions influence their self-image. This movement prevents CRE from moralising without engaging the real world of students. The second movement, grounding, brings these experiences into dialogue with Scripture and Christian theology, especially the four theological foundations. The third movement, embodying, cultivates formative practices such as digital sabbath, prayerful reflection before posting, verification of information before sharing, and constructive participation in online communities. This movement reflects the insight of J. K. A. Smith (2009) that formation occurs through repeated practices that shape desire. The fourth movement,

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witnessing, encourages students to use digital media to bear witness to Christ through responsible actions, such as creating edifying content, supporting victims of cyberbullying, and promoting truth in digital spaces. This movement is in line with the emphasis on digital witness by Ibrani (2025) and the missional identity described by Gandaputra and Huwae (2026).

The model is supported by an educational ecosystem consisting of the school, the family, and the church. The school provides structured learning and curriculum, the family provides daily guidance and modelling in the use of digital devices, and the church provides a faith community and opportunities for service, both online and offline. The CRE teacher functions as a facilitator who connects the three, in line with the role of the teacher as spiritual leader described by Topayung (2025).

To illustrate how the model may operate in practice, the following hypothetical learning unit is offered. It has not been implemented or tested and is intended only to make the model concrete. The unit addresses the theme of identity in Christ and social media for senior high school students in grade XI (Phase F of the Kurikulum Merdeka), within the element of humanity and Christian values, and supports the graduate profile dimensions of faith and piety, critical reasoning, and citizenship. In the discerning movement, students are invited to keep a private record of their own social media use for one week, noting the time they spend, the content they consume and produce, and the feelings that arise when they compare themselves with others. The teacher then facilitates a reflective conversation on how these experiences shape their self-image. In the grounding movement, students study the affirmation of the image of God in Genesis 1:26–27 and the Pauline call not to be conformed to the pattern of this world in Romans 12:2, and discuss how these texts relocate their identity from digital recognition to the love of God.

Because the unit asks students to observe their own digital lives, it must protect their privacy, as Pasaribu (2026) emphasises with regard to student data. The records of students remain their own and are neither collected nor graded; only what students choose to share is discussed, and no screenshots or personal data of other users are used. Participation in any sharing activity is voluntary, parents are informed about the unit in advance, and consent is sought in line with school policy, particularly when student products are shared beyond the classroom.

In the embodying movement, students agree on a set of formative practices for the following weeks, such as a weekly digital sabbath, a short prayer of reflection before posting, and the habit of verifying information before sharing it. In the witnessing movement, students work in groups to design edifying digital content or a simple campaign against cyberbullying in their school, which is then presented to the class and, where appropriate and with consent, shared with their families and church youth groups. Assessment is formative and is carried out through reflective journals (assessed only on the parts that students choose to submit), peer feedback, and the evaluation of the digital project, using indicative indicators for each dimension of moral responsibility (Table 4), each of which can be rated at three levels: beginning, developing, and consistent. The indicators are proposed for illustration and would

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require validation before use; they also provide a starting point for the measurement instruments recommended for future research. This illustration shows that the four movements are not isolated steps but a cycle that can be repeated across different CRE topics.

Table 4. Indicative Indicators for Assessing Digital Moral Responsibility

Dimension	Indicative indicators	Possible evidence
Responsibility for the self	Reflects on own screen time and attention; manages privacy settings; recognises how own digital footprint expresses identity in Christ	Journal excerpts chosen by the student; self-assessment
Responsibility for others	Uses edifying language; refuses to join or spread cyberbullying; supports vulnerable peers; respects people of other faiths online	Peer feedback; group project; teacher observation of class discussion
Responsibility for the truth	Verifies information before sharing; identifies hoaxes and manipulation; uses artificial intelligence honestly and discloses its use	Fact-checking task; project documentation; statement of AI use

Source: Authors' proposal (2026); indicative and not yet validated.

Compared with previous studies, the model offers three distinctive contributions. First, it treats religious identity and moral responsibility as two interrelated outcomes of CRE, whereas previous studies tend to address identity (Hasiholan, 2024; Manik et al., 2026) or morality (Sari & Bermuli, 2021; Zamasi et al., 2024) separately. Second, it articulates moral responsibility in three explicit dimensions, namely responsibility for the self, for others, and for the truth, which extends the model of Boiliu et al. (2025) that frames ethics broadly as responsible digital citizenship. Third, it translates the theological foundations into a sequence of pedagogical movements that can guide curriculum and lesson design, while previous integrative proposals such as Ibrani (2025) and Meisyani et al. (2026) focus more on components and recommendations than on a pedagogical sequence. Compared with international work, the model shares the emphasis on discernment developed by D. I. Smith and Sevensma (2020) and the concern for the moral formation role of the Christian educator in the era of generative artificial intelligence raised by Condrey (2024). It complements digital citizenship frameworks (Ribble, 2015) by grounding responsible technology use in religious identity, and it responds to the scarcity of research on Christian digital faith formation noted by de Kock (2025) by offering a model that can be tested empirically.

The model has practical implications for CRE. In terms of curriculum, digital ethics should be integrated across CRE topics and the elements of the learning outcomes rather than placed in a single isolated unit. In terms of teacher practice, CRE teachers need to develop not only digital competence but also the ability to accompany students in reflecting on their digital experiences theologically, including in multireligious school settings. In terms of assessment, CRE should assess not only cognitive understanding but also the reflective awareness and responsible digital practices of students, for example through reflective journals, digital projects, and portfolios guided by indicators such as those in Table 4. In terms of partnership, schools should involve parents and churches through shared programmes on digital ethics and faith formation.

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This study has several limitations. First, the model is conceptual and has not been tested empirically in CRE classrooms; the learning unit and the assessment indicators are hypothetical. Second, the corpus is limited to twenty-two peer-reviewed articles identified through Google Scholar, Garuda, and journal websites rather than through a full systematic review protocol in international databases such as Scopus, ATLA, or ERIC, so the mapping of previous research may not be exhaustive. Third, most of the analysed studies come from the Indonesian context and were published in Indonesian journals, with only one published in an international journal. The triangulation with international literature was therefore conducted at the level of theoretical dialogue rather than within the corpus, and the applicability of the model to other cultural contexts requires further examination. Fourth, 16 of the 22 corpus studies are conceptual, and several of the studies with an empirical component report limited methodological detail, which limits the empirical grounding of the synthesis. Fifth, the coding was not checked through a formal inter-coder reliability procedure, which may introduce interpretive bias. These limitations open opportunities for future research, such as developing and validating measurement instruments for religious identity and digital moral responsibility, testing the model through classroom action research or research and development, and conducting a systematic literature review with broader international databases.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to answer how Christian Religious Education can be reconstructed on the basis of digital ethics so that it forms both the religious identity and the moral responsibility of Generation Z. The answer it proposes is that such a reconstruction requires a move from a media-based to a formation-based approach, in which digital space is treated as an environment that shapes habits, desires, and identity, and in which religious identity and moral responsibility are formed together rather than separately.

The novelty of the study lies in two elements. The first is the articulation of moral responsibility in digital space as a distinct educational outcome with three interrelated dimensions, namely responsibility for the self, for others, and for the truth, grounded in the image of God, the incarnation, the love commandment, and the glory of God. The second is a pedagogical sequence of discerning, grounding, embodying, and witnessing, adapted from shared Christian praxis, which translates this foundation into a repeatable cycle of learning supported by the school, the family, and the church.

Theoretically, the model offers Christian Religious Education an integrative framework that connects theology, identity formation, and digital ethics and that can be placed in dialogue with international work on digital religion, digital theology, and digital citizenship. Practically, it offers direction for curriculum design within the national curriculum, for teachers working in both Christian and multireligious schools, for the formative assessment of digital moral responsibility, and for partnership among formative communities. Because the model is conceptual and derived from a limited and largely conceptual body of literature, its claims remain propositions to be tested. Future research should develop and validate instruments for

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religious identity and digital moral responsibility, test the model through classroom action research or research and development, and extend the literature mapping through a systematic review of international databases. In this way, Christian Religious Education can help Generation Z to live as faithful and responsible followers of Christ in both physical and digital spaces.

Funding
This research received no external funding.

Author Contributions
Liston Sihombing; conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, and writing (original draft). Andrea Elfata Ratulangi; investigation, data curation, theological analysis, writing (review and editing), and correspondence.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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