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MORAL FORMATION THROUGH CHILDREN'S SONGS: AN ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE IN A GLOBAL MEDIA CONTEXT

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Abstract:

Children's songs constitute a powerful yet often underexamined medium of moral socialisation in early childhood education. In contemporary Muslim societies, children are increasingly exposed to a plural media environment in which Islamic children's songs coexist with Western-produced musical content, particularly through digital platforms. While music-based learning has been widely recognised for its cognitive, linguistic, and emotional benefits, comparatively little attention has been given to how different cultural traditions of children's songs shape moral and religious value formation. This study addresses that gap by offering a qualitative comparative analysis of Islamic and Western children's songs and examining teachers' perceptions of their influence on Islamic moral development among young learners in Malaysia. Guided by theories of moral education, socio-cultural learning, and Islamic pedagogy, the study employs thematic content analysis of selected songs alongside survey data from primary and preschool teachers. The findings indicate that Islamic children's songs consistently integrate moral instruction with religious consciousness, framing ethical behaviour as an expression of faith and accountability to God, whereas Western children's songs primarily

promote general social values within a secular and individualistic framework (Al-Ghazālī, 2004; Barrett, 2016; Lickona, 1991). Teachers reported that moral internalisation was strongest when songs were emotionally engaging and pedagogically mediated through explanation and repetition (Hallam, 2010; Ilari & Sundara, 2009). The study contributes to scholarship on music education and moral development by highlighting the culturally situated nature of musical pedagogy and emphasising the need for intentional mediation of children's media in Islamic educational contexts.

Introduction

Music occupies a central position in early childhood education, functioning not only as a medium of enjoyment but also as a powerful pedagogical tool that shapes cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development. Numerous studies have demonstrated that musical activities enhance language acquisition, memory retention, emotional regulation, and social interaction, making songs particularly effective for young learners (Hallam, 2010; Ilari & Sundara, 2009). Beyond these developmental benefits, music also plays a crucial role in moral socialisation, as children frequently internalise values, norms, and behavioural expectations through repeated and emotionally engaging musical experiences.

Within Muslim educational traditions, children's songs and nasheed have long served as instruments of ethical and spiritual formation, embedding moral instruction within Qurʾānic teachings, prophetic exemplars, and religious consciousness. Classical Islamic scholars emphasised that moral development begins in early childhood and relies heavily on habituation, imitation, and emotional attachment to virtuous practices (Al-Ghazālī, 2004). Songs, with their rhythmic repetition and affective appeal, naturally support these processes by reinforcing ethical behaviour in ways that are accessible and memorable for children.

In recent decades, however, the moral landscape of childhood has been significantly reshaped by globalisation and digital media. Children today are increasingly exposed to Western-produced children's songs and programmes, particularly through platforms such as YouTube, alongside locally produced Islamic content. While Western children's songs often promote positive social behaviours such as cooperation, independence, and emotional expression, they typically do so within a secular moral framework, detached from religious belief or metaphysical accountability (Barrett, 2016). This coexistence of divergent moral narratives raises important questions about value alignment, ethical consistency, and cultural influence in Muslim-majority societies.

Despite the widespread use of songs in both formal education and home environments, existing research has largely prioritised the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of music-based learning, with comparatively limited attention to its moral and religious implications (Ilari, 2015; Campbell, 2010). Studies of moral education emphasise that values are most effectively internalised when they are embedded within emotionally meaningful and socially reinforced practices rather than taught as abstract principles (Lickona, 1991). Yet few empirical studies have systematically examined how different traditions of children's songs convey moral

values, particularly from the perspective of teachers who directly observe children's behaviour and value formation in educational settings.

The lack of comparative research is especially notable in the context of Islamic education. While Islamic children's media such as Omar & Hana explicitly integrates moral behaviour with religious identity, little scholarly attention has been given to how such content differs ethically and pedagogically from Western children's songs, or how educators navigate these differences in practice. Without such analysis, teachers and parents are left without clear, evidence-based guidance on how to mediate children's exposure to diverse musical content in ways that support Islamic moral development.

This study therefore undertakes a qualitative comparative investigation of Islamic and Western children's songs, focusing on their moral themes and teachers' perceptions of their influence on children's ethical behaviour. By integrating perspectives from moral education theory, socio-cultural learning theory, and Islamic pedagogy, the research seeks to illuminate how music functions as a culturally situated moral practice rather than a neutral educational tool (Vygotsky, 1978; Lickona, 1991). In doing so, the study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship on music education and moral development and offers practical insights for educators working within culturally and religiously diverse media environments.

The rapid expansion of digital media has profoundly reshaped the cultural and moral environments in which children grow and learn. Songs and musical content, once mediated primarily through families and formal educational settings, are now widely accessed through global digital platforms such as YouTube and streaming services. As a result, children are increasingly exposed to a heterogeneous mix of cultural messages, values, and moral frameworks at an early age. Within Muslim societies, this shift raises pressing concerns regarding the transmission of Islamic moral values, particularly when Western-produced children's songs dominate children's daily media consumption.

Music has long been recognised as a powerful pedagogical tool in early childhood education due to its capacity to enhance memory, emotional engagement, and behavioural regulation (Hallam, 2010; Ilari & Sundara, 2009). In Islamic educational traditions, children's songs and nasheed have historically functioned as instruments of moral and spiritual formation, embedding ethical instruction within Qurʾānic teachings, prophetic models, and religious consciousness (Al-Ghazālī, 2004). By contrast, Western children's songs typically promote general social values such as sharing, independence, and self-expression, often framed within secular and individualistic worldviews (Barrett, 2016).

Despite the widespread use of songs in classrooms and homes, there remains a lack of systematic research examining how Islamic and Western children's songs differ in their moral content and ethical orientation, and how these differences are perceived by educators responsible for children's moral development. Existing studies largely focus on cognitive, linguistic, or emotional outcomes of music-based learning, with comparatively little attention given to moral and religious dimensions (Ilari, 2015; Campbell, 2010). Moreover, few studies foreground teachers' perspectives, even though educators play a crucial role in mediating media content and observing its behavioural effects in real educational contexts.

The central research problem of this study, therefore, lies in the insufficient scholarly understanding of how different cultural traditions of children's songs shape moral development, particularly Islamic moral values, within contemporary Malaysian educational settings. Without such understanding, educators and parents are left without evidence-based guidance to navigate children's exposure to competing moral narratives in an increasingly globalised media environment.

Literature Review

Research in early childhood education consistently demonstrates that music facilitates learning by engaging affective, cognitive, and social processes simultaneously. Ilari and Sundara (2009) argue that musical exposure supports language development and social bonding, while Hallam (2010) highlights music's role in enhancing self-regulation, cooperation, and emotional awareness. These findings suggest that music is not a neutral medium, but a powerful conduit for value transmission.

Within moral education, scholars such as Lickona (1991) emphasise that ethical development is most effective when values are taught through repeated, emotionally meaningful experiences rather than abstract instruction. Songs, with their rhythmic repetition and emotional resonance, are therefore particularly suited to moral education in early childhood. Campbell (2010) further notes that music education inevitably carries moral dimensions, as it shapes attitudes, behaviours, and communal sensibilities.

In Islamic educational thought, moral development is inseparable from spiritual consciousness. Classical scholars such as Al-Ghazālī (2004) emphasised habituation, imitation, and emotional attachment as key mechanisms of ethical formation, all of which are activated through musical and poetic forms. Contemporary studies on Islamic children's media indicate that programmes such as Omar & Hana explicitly integrate religious language, ritual practice, and ethical norms, thereby reinforcing moral instruction within a spiritual framework (Norani & Helmento, 2021).

By contrast, Western children's songs, while often promoting positive social behaviour, tend to frame morality in secular terms, emphasising autonomy and individual choice (Barrett, 2016). Although such values are not inherently incompatible with Islamic ethics, their lack of religious grounding may limit their effectiveness in fostering comprehensive Islamic moral consciousness. The limited number of comparative studies addressing these distinctions, particularly from educators' perspectives, underscores the relevance and necessity of the present research.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to address the identified research gap by undertaking a comparative and interpretive examination of Islamic and Western children's songs as tools of moral socialisation. The primary objective is to analyse the moral meanings and ethical values embedded within selected Islamic and Western children's songs that are popular among Malaysian children. Through this analysis, the study aims to identify both convergences and divergences in how moral behaviour, social responsibility, and ethical norms are represented across these two traditions.

In addition, the study aims to explore teachers' perceptions of the influence these songs exert on children's moral behaviour and value formation. By focusing on educators' lived experiences and professional observations, the research seeks to understand how moral messages conveyed through songs are interpreted, reinforced, or challenged within classroom contexts. Finally, the study aims to examine the pedagogical challenges teachers face when integrating songs into moral education, particularly in balancing entertainment, cultural exposure, and religious values.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study extends across educational, cultural, and scholarly domains. From an educational perspective, the research provides teachers with empirically grounded insights into how songs function as moral pedagogical tools. By clarifying the ethical orientations of Islamic and Western children's songs, the study supports more informed decision-making in curriculum design and classroom practice, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts where moral education is closely linked to religious identity (Lickona, 1991).

Culturally, the study contributes to broader discussions on globalisation and value transmission. As children increasingly consume global media content, understanding how cultural products shape moral consciousness becomes essential for preserving ethical coherence within local traditions. This research highlights the importance of intentional mediation rather than passive consumption of children's media.

Academically, the study enriches interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of music education, moral development, and Islamic pedagogy. While existing research has established the cognitive and emotional benefits of music in early childhood, fewer studies have examined music as a site of moral and religious meaning-making (Ilari, 2015; Campbell, 2010). By foregrounding Islamic moral values and teachers' perspectives, this study addresses an underexplored area within international literature.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design, combining thematic content analysis with teacher-based survey data to examine the moral dimensions of children's songs. Qualitative methodology is particularly appropriate for this research because moral values and ethical meanings are socially constructed and context-dependent, requiring interpretive rather than purely quantitative analysis (Creswell, 2014).

The first component of the methodology involves the selection and thematic analysis of Islamic and Western children's songs that are commonly accessed by Malaysian children. The songs were analysed for recurring moral themes, ethical instructions, and underlying value frameworks. Particular attention was given to how moral behaviour is framed—whether as divinely accountable action, social convention, or personal choice.

The second component consists of a questionnaire administered to primary and preschool teachers in Bandar Saujana Putra, selected through purposive sampling due to their direct involvement in children's moral and behavioural development. Teachers' responses were analysed thematically to identify perceptions of moral influence, classroom applicability, and pedagogical challenges. The integration of content analysis and teacher perspectives allows for

methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility and interpretive depth of the findings (Creswell, 2014).

Findings

The findings of this study indicate that children's songs function as significant agents of moral socialisation, with Islamic and Western children's songs differing in ethical orientation, narrative framing, and perceived moral emphasis. To improve clarity and readability, the findings are presented thematically, reflecting recurrent patterns identified through song analysis and teachers' responses. Teachers' perceptions and thematic analysis suggest that moral values are conveyed through music in culturally situated ways rather than as neutral or uniform messages.

First, regarding moral grounding, Islamic children's songs were consistently perceived as conveying explicit moral instruction embedded within religious belief. Teachers reported that songs associated with Islamic media, such as Omar & Hana, frequently include references to God (Allah), prayer, prophetic example, and religious obligation. Moral behaviours such as honesty, cleanliness, kindness to parents, modesty, and respect for others are framed not merely as desirable social conduct but as acts connected to faith and accountability. Teachers commonly interpreted this integration as reinforcing moral meaning through religious consciousness rather than through social convention alone. This observation is consistent with Islamic educational thought, which conceptualises moral behaviour as inseparable from spiritual awareness (Al-Ghazālī, 2004).

In contrast, a second pattern concerns the moral framing found in Western children's songs. Teachers noted that Western songs generally promote values such as sharing, cooperation, independence, self-confidence, and emotional expression. While these values were viewed positively, respondents observed that they are typically presented in secular and individualistic terms, without explicit reference to religious belief or transcendent accountability. As a result, moral messages were often understood as socially appropriate behaviour rather than ethical obligation. This perception aligns with existing scholarship suggesting that Western children's media tends to frame morality as personal choice or social norm rather than as part of a comprehensive moral worldview (Barrett, 2016).

A third finding relates to the process of moral internalisation. Teachers reported that moral messages conveyed through songs were more likely to be internalised when accompanied by explanation, repetition, and contextual reinforcement in classroom activities. Islamic songs were described as particularly effective when teachers explicitly connected lyrics to religious practices and everyday behaviour. In this sense, songs functioned as entry points for moral discussion rather than as standalone instructional tools. This supports research in moral education indicating that values are more effectively internalised through emotionally meaningful and socially guided experiences (Lickona, 1991; Ilari, 2015).

Emotional engagement also emerged as a recurring theme. Teachers observed that children responded more attentively to songs that were rhythmic, visually engaging, and narratively simple. Both Islamic and Western songs benefited from these characteristics; however, Islamic songs were perceived to achieve stronger moral resonance when emotional appeal was paired with clear ethical direction. This finding reflects research highlighting the role of affective

engagement in enhancing attention, memory, and behavioural regulation in early learning (Hallam, 2010; Ilari & Sundara, 2009).

Finally, teachers identified several practical challenges in using songs for moral education. These included limited access to high-quality Islamic children's songs, curriculum time constraints, and limited formal training in music-based pedagogy. Teachers also expressed concern that unmediated exposure to Western children's media through digital platforms could weaken or dilute Islamic moral messages if not accompanied by guidance and explanation. Such concerns highlight the role of educators as mediators rather than passive users of musical content.

Overall, the findings suggest that children's songs exert moral influence through an interaction between lyrical content, cultural framing, emotional engagement, and pedagogical mediation. Islamic children's songs were perceived as offering a more coherent moral framework grounded in religious meaning, while Western children's songs were viewed as supporting general social behaviour within a secular orientation.

Taken together, these findings indicate that music-based moral learning is shaped not only by the content of songs but also by the cultural and pedagogical contexts in which they are used. The following discussion interprets these patterns in relation to theories of moral education, socio-cultural learning, and Islamic pedagogy, with particular attention to how music functions as a morally situated educational practice rather than a neutral instructional medium.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that children's songs function as influential yet culturally situated tools of moral socialisation. While both Islamic and Western songs convey positive values, their ethical orientations and pedagogical implications differ in important ways. Interpreting these findings through established theories of moral development and music education helps to clarify how and why these differences matter within Islamic educational contexts.

From the perspective of moral education theory, values are most effectively internalised when they are emotionally engaging, consistent, and embedded within meaningful social practices (Lickona, 1991). The stronger moral resonance attributed to Islamic children's songs can therefore be understood in relation to their integration of ethical behaviour with spiritual purpose. Moral actions are framed not simply as socially appropriate conduct but as expressions of faith and responsibility before God, reinforcing a holistic conception of character education.

This interpretation aligns closely with Islamic pedagogical thought. Classical scholars such as Al-Ghazālī (2004) emphasised habituation, imitation, and emotional attachment as central mechanisms of moral formation. Songs that repeatedly associate moral behaviour with religious meaning may therefore support these processes more effectively than content that frames morality in purely social or individual terms. Teachers' observations that Islamic songs encourage children to link behaviour with worship and divine awareness reflect this pedagogical logic.

By contrast, Western children's songs were perceived as promoting secular moral reasoning, emphasising autonomy, emotional expression, and interpersonal cooperation. While these values are not inherently incompatible with Islamic ethics, their presentation as self-sufficient moral goods may limit their capacity to foster religiously grounded moral consciousness. Barrett (2016) notes that Western children's media often prioritises individual choice and emotional satisfaction, which may explain teachers' perceptions that such songs require mediation to align with Islamic moral objectives.

The findings also underscore the importance of pedagogical mediation in music-based moral learning. Teachers consistently reported that songs were most effective when accompanied by explanation, repetition, and contextualisation. This observation is consistent with socio-cultural learning theory, which emphasises guided participation and interaction with more knowledgeable others as central to value internalisation (Vygotsky, 1978). Music alone does not transmit moral meaning automatically; its influence depends on how educators frame and reinforce its messages.

Emotional engagement further enhances the moral potential of music. Research suggests that music's affective qualities strengthen attention, memory, and empathy, making it a particularly powerful medium for early moral education (Hallam, 2010; Ilari & Sundara, 2009). Islamic children's songs appear to leverage this affective dimension more effectively when emotional appeal is paired with explicit ethical guidance, thereby supporting deeper moral internalisation.

The challenges identified by teachers, such as limited resources, time constraints, and lack of training, point to broader structural issues in moral education. Campbell (2010) argues that the moral dimensions of music pedagogy are often underestimated, resulting in underutilised educational potential. Addressing these challenges requires greater institutional support, including access to appropriate content and professional development focused on intentional music-based moral instruction.

Finally, the findings reflect the complexities of moral education in a globalised media environment. Teachers' selective use of Western children's songs suggests a pragmatic strategy that balances cultural openness with moral coherence. Rather than rejecting Western content outright, educators emphasised the need for contextual guidance to ensure alignment with Islamic ethical values. This approach resonates with contemporary Islamic educational discourse that advocates critical engagement with global culture while maintaining moral and spiritual integrity.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that children's songs are not merely auxiliary tools in early childhood education, but powerful agents of moral socialisation that shape children's ethical understanding, emotional orientation, and behavioural habits. Through a comparative analysis of Islamic and Western children's songs, informed by teachers' perspectives, the research has shown that moral values are conveyed through music in culturally distinct ways that carry significant implications for Islamic moral development.

The findings confirm that Islamic children's songs provide a more coherent and spiritually grounded framework for moral education, as they integrate ethical behaviour with religious consciousness and accountability to God. By embedding values such as honesty, respect,

cleanliness, and compassion within references to prayer, worship, and divine awareness, Islamic songs align closely with Islamic pedagogical traditions that regard morality as inseparable from faith (īmān) and righteous action (ʿamal) (Al-Ghazālī, 2004). This integration enables children to internalise moral values not merely as social expectations, but as meaningful aspects of their religious identity.

In contrast, Western children's songs were found to promote largely secular moral values, such as cooperation, self-confidence, and emotional expression, framed primarily in individualistic or socially pragmatic terms. While these values are not inherently incompatible with Islamic ethics, their presentation without spiritual anchoring may limit their effectiveness in nurturing holistic Islamic moral consciousness. This observation resonates with scholarship suggesting that moral education is most effective when values are embedded within a consistent ethical worldview rather than presented as isolated behaviours (Lickona, 1991; Barrett, 2016).

The study also highlights the central role of pedagogical mediation in maximising the moral impact of children's songs. Teachers consistently emphasised that songs were most effective when accompanied by explanation, repetition, and contextual reinforcement within classroom activities. This finding supports socio-cultural learning theory, which posits that children acquire values through guided participation and interaction with educators who model and interpret moral meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). Music, therefore, does not function as an automatic transmitter of values; its moral influence depends on how intentionally it is used within educational settings.

Moreover, the research underscores the importance of emotional engagement in moral learning. Music's affective power enhances attention, memory, and empathy, making it particularly effective for early moral education (Hallam, 2010; Ilari & Sundara, 2009). Islamic children's songs appear to leverage this affective dimension more effectively by aligning emotional resonance with explicit ethical guidance, thereby strengthening children's capacity to internalise values in meaningful and enduring ways.

From a broader perspective, the study draws attention to the challenges posed by globalised children's media environments, where unfiltered exposure to diverse moral narratives can create ethical ambiguity. Teachers' selective and integrative approach—using Western songs to support general social skills while prioritising Islamic songs for moral and spiritual formation—reflects a pragmatic strategy for navigating cultural plurality while maintaining moral coherence. This approach reinforces the need for critical engagement with children's media rather than passive consumption.

In terms of contribution, this study advances scholarship at the intersection of music education, moral development, and Islamic pedagogy by foregrounding teachers lived experiences and by addressing a dimension of music-based learning that remains underexplored in international research. It also offers practical implications for educators, curriculum designers, and parents, emphasising the importance of intentional media selection and pedagogical guidance in moral education.

Future research could extend this work by incorporating observational methods, expanding the participant pool across different regions, and examining the long-term behavioural effects of music-based moral instruction. As children's media continues to evolve in digital contexts,

sustained scholarly attention to the moral dimensions of musical content will remain essential for supporting ethical development in culturally and religiously diverse societies.

Acknowledgements

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