



Mapping the Knowledge Evolution of Character Education in Islamic Religious Studies: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

This study maps the development, intellectual structure, and thematic evolution of research on character education within Islamic Religious Studies using a bibliometric approach. A total of 157 Scopus-indexed documents published between 2015 and 2025 were analyzed. The dataset was processed using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny in R and VOSviewer v.1.6.20 to examine publication growth, source distribution, influential documents, keyword co-occurrence, thematic mapping, and collaboration patterns. The findings show that research on Islamic education and character education has grown rapidly, with an annual growth rate of 40.51% and publications distributed across 88 sources. The field is strongly shaped by Southeast Asian scholarship, particularly Indonesia, while international collaboration remains relatively limited at 15.29%. The most frequent keywords include Islamic education, character education, Islamic religious education, Indonesia, higher education, religious moderation, and Islamic boarding school, indicating a concentration on value formation, institutional contexts, and moral-religious education. The thematic map suggests that education, character, and Indonesia function as central motor themes, whereas Islamic values, curriculum, and educational technology appear as more specialized or emerging areas. However, the absence of cited-reference metadata in the exported dataset limits the extent to which co-citation-based intellectual structures can be inferred. This study contributes a data-driven overview of the research landscape and identifies future directions for strengthening comparative, interdisciplinary, and internationally collaborative studies on character education in Islamic Religious Studies.

1. Introduction

In the last decade, character education has regained scholarly and policy attention because education systems are increasingly expected to cultivate not only academic competence but also moral integrity, civic responsibility, and social sensitivity. In Islamic education, this concern is closely related to *akhlaq*, *adab*, and *ihsan*, which frame character formation as both an ethical and spiritual process. Islamic Religious Studies (IRS) is therefore not merely a subject area concerned with doctrinal knowledge; it is also a pedagogical space in which learners encounter moral reasoning, religious values, and social responsibility (Abdullah, 2014; Hashim et al., 2021).

Existing scholarship on character education in Islamic contexts has expanded across several streams, including curriculum integration, teacher role modelling, *pesantren*-based values education, religious moderation, and moral habituation (Mujahid, 2021; Solihin et al., 2020). However, the literature remains dispersed across educational, theological, and socio-cultural domains. Many studies offer normative arguments

or case-based findings, but fewer studies show how the broader academic conversation has developed across authors, institutions, countries, sources, and keywords over time. This fragmentation makes it difficult to identify the dominant knowledge base, the most visible research themes, and the emerging directions of the field.

Character education is generally understood as an intentional and systematic effort to strengthen moral reasoning, emotional awareness, responsible conduct, and civic virtues (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; McGrath et al., 2021). In Islamic thought, the concept overlaps with *akhlaq*, which refers to the cultivation of virtuous dispositions that guide conduct toward moral excellence and social harmony. The pedagogical foundation of Islamic character education often integrates *tarbiyah*, *ta'dib*, and *ta'lim*, linking knowledge acquisition with ethical formation and practical conduct (Kistoro et al., 2023).

Recent studies also indicate that Islamic character education is increasingly connected to contemporary issues such as multicultural education, religious moderation, digital ethics, higher education, and student-centered pedagogy. This shift suggests that the field is moving beyond a purely normative orientation toward a more applied and interdisciplinary discourse. Nevertheless, the extent of this shift needs to be examined systematically through bibliometric evidence rather than inferred from selective readings of individual studies.

Bibliometric analysis provides a suitable method for mapping this development because it allows researchers to describe publication patterns, collaboration structures, keyword networks, and thematic evolution in a transparent and reproducible manner (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021). In this study, bibliometrics is used not to replace qualitative interpretation but to provide a structured overview of how character education within Islamic Religious Studies has evolved between 2015 and 2025. The analysis is especially useful for identifying which themes are already well established, which areas remain peripheral, and where future research may contribute more substantially.

This study aims to map and analyze the evolution of knowledge on character education in Islamic Religious Studies from 2015 to 2025 using Scopus-indexed literature. Specifically, the study addresses three research questions: RQ1: How has research on character education in Islamic Religious Studies evolved in terms of publication trends, document types, sources, and collaboration patterns during 2015-2025? RQ2: What conceptual and thematic structures are reflected in keyword co-occurrence, thematic mapping, and factorial analysis of the field? RQ3: How have research themes and keyword linkages evolved over time, and what topics suggest future directions for character education in Islamic Religious Studies?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative bibliometric design to examine patterns of knowledge production, thematic concentration, and collaboration in research on character education within Islamic Religious Studies. Bibliometric analysis was selected because it enables a systematic evaluation of publication metadata and visualizes relationships among authors, sources, countries, and keywords (Donthu et al., 2021). The analysis combined performance analysis and science mapping. Performance analysis described productivity and visibility indicators, while science mapping explored keyword co-occurrence, thematic development, collaboration networks, and conceptual structures.

2.2. Data Source and Search Strategy

The data were retrieved from the Scopus database, which was selected because of its broad coverage of peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and scholarly books in education and social science (Aghaei Chadegani et al., 2013). The search strategy used Boolean operators in the title, abstract, and keyword fields: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("character education" AND "Islamic education") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Islamic character education" OR "religious character formation") AND PUBYEAR > 2014 AND PUBYEAR < 2026. The retrieval was conducted after the 2025 publication window had been indexed. The initial search yielded 157 documents covering the period 2015-2025.

2.3. Document Selection Flow

The document-selection procedure was organized to ensure transparency from identification to final analysis. Because the Scopus export did not contain duplicate entries and all retrieved records matched the broad topical scope after title-abstract screening, the final analytical corpus remained 157 documents. The flowchart below summarizes the selection process.

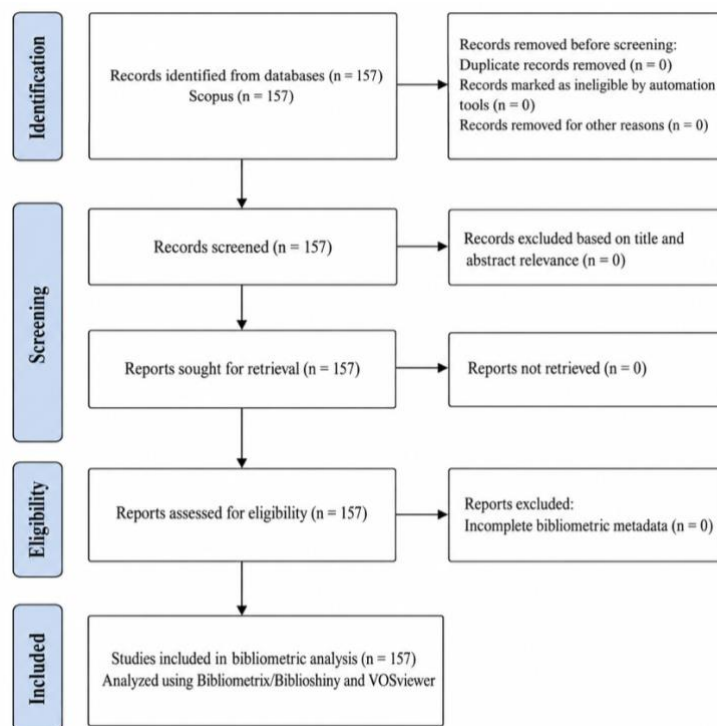


Figure 1. Flowchart of Document Selection for Bibliometric Analysis

2.4. Data Cleaning and Preparation

All records were exported in CSV and BibTeX formats for compatibility with Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny and VOSviewer v.1.6.20. Data cleaning involved checking duplicate records, normalizing author names, standardizing institutional and country names, and harmonizing keywords with similar meanings. For example, terms such as moral education, character building, and character education were examined to avoid fragmented interpretation when they referred to closely related concepts. This preprocessing improved consistency in frequency analysis, thematic mapping, and network visualization.

2.5. Analytical Techniques

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, performance analysis was used to describe the number of documents, annual growth rate, document types, sources, authorship patterns, citation indicators, and country collaboration. Second, science mapping was used to examine keyword co-occurrence, thematic maps, trend topics, conceptual structure, and collaboration networks. The keyword threshold was set to include terms with sufficient recurrence for meaningful visualization. Since the exported Scopus dataset recorded References = 0, reference-based co-citation analysis was not interpreted as a primary basis for intellectual-structure claims. Instead, the intellectual and conceptual structure was discussed mainly through keyword networks, thematic maps, most cited documents, and collaboration patterns.

2.6. Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

Analytical reliability was strengthened through triangulation between Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny and VOSviewer outputs. Manual inspection was conducted to ensure that keyword clusters were substantively meaningful and not merely algorithmic artifacts. The study used publicly available bibliographic metadata and did not involve human participants; therefore, formal ethical clearance was not required. Nevertheless, the interpretation was kept proportionate to the available metadata to avoid overclaiming causal relationships or thematic dominance beyond what the bibliometric evidence can support.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Main Information of the Dataset

The dataset consists of 157 documents published across 88 sources during 2015-2025 (see Table 1). The annual growth rate of 40.51% indicates a rapid increase in scholarly attention, but this figure should be read carefully because the field begins from a relatively small publication base. The average document age of 2.71 years and the average citation count of 4.051 per document suggest that many publications are recent and have

had limited time to accumulate citations. Therefore, citation-based visibility should be interpreted as early influence rather than settled scholarly authority.

The authorship profile shows 526 authors, 3.54 co-authors per document, and 15.29% international co-authorship. These figures indicate an active collaborative culture, although collaboration appears to be stronger within national or regional networks than across broader international partnerships. The dominance of journal articles (141 documents) suggests that the field is primarily disseminated through peer-reviewed article formats, while conference papers, book chapters, reviews, and books remain relatively minor components of the corpus.

Table 1. Main Information of the Bibliometric Dataset

Description	Result
Timespan	2015:2025
Sources (journals, books, etc.)	88
Documents	157
Annual growth rate	40.51%
Document average age	2.71 years
Average citations per document	4.051
References in exported metadata	0
Keywords Plus	62
Author's keywords	531
Authors	526
Authors of single-authored documents	26
Single-authored documents	28
Co-authors per document	3.54
International co-authorship	15.29%
Document types	141 articles; 8 conference papers; 5 book chapters; 2 reviews; 1 book

3.2. Three-Field Plot

The three-field plot links author affiliations, countries, and dominant terms (see Figure 2). The strongest flow is connected to Indonesian institutions and the keyword cluster around Islamic education, character, and religious education. This pattern indicates that the topic has a strong Indonesian empirical base. However, the visualization should not be read as evidence that Indonesia alone defines the field; rather, it shows that Indonesian institutions are the most visible contributors in this particular Scopus dataset.

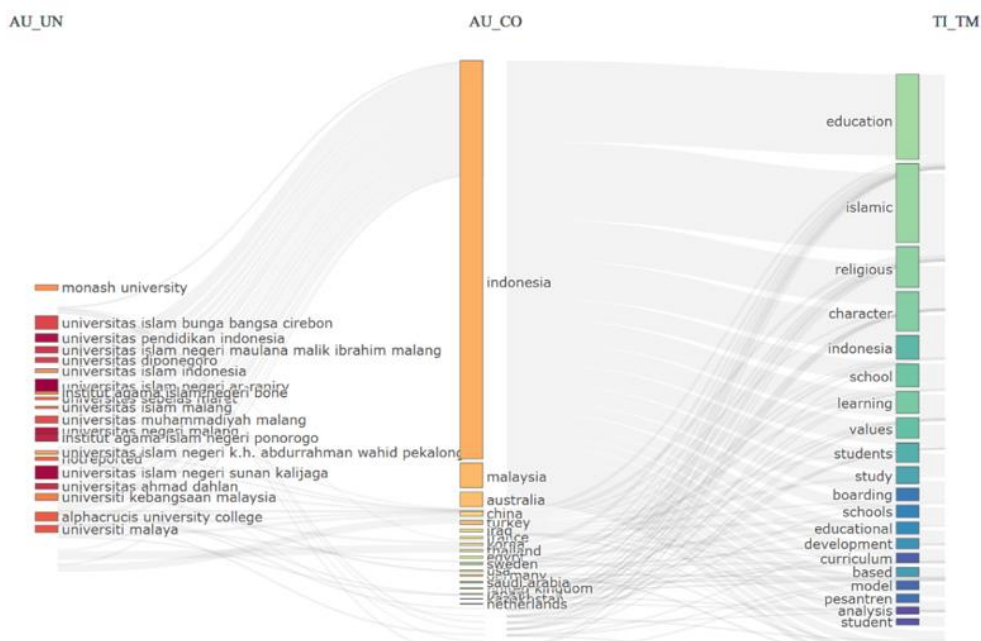


Figure 2. Three-Field Plot of Affiliations, Countries, and Keywords

3.3. Most Globally Cited Documents

The most globally cited documents are concentrated in recent publications from 2019-2024, with Latipah et al. (2020), Mahmudah and Nurhayati (2021), Hastasari (2022), and Taufik (2020) appearing among the most visible works (see Figure 3). The relatively recent publication years suggest that citation accumulation is still

developing. Consequently, these documents can be interpreted as currently visible references within the dataset, not necessarily as definitive canonical works for the entire field.

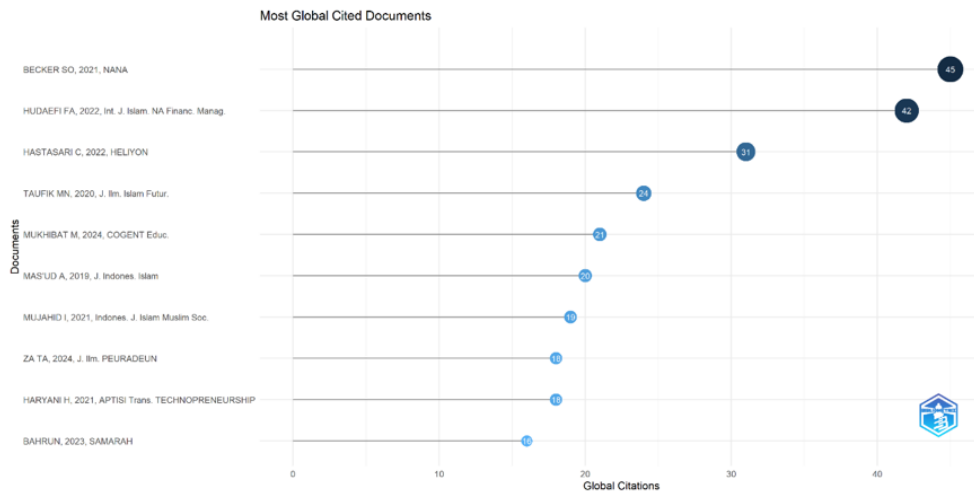


Figure 3. Most Globally Cited Documents

3.4. Most Frequent Words

The most frequent words show that Islamic education is the dominant term, followed by character education, education, Islamic religious education, and Indonesia (see Figure 4). This distribution confirms that the corpus is centered on the relationship between Islamic educational contexts and character formation. The presence of higher education, religious education, Islamic boarding school, and AI also suggests that the field is beginning to connect values education with institutional level, pedagogy, and emerging technological concerns.

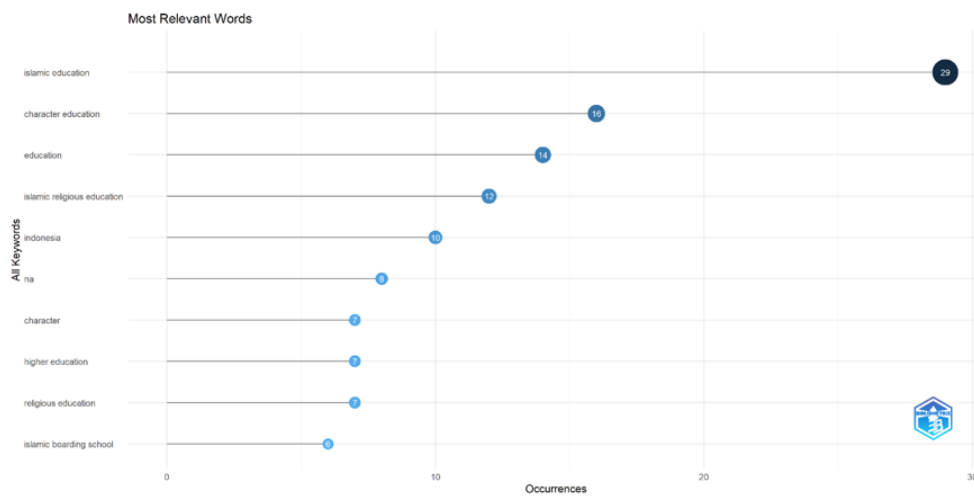


Figure 4. Most Frequent Words in the Dataset

3.5. Word Cloud

The word cloud visually reinforces the dominance of Islamic education and character education (see Figure 5). While word clouds are useful for displaying frequency, they do not show conceptual relationships or theoretical depth. For that reason, the word cloud is interpreted together with co-occurrence networks and thematic maps to avoid reducing the field to isolated keywords.

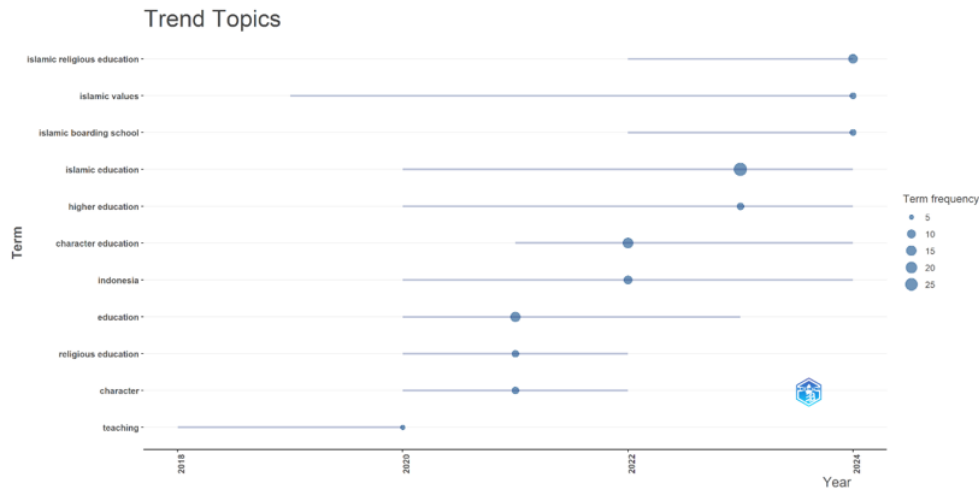


Figure 7. Trend Topics in the Dataset

3.8. Co-occurrence Network

The co-occurrence network places Islamic education near the center of the keyword structure, linking it with religious education, character education, curriculum, multicultural education, and Indonesia (see Figure 8). This indicates that Islamic education functions as a bridging concept connecting moral, curricular, institutional, and socio-cultural concerns. Peripheral clusters, such as boarding school, independence, and specific pedagogical terms, show that some subthemes are present but not yet strongly integrated with the main discourse.

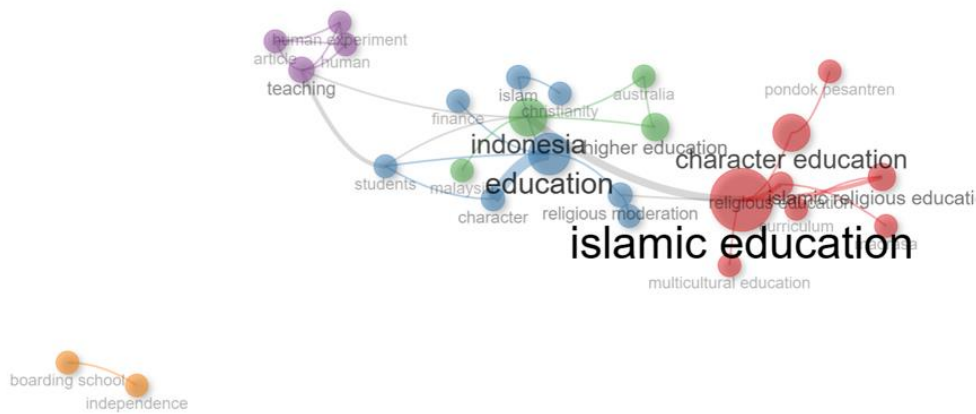


Figure 8. Keyword Co-occurrence Network

3.9. Thematic Map

The thematic map identifies education, character, and Indonesia as motor themes with relatively high centrality and development (see Figure 9). Islamic education, character education, and religious education appear as basic themes, meaning that they are central but still open to deeper theoretical and methodological elaboration. Islamic values, curriculum, and education computing appear as more specialized areas. These results support a careful conclusion: the field has a strong thematic foundation, but some promising areas require more sustained and comparative research.

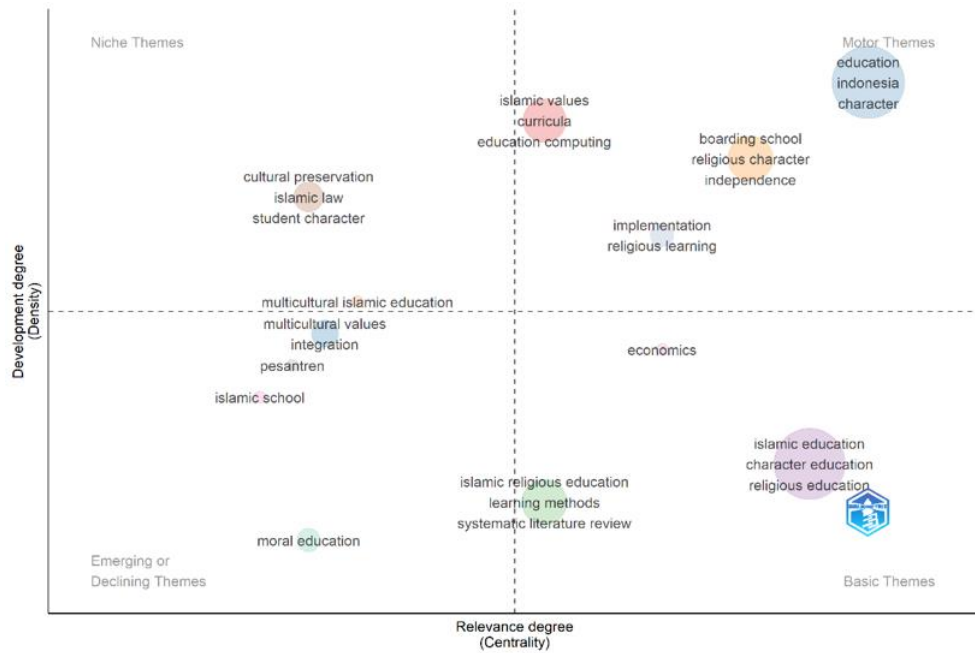


Figure 9. Thematic Map of Research Themes

3.10. Thematic Evolution

The thematic evolution map indicates that the field moved from broader themes such as character education, moral education, and higher education toward more focused themes including Islamic education, Islamic values, moral education, and Islamic boarding schools (see Figure 10). This narrowing can be interpreted as consolidation, but it may also reflect the search strategy and the dominance of Indonesian research contexts in the dataset. Therefore, the evolution should be read as a pattern within this corpus rather than as a universal trend in all Islamic education scholarship.

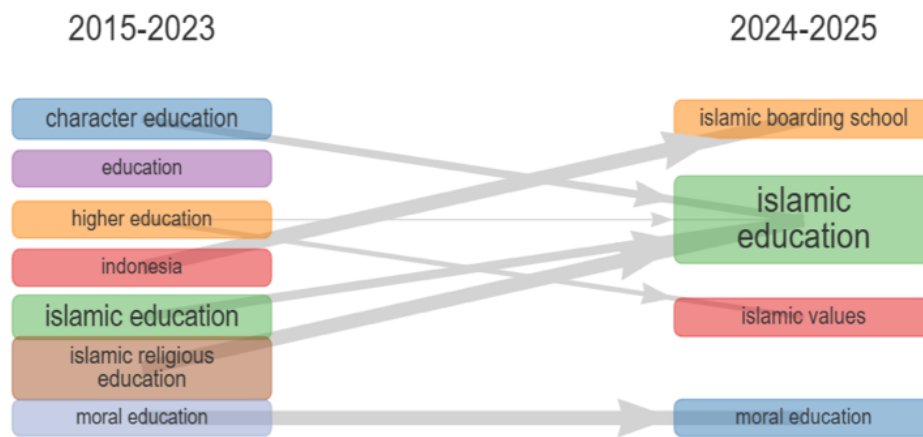


Figure 10. Thematic Evolution Across Periods

3.11. Factorial Analysis Topic Dendrogram

The factorial analysis topic dendrogram groups keywords based on conceptual proximity (see Figure 11). A large cluster connects religious education, Islamic character, curriculum, students, management, Islamic values, religious moderation, and Islamic boarding schools. This suggests that character education is often discussed through curriculum, institutional management, and value internalization. More distant terms, such as Australia, Christianity, radicalism, and human experimentation, appear as specialized or context-specific topics with weaker integration into the core conceptual structure.

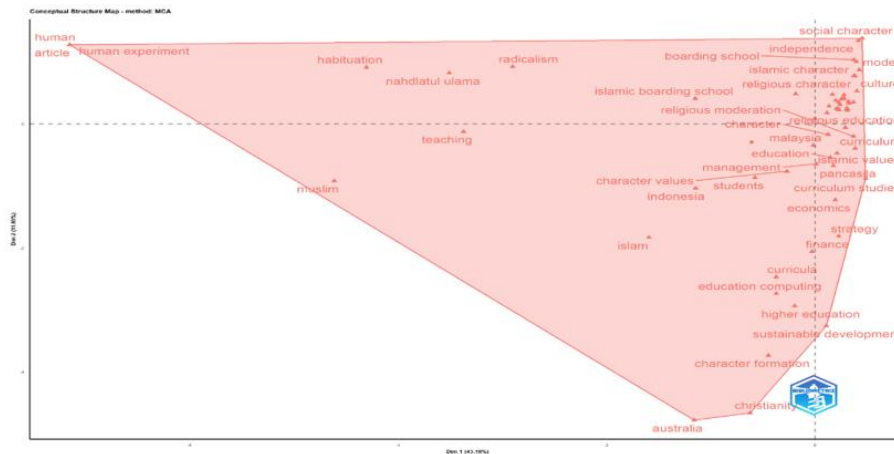


Figure 11. Factorial Analysis Topic Dendrogram

3.12. Collaboration Network

The collaboration network shows several productive clusters rather than one fully integrated scholarly community (see Figure 12). Authors such as Kistoro HCA, Masduki Y, Latipah E, Rahmi S, Arifin Z, Firdaus E, and Syafei M appear as important nodes within their respective clusters. The limited interconnection among clusters suggests that the field would benefit from broader cross-institutional and cross-country collaboration, especially for comparative studies that can test whether findings from Indonesia and Malaysia apply in other Muslim-minority or multicultural contexts.

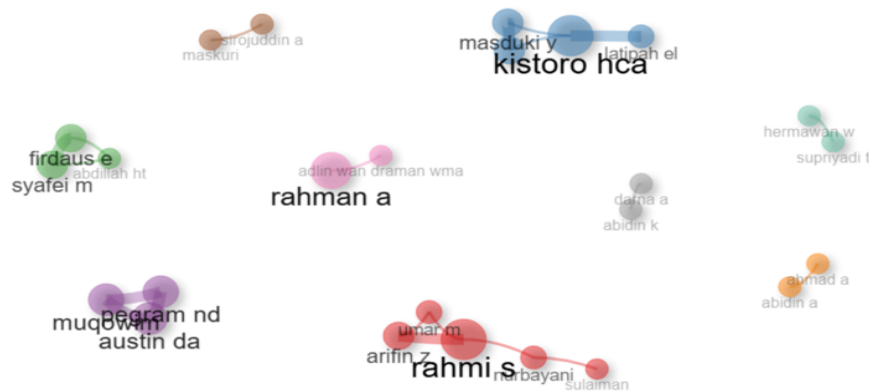


Figure 12. Author Collaboration Network

3.13. Countries Collaboration World Map

The country collaboration map positions Indonesia as the most visible center of collaboration in the dataset, with links to Malaysia, Australia, Middle Eastern countries, East Asia, Europe, and the United States (see Figure 13). This indicates international reach, although the overall international co-authorship rate of 15.29% shows that global collaboration is still moderate. Thus, Indonesia can be described as a major contributor within this corpus but claims about global leadership should be made cautiously unless supported by broader multi-database evidence.



Figure 13. Country Collaboration World Map

3.14. Discussion

Overall, the bibliometric findings indicate that research on character education in Islamic Religious Studies has become more visible during the last decade, especially through publications connected to Indonesian and Southeast Asian institutions. This growth pattern is consistent with prior Scopus-based bibliometric studies showing that Islamic education research has expanded through geographically concentrated but increasingly diversified publication networks (Asari et al., 2024; Kistoro et al., 2023; Nirwana et al., 2024; Supriyadi et al., 2024). The annual growth rate in the present dataset therefore suggests an expanding field; however, because many documents are recent and have had limited time to accumulate citations, citation indicators should be interpreted as early visibility rather than settled intellectual authority (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Cater, 2015).

The conceptual structure is anchored in the relationship between Islamic education, character education, religious education, Islamic values, and Indonesia. This structure is theoretically plausible because character education is commonly framed as the intentional cultivation of moral reasoning, virtue, social responsibility, and ethical action (Arthur et al., 2017; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; McGrath et al., 2021). In Islamic education, this orientation overlaps with *akhlaq*, *adab*, *ta'dib*, and value internalization, where moral formation is not an auxiliary objective but a central educational purpose (Abdullah, 2014; Hasan, 2020; Hashim et al., 2021; Kistoro et al., 2023). Thus, the dominance of keywords such as Islamic education, character education, Islamic religious education, and Islamic values reflect a substantive pedagogical concern rather than merely a terminological concentration.

The emergence of higher education, religious moderation, curriculum, AI, and education computing in the keyword structure indicates that the field is beginning to connect Islamic character education with contemporary educational challenges. Similar trends have been reported in bibliometric and review studies that identify religious moderation, institutional reform, curriculum integration, and technology-mediated learning as growing concerns in Islamic education scholarship (Hasan & Juhannis, 2024; Asari et al., 2024; Supriyadi et al., 2024). These findings suggest that Islamic character education is moving from a predominantly normative discourse toward more applied and interdisciplinary conversations. Nevertheless, the field still requires stronger empirical designs, comparative studies, and cross-national collaboration to test whether findings from Indonesian and Malaysian settings are transferable to Muslim-minority, multicultural, or secular education contexts.

A key limitation of the current dataset is the absence of cited-reference metadata in the exported file. This restricts the ability to make strong claims about co-citation structures or intellectual foundations based on reference linkages. Bibliometric methodologists caution that co-citation, bibliographic coupling, keyword co-occurrence, and thematic mapping capture different dimensions of a field and should not be treated as interchangeable evidence (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Cobo et al., 2011; Donthu et al., 2021; van Eck & Waltman, 2010). For that reason, the present discussion emphasizes keyword co-occurrence, thematic maps, document visibility, and collaboration networks. This cautious interpretation is important because bibliometric maps can be overread as evidence of theoretical dominance, whereas they primarily indicate patterns in available metadata.

Theoretically, the study shows that Islamic character education operates as a dialogical knowledge domain: it is grounded in Islamic ethical concepts such as *akhlaq* and *adab* while also engaging contemporary educational issues such as curriculum reform, religious moderation, student development, digital ethics, and educational technology. Practically, the findings can guide curriculum designers, teacher educators, and policymakers in identifying which themes have become central and which require further development. The moderate level of international collaboration also suggests the need for joint research across Muslim-majority

and Muslim-minority contexts so that the field does not remain overly dependent on a limited regional evidence base. Strengthening international co-authorship would also improve theoretical comparison, methodological diversity, and the visibility of Islamic character education within broader moral and religious education scholarship (Llorent-Bedmar et al., 2021; Zupic & Cater, 2015).

This study has several limitations. First, the corpus is limited to Scopus-indexed documents, which may exclude relevant studies published in regional databases, Arabic-language journals, Indonesian repositories, and non-indexed Islamic education journals. Second, the search string focuses on character education and Islamic education, so related terms such as *akhlaq* education, moral formation, adab, values education, and virtue education may not be fully captured unless indexed in titles, abstracts, or keywords. Third, the absence of cited-reference metadata prevents stronger co-citation analysis. Future studies should use multi-database datasets, multilingual search terms, and complete cited-reference exports. Combining bibliometrics with systematic literature review or content analysis would also help explain not only what themes appear, but how concepts of character, morality, and Islamic values are theoretically framed and pedagogically implemented (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Cater, 2015).

4. Conclusion

This study provides a bibliometric mapping of 157 Scopus-indexed documents on character education in Islamic Religious Studies published between 2015 and 2025. The results show rapid publication growth, a strong concentration of contributions from Indonesia and Southeast Asia, and a thematic core centered on Islamic education, character education, Islamic religious education, Indonesia, Islamic values, and Islamic boarding schools. The field shows meaningful development, but its intellectual structure should be interpreted cautiously because the dataset is dominated by recent documents and lacks cited-reference metadata. The findings suggest that character education within Islamic Religious Studies is moving toward more specific institutional and pedagogical concerns, including *pesantren*, higher education, religious moderation, curriculum, and emerging digital contexts. To strengthen the field, future research should expand beyond single-database bibliometrics, build comparative international collaborations, and integrate bibliometric findings with qualitative or mixed-methods analysis. Such efforts would provide a more nuanced understanding of how Islamic ethical values are conceptualized, taught, and transformed within contemporary education systems.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to this paper. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/ or publication of this article.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/ or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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