

From Online Learning to Digital Alienation: Post-Pandemic Mental Health among Indonesian Youth

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia is currently confronting a critical youth mental health crisis, marked by a disturbing escalation in suicide cases among children and adolescents between 2023 and 2026. This trend, corroborated by the 2025–2026 National Health Screening Program (CKG) which identified mental health distress in nearly 10% of 7 million screened children, is deeply linked to the forced immersion of youth into digital environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study investigates the long-term consequences of this forced transition by analyzing the relationship between prolonged online learning, social isolation, and emerging psychosocial vulnerabilities. Utilizing a mixed-methods convergent design, this research integrates primary data from a September 2020 survey, "Kisahku di Jaman Covid" (N=107), with contemporary case illustrations, including the 2025 SMAN 72 Jakarta bombing and tragic instances of student suicide in 2025–2026. The findings reveal that even in 2020, 74.6% of students experienced significant dissatisfaction with online learning due to social isolation, emotional exhaustion, and boredom. Over time, this digital-only interaction intensified screen dependency and eroded real-world social resilience, which, when combined with unaddressed academic and social pressures, contributed to the current post-pandemic vulnerabilities. Conceptualized as "digital alienation," this state reflects the normalization of fragmented virtual interaction and the erosion of communal social relations essential to Indonesian childhood. To address these systemic risks, this article proposes a Relational Recovery Education Policy (RREP), emphasizing the urgent rehumanization of learning environments, critical digital literacy, and the integration of robust mental health support within educational and communal institutions.

Keywords: youth mental health; digital alienation; online learning; suicide prevention; Relational Recovery Education Policy (RREP)

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is confronting a significant youth mental health crisis in the post-pandemic era. Data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) highlight over 100–116 child and adolescent suicide cases recorded between 2023 and 2026, positioning Indonesia with one of the highest rates in Southeast Asia. The 2025–2026 National Health Screening Program (Cek Kesehatan Gratis/CKG), covering approximately 7 million children, identified mental health distress indicators in nearly 10% of participants. Specifically, the Ministry of Health reported 4.4% (around 338,000 children) showing symptoms of anxiety disorders and 4.8% (around 363,000 children) exhibiting depressive disorders. Global School-Based Student Health Survey data further reveal a sharp rise in suicide attempts among students, increasing from 3.9% in 2015 to 10.7% in 2023. These alarming trends underscore a profound public health challenge that extends beyond immediate clinical symptoms to deeper disruptions in social, emotional, and spiritual development. Evidence from the Indonesia National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS) further highlights the magnitude of the crisis. Conducted as the first nationally representative adolescent mental health survey in Indonesia, the study estimated that approximately one in three adolescents experienced mental health problems within the previous twelve months, while around one in twenty met the criteria for a diagnosable mental disorder. Despite the substantial burden, treatment-seeking behavior remained remarkably low, indicating a significant gap between mental health needs and access to professional support. These findings suggest that the post-pandemic escalation of youth psychological distress is occurring within an already vulnerable mental health ecosystem.

This paper hypothesizes that the sharp escalation in mental health disorders is closely linked to children's forced immersion into digital environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. The abrupt transition from face-to-face schooling to mandatory online learning (2020–2021) did more than alter pedagogical delivery; it fundamentally dismantled schools as primary sites of social infrastructure. In Indonesia's communal social context—where schools integrate academic learning, religious interaction (ta'aruf), peer bonding, moral formation, and collective identity—this shift transformed vibrant physical spaces into fragmented digital routines.

- Key Supporting Studies (Global and Indonesia-Specific):
- A meta-analysis by Racine et al. (2021) found that pooled prevalence of clinically elevated depression and anxiety symptoms among children and adolescents doubled during the pandemic to 25.2% and 20.5%, respectively. jamanetwork.com
 - Indonesian studies, such as those by Nuryana et al. (2022) and Saputra et al. (2021), documented high levels of stress, depression, boredom, and perceptions of online learning as ineffective and isolating. [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/) +1
 - UNICEF-Gallup data indicated that nearly one in three young Indonesians (29%) often felt depressed or uninterested during the pandemic [unicef.org](https://data.unicef.org/)
 - Longitudinal and cross-sectional research links prolonged virtual learning to reduced social connection, higher mental health problems, and learning fatigue (e.g., UC Davis study, 2022; various Indonesian vocational and nursing student studies). ucdavis.edu

During the pandemic, schools ceased functioning as physical social institutions and were replaced by screen-mediated interaction. Classrooms that previously supported peer bonding, emotional socialization, discipline formation, collective rituals, and everyday friendship were fragmented into domestic and digital routines. Additional evidence from Indonesian psychiatric services further strengthens concerns regarding the long-term impact of digital immersion on youth mental health. Reports from RSJ

Cisarua, West Java, documented 209 child patients experiencing severe gadget dependency and associated mental health disorders between 2016 and the early pandemic period. More concerning, during January–February 2021 alone, approximately 200 children required outpatient treatment, while several required inpatient psychiatric care due to gadget addiction accompanied by severe emotional and behavioral disturbances. Most patients were between 11 and 15 years old. Similar patterns were reported by RSJ Menur in East Java, where child and adolescent psychiatric services recorded thousands of annual visits, with concentration difficulties, social anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and tantrums related to excessive digital exposure becoming increasingly common clinical complaints. These observations suggest that the educational digitalization triggered by the pandemic evolved into a broader psychosocial and public health challenge affecting child development and social adaptation. In Indonesia’s communal context, this virtualization carried particular significance. It changed how children encountered teachers, peers, authority, friendship, time, and themselves. Global studies have documented increases in loneliness, anxiety, depression, stress, problematic internet use, cyberbullying, and emotional fatigue among adolescents during and after the pandemic (Catling et al., 2022; Drazenovic et al., 2023; Fischer-Grote et al., 2024; Marciano et al., 2022). However, much of this literature focuses on psychological symptoms rather than the underlying social mechanisms through which digital schooling reshaped relational life.

In Indonesia, childhood and adolescence are embedded in dense communal structures involving family, school, religion (mosque/church activities), neighborhood, and peer networks. Schools often serve as crucibles for *sakinah* (tranquility) through collective worship, moral learning, and social belonging—elements emphasized in Islamic Psychology (Al-Ghazali, 2010; Rothman & Coyle, 2018; Haque, 2022). The sudden displacement of these structures into digital platforms left children technically connected but socially and emotionally disconnected. This article conceptualizes that condition as digital alienation: a paradoxical state in which young people maintain digital connectivity while experiencing diminished embodied presence, weakened relational depth, and reduced capacity for real-world social resilience. Compulsory online learning contributed to relational disruption whose consequences continue to manifest in post-pandemic vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic produced one of the most disruptive educational transformations in modern history. In Indonesia, millions of students were suddenly removed from classrooms. While justified as a public health necessity, its longer-term social and psychological costs have become evident.

Literature Gap

Existing scholarship on COVID-19 and youth mental health falls into three broad categories: (1) psychological studies on anxiety, depression, and stress (Soria & Horgos, 2021; Catling et al., 2022; Wiguna et al., 2020); (2) media/communication research on social media use and digital dependency (Drazenovic et al., 2023; Marciano et al., 2022); and (3) educational studies on learning loss, technological inequality, and pedagogical adaptation. Important gaps persist. Few studies longitudinally connect 2020–2021 online learning experiences with post-pandemic adolescent mental health in Indonesia or the Global South. Many treat online learning merely as an external stressor, overlooking how digital platforms restructure social relationships, identity formation, and communal belonging. The concept of digital alienation remains underdeveloped, especially in culturally grounded Southeast Asian contexts. Children’s direct voices from the pandemic period are underrepresented, with reliance on adult or institutional reports. This study addresses these gaps by integrating children’s real-time narratives from the “Kisahku di

Jaman Covid” survey with theoretical frameworks of digital alienation, relational divergence, and technological co-optation. It reframes online learning as a profound social condition that reshaped children’s relational worlds.

Research Objectives and Questions

1. Map the subjective experiences of Indonesian school-aged children during mandatory online learning.
2. Analyze how prolonged digital learning disrupted social relationships and generated digital alienation.
3. Propose a culturally grounded relational recovery policy framework for post-pandemic youth mental health in Indonesia.

Research Questions:

1. How did online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic generate digital alienation among Indonesian youth, and what are its long-term implications for mental health in the post-pandemic period?
2. What educational and policy models are needed to reduce digital alienation and strengthen youth mental health recovery in Indonesia?

This article advances three core arguments. First, compulsory online learning intensified digital alienation by severing children from peer communities, embodied classroom interactions, collective routines, and informal socialization. Second, prolonged gadget dependency normalized controlled, fragmented interactions, creating relational divergence between digital convenience and face-to-face social competence. Third, in Indonesia’s communal-cultural context—rich in religious and social interdependence—the disruption of school, religious practice, and family routines generated relational trauma with lasting mental health consequences. These dynamics are not merely additive stressors but represent a systemic restructuring of childhood social ecology. Recovery requires more than academic remediation; it demands deliberate restoration of embodied presence, communal belonging, and spiritual equilibrium.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Alienation: Theological, Philosophical, and Relational Foundations

The concept of alienation (*Entfremdung*) occupies a foundational position within the trajectories of theological, philosophical, and sosiological discourse. In Abrahamic traditions, the ontological roots of alienation are traced back to the primordial rupture in the Garden of Eden—a cataclysmic moment of transgression that triggered humanity’s eviction and subsequent estrangement from the Divine. Ephesians 4:18 explicitly delineates this existential state as one characterized by a darkened understanding and a hardened heart, culminating in a profound alienation from the life of God (Schacht, 2007).

In his seminal treatise *Alienation* (2007), Richard Schacht offers one of the most comprehensive analytical deconstructions of the term. Etymologically rooted in the Latin *alienare*—meaning to transfer ownership to another, to estrange, or to withdraw—the term has been actively deployed in English since

the 12th–15th centuries, and in German (*Entfremdung*) since the medieval epoch. Schacht bifurcates the practical applications of alienation into three core dimensions:

1. The legalistic transfer of property rights (*transfer of ownership*)
2. Psychological pathology (*mental disturbance*)
3. Interpersonal detachment (*interpersonal estrangement*)

This study restricts its analytical focus exclusively to the relational and interpersonal dimension.

Drawing from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (as cited in Schacht, 2007, p. 15), to alienate is "to turn away in feeling or affection; to make hostile or unfriendly." Within human relationships, alienation manifests as the crystallization or absolute severance of interhuman bonds.

G.W.F. Hegel's dialectical philosophy, as interpreted by Schacht (2007, pp. 52–53), provides critical conceptual depth: although humans exist as individuated agents, their essential realization (*Geist* or spirit) necessitates absolute integration with the broader social substance. Hegel distinguishes between self-alienation (*Selbstentfremdung*) and the atomization born from losing unity with communal structures. True self-actualization emerges only through the rigorous dialectical interplay between individual consciousness and active communal belonging.

This Hegelian framework finds a compelling synthesis within the paradigm of Islamic Psychology. The ontological equilibrium of the *nafs* (psyche/self) and the *qalb* (spiritual heart) is fundamentally relational, spiritual, and collectivistic. Al-Ghazali (2010) posited that *sakinah* (psycho-spiritual tranquility) is not cultivated in isolation; rather, it is dynamically stimulated through physical proximity, collective rituals, contemplation of the natural order, and harmonious social interactions. When these organic conduits are disrupted, an internal fragmentation of the self becomes inevitable.

Contemporary Islamic psychological frameworks (Rothman & Coyle, 2018; Haque, 2022; Awaad et al.) reinforce this thesis, asserting that psychological wellbeing is inextricably bound to the socio-spiritual fabric of the *ummah* (community). Furthermore, empirical scholarship highlights how religious coping mechanisms served as a vital structural buffer against severe mental health challenges among Muslim populations during the acute crises of the COVID-19 pandemic (Awaad, 2020s studies via Yaqeen Institute).

Digital Media: Characteristics, Networking Logic, and the Transformation of Identity

Digital media, as conceptualized by Manovich (2001) and Miller (2011), is fundamentally defined by numerical representation, wherein all data is encoded into binary scripts (0s and 1s). This intrinsic characteristic renders digital content entirely programmable: it can be infinitely manipulated, duplicated, and distributed across disparate platforms instantaneously. Digital environments operate through an overarching networking logic (Hardiman, 2010), emerging from the structural convergence of computational automation and global information transmission. Originally engineered as a decentralized military communication grid, the internet has mutated into a pervasive global infrastructure that reconfigures human connectivity.

Within virtual spaces, the construction of identity undergoes a radical ontological shift compared to the physical world. To understand this paradigm shift, the table below delineates the structural divergences between virtual and embodied identities:

Analytical Dimension	Virtual Identity (Digital Space)	Embodied Identity (Physical World)
Ontological Nature	Fluid, hyper-mutable, and predominantly anonymous (Miller, 2011).	Relationally, historically, and geographically contingent (Ricoeur, 1992).
Agency of Control	Exceptionally high; meticulously curated via text, digital filters, and avatars.	Low to moderate; bound to biological and corporeal realities that resist instant manipulation.
Validation Mechanism	Quantifiable platform metrics (e.g., likes, shares, views, algorithmic visibility).	Sustained discursive practices and continuous, face-to-face social negotiation.

This structural polarization induces a phenomenon termed relational divergence—a widening chasm between easily managed, friction-free digital interactions and the messy, unpredictable complexities of embodied social life.

Socialization as an Imperative Human Need and the Digital Disruption

Human beings are fundamentally *zoon politikon*. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Ross, 2009), argued that friendship (*philia*) is an indispensable prerequisite for human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) across the life course. He famously observed that without friends, "no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods." Within the Islamic tradition, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) structurally operationalized the power of community through the institution of companionship with his *sahabah* (companions), reinforcing the doctrine that relational solidarity is the foundational cornerstone of communal resilience. Sociologically, socialization operates through three tightly interwoven mechanisms: the internalization of institutional norms, the imitation of significant others, and the critical evaluation of collective values. The domestic sphere operates as the primary arena of socialization, followed sequentially by academic and religious institutions. The ascendancy of digital environments destabilizes this process by institutionalizing low-friction, ego-centric modes of interaction. In the virtual realm, interpersonal bonds can be initiated, maintained, or terminated unilaterally with negligible emotional overhead.

Turkle (2011) masterfully captures this contemporary paradox through her thesis of being "*alone together*." While digital technologies promise omnipresent connectivity, they simultaneously dilute the depth, immediacy, and vulnerability of authentic relational life. Individuals are rendered "lonely but fearful of intimacy," systematically substituting the emotional demands and ambiguities of face-to-face encounters with highly curated, screen-mediated interactions.

Online Learning, Youth Mental Health, and Post-Pandemic Pathologies

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a historical rupture, forcing over 1.6 billion learners globally into mandatory remote or hybrid educational modalities. While this digital migration preserved instructional continuity, a robust body of empirical evidence documents its severe toll on youth psychopathology. Global meta-analyses reveal that clinical symptoms of depression and anxiety among children and adolescents

approximately doubled during the pandemic (Racine et al., 2021). Prolonged compulsory online learning has been rigorously linked to exponential increases in screen exposure, acute social isolation, the collapse of diurnal routines, academic overload, technological inequality, and heightened existential uncertainty (Marciano et al., 2022; Metherell et al., 2022; UC Davis, 2022).

Crucially, schools do not operate merely as mechanical venues for curriculum delivery. In Indonesia's highly communal ecosystem, academic institutions function as vital multi-dimensional hubs that integrate cognitive development, peer bonding, moral formation, religious socialization, and the construction of collective identity.

The radical virtualization of schooling compressed these rich, organic interactions into thin, screen-mediated interfaces. Consequently, the informal dimensions of the educational ecology—spontaneous peer dialogues, subtle emotional semiotics, collective rituals, and unstructured play—were systematically excised from the child's daily life (Nuryana et al., 2025; Pham et al., 2024).

Emerging empirical studies from Indonesia and the broader Southeast Asian region validate a stark post-pandemic landscape characterized by elevated academic stress, chronic burnout, pervasive loneliness, learning fatigue, and a quantifiable attrition of psychological resilience among adolescents (Fitriana et al., 2024; Kaligis et al., 2023; Sevilla-Morales et al., 2025).

Recent Indonesian studies provide further empirical support for the relationship between intensive digital exposure and deteriorating adolescent mental health. A study involving 224 secondary school students found that 49.6% exhibited indications of mental health problems, including stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. The prevalence of psychological distress increased substantially among students categorized as intensive social media users. Similarly, research utilizing the Self-Reporting Questionnaire (SRQ-20) reported that 84.6% of adolescents and young adults with high social media intensity demonstrated symptoms of mental-emotional disorders. Frequently reported symptoms included headaches, excessive worry, restlessness, and sleep disturbances.

National digital behavior surveys conducted by APJII further indicate that Indonesian adolescents spend an average of approximately 5.8 hours per day on social media platforms. Clinical observations suggest that screen exposure exceeding four hours daily significantly increases the risk of insomnia, anxiety disorders, emotional dysregulation, and problematic internet use. These findings support the argument that prolonged online learning normalized excessive digital engagement patterns that persisted after the reopening of schools.

National evidence from the Indonesian Health Survey (SKI) 2023 reinforces concerns regarding youth psychological wellbeing. The Health Development Policy Agency of the Ministry of Health identified depression among young people as one of the country's priority health issues and produced a dedicated thematic report examining adolescent mental health. Subsequent policy analyses based on SKI 2023 reported that the highest prevalence of depression was observed among individuals aged 15–24 years, while treatment-seeking behavior remained relatively low. This treatment gap indicates that many young people experiencing psychological distress may remain undetected or unsupported despite increasing exposure to mental health risk factors.

Digital Alienation and Relational Transformation

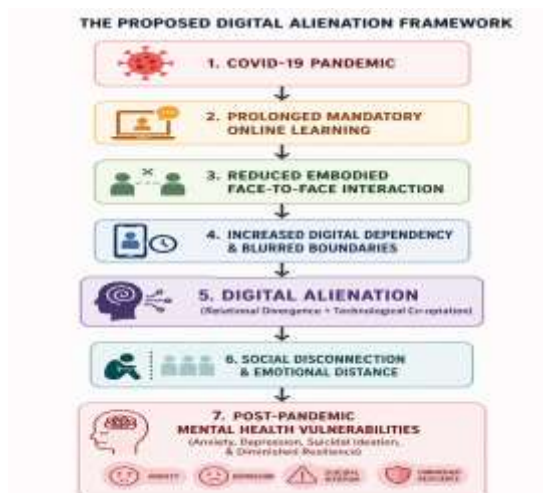
This study formally operationalizes digital alienation as a paradoxical sociological condition wherein high-frequency technological connectivity fails to replicate the depth, embodiment, and structural

reciprocity inherent in face-to-face human interactions. It is characterized by social disconnection, emotional flattening, and fragmented belonging. Digital alienation does not denote the complete absence of communication; rather, it describes a pathology of hyper-connection where sustained platform engagement coexists with a profound erosion of relational fulfillment and weakened social integration.

In the context of compulsory online learning, digital alienation manifests when the educational experience is reduced to automated task submission, screen-based instructions, and text-heavy platform interfaces. Children "attend" school logistically but are disenfranchised from the informal, embodied socialization that drives emotional maturity. Over time, this breeds an acute psychological dependency on highly controllable digital environments while steadily eroding real-world social confidence and interpersonal resilience.

The Proposed Digital Alienation Framework

To map the complex trajectories of this phenomenon, this study advances the *Digital Alienation Framework*, which delineates the causal pathway linking macro-structural pandemic disruptions to post-pandemic mental health vulnerabilities.



The framework positions digital alienation as a crucial mediating construct that bridges the gap between educational digitalization and deteriorated psychological outcomes. This model is explicitly contextualized within the communal ecosystem of Indonesia, where the spheres of school, religion, family, and peer networks are deeply interdependent and co-constitutive.

Novelty and Scholarly Contributions

This paper offers several distinctive contributions to digital sociology, youth mental health, and Islamic Psychology:

1. Epistemological Shift: It shifts the analytical lens from superficial psychological symptoms to the underlying relational mechanisms (*underlying relational mechanisms*), addressing a persistent theoretical blind spot in pandemic-era mental health literature.
2. Operationalization of the Construct: It conceptualizes and operationalizes digital alienation specifically as a structural mediating variable within the sociology of digital education.

3. Interdisciplinary Conceptual Synthesis: It constructs a robust, culturally adaptive framework that synthesizes classical alienation theory (Schacht, Hegel), critical digital culture studies (Turkle, Miller, Manovich), empirical post-pandemic datasets (Racine et al., Marciano et al., Nuryana et al.), and Islamic psychological paradigms (Al-Ghazali, Rothman & Coyle, Awaad).
4. Amplification of Global South Narratives: By anchoring its empirical analysis in the lived experiences of children extracted from the historical 2020 "*Kisahku di Jaman Covid*" survey and bridging them with 2025–2026 national longitudinal data, this study fills a profound empirical void in Southeast Asian sosiological literature. It systematically deconstructs the myth of compulsory online learning as a neutral technological adaptation, reframing it as a radical restructuring of childhood's social ecology with long-term consequences for communal resilience.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design.

This study employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design to capture both the measurable behavioral shifts and the subjective lived experiences of Indonesian youth. The design integrates descriptive statistical analysis to identify patterns in digital usage with thematic analysis of qualitative narratives. This dual approach facilitates a holistic understanding of digital alienation as both a quantifiable trend and a complex emotional phenomenon within the post-pandemic context.

Participants and Data Collection

Primary data were gathered through the online survey "*Kisahku di Jaman Covid*" (N=107) conducted between 2020 and 2021. The purposive sample comprised school-aged children (5–16 years) distributed across diverse Indonesian regions (North Sumatra, Aceh, West/Central Java, Jakarta, Bali, and Yogyakarta), representing varied socioeconomic and religious backgrounds. Data collection utilized digital platforms during active pandemic restrictions to minimize retrospective recall bias. Participants were recruited via school networks and educational community channels.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively (frequencies and percentages), while open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis through iterative coding and interpretive synthesis. Integration of findings was achieved via joint-display, allowing for a comparative interpretation of statistical trends alongside narrative evidence. Ethical protocols adhered to strict standards for research involving minors: informed parental consent was obtained for all participants, anonymity was maintained through data minimization, and sensitive identifiers were systematically masked or generalized to ensure participant safety and maintain institutional research integrity.

FINDINGS

Relational Disruption and Educational Dissatisfaction

The quantitative data reveal a pervasive dissatisfaction with online learning, with 74.6% of respondents expressing negative perceptions. Analysis of qualitative narratives indicates that this discontent

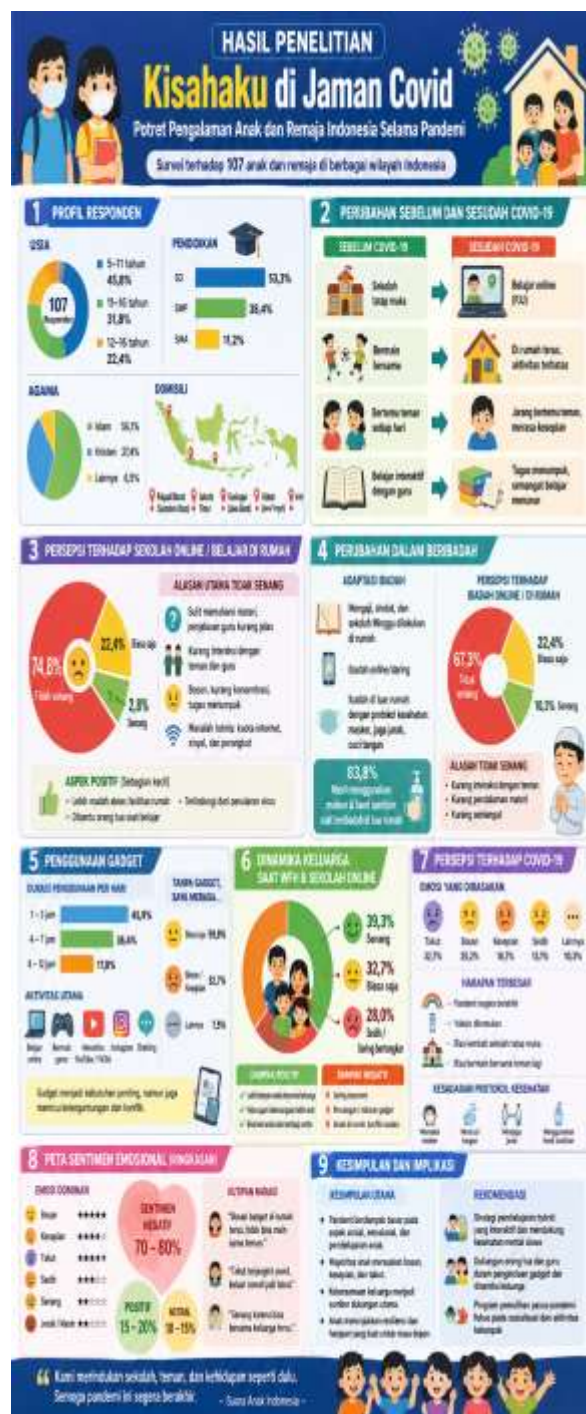
stems not from technical barriers, but from "relational loss." The virtualization of the classroom dismantled the communal social infrastructure essential for motivation and emotional socialization. Respondents consistently described school as a primary site for friendship and collective routine; its displacement into domestic digital spaces resulted in feelings of isolation, boredom, and emotional exhaustion, confirming that pedagogical delivery cannot be decoupled from its embodied social context.

Digital Proliferation and Boundary Erosion

Data indicate a significant escalation in gadget dependency, with over 54% of participants exceeding four hours of daily screen time. The convergence of formal schooling, entertainment, and religious practice onto a singular digital medium fostered "technological co-optation," where boundaries between learning, leisure, and emotional regulation blurred. This hybridization diminished the distinctiveness of social arenas—most notably in religious practice, which shifted from communal, place-based worship to individualized, screen-mediated activities, thereby weakening the traditional communal bonds vital to Indonesian youth identity. The survey findings are consistent with clinical observations reported by Indonesian mental health facilities. During and after the online learning period, psychiatrists increasingly observed symptoms resembling attention deficit disorders among children exposed to excessive short-form digital content, including TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels. These symptoms included shortened attention span, impulsivity, concentration difficulties, and reduced tolerance for delayed gratification. Clinical interviews frequently revealed aggressive reactions, emotional outbursts, and loss of self-control when digital access was restricted, indicating behavioral dependency patterns. Such evidence suggests that digital proliferation affected not only the quantity of screen exposure but also the quality of emotional regulation and cognitive development among young users.

Domestic Tensions and Emotional Vulnerability

Home-based learning produced ambivalent outcomes for family dynamics. While 39% of respondents reported improved family proximity, the compression of work, study, and conflict into confined domestic spaces exacerbated household tensions for others. These findings suggest that the home environment often fails to act as a stable substitute for the school, frequently amplifying existing psychosocial stressors. Predominant emotional responses—boredom, loneliness, and fear—underscore a crisis of belonging that transcends the educational domain.



Mechanisms of Post-Pandemic Alienation

The case illustrations serve to contextualize the escalation of post-pandemic vulnerabilities. The synthesis of survey data and contemporary incidents (e.g., student suicide, social incidents) reveals a trajectory of alienation wherein:

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(Wardhani, et al.)

1. **Structural and Educational Exclusion:** Economic precarity intersects with digital requirements, deepening the sense of shame and social exclusion.
2. **Relational Divergence:** Prolonged bullying, peer rejection, and social isolation—often amplified by algorithmic echo chambers—render individuals vulnerable to destructive expression when traditional support systems are absent.
3. **Kinship Erosion:** Digital-mediated identity and algorithmic polarization may override embodied kinship obligations, as observed in cases of familial withdrawal.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that pandemic-era online learning functioned as a catalyst for "digital alienation." Although youth remained technically connected, this virtuality failed to facilitate meaningful recognition or social resilience, resulting in a fractured relational landscape that persists into the post-pandemic period.

Case Illustrations of Post-Pandemic Alienation

To contextualize the long-term implications of digital alienation, this section examines selected post-pandemic incidents reported in the Indonesian media. While not establishing strict causality from the 2020 survey data, these cases serve as illustrative trajectories of unresolved relational disconnection and psychosocial vulnerability.

1. **Structural Deprivation and Educational Alienation** In February 2026, the suicide of a 10-year-old elementary student (YBR) in Ngada, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), highlighted the fatal intersection of economic hardship and educational pressure. A farewell letter indicated severe emotional distress, wherein the child appeared to internalize familial financial struggles as personal rejection. Psychological analyses of the case suggest that structural inequalities, combined with post-pandemic educational demands, can acutely intensify feelings of alienation and worthlessness, particularly when children lack safe, embodied spaces for emotional processing.
2. **Social Exclusion, Bullying, and Destructive Expression** The November 2025 incident at SMAN 72 Jakarta—where a 17-year-old student detonated a homemade low-explosive device—exemplifies the dangerous culmination of peer rejection and digital radicalization. Investigations revealed the perpetrator had endured prolonged bullying, lacked offline emotional support, and was heavily exposed to violent content via online "True Crime" communities. Handled under the Juvenile Justice System (SPPA), this case underscores the catastrophic potential when social isolation and algorithmic radicalization converge in the absence of robust, school-based mental health interventions.
3. **Academic Pressure and Silent Suffering** The February 2025 suicide of a 16-year-old student (IQZ) in Banjarbaru, South Kalimantan, further illustrates the fragile state of adolescent mental health. Investigators linked the incident to overwhelming post-pandemic academic burdens. Alongside rising national mental health statistics, these cases demonstrate that the relational disruptions experienced during the pandemic have left enduring vulnerabilities, heavily impacting youth facing intersecting challenges of bullying, economic stress, and limited emotional support systems.

Synthesis of Findings

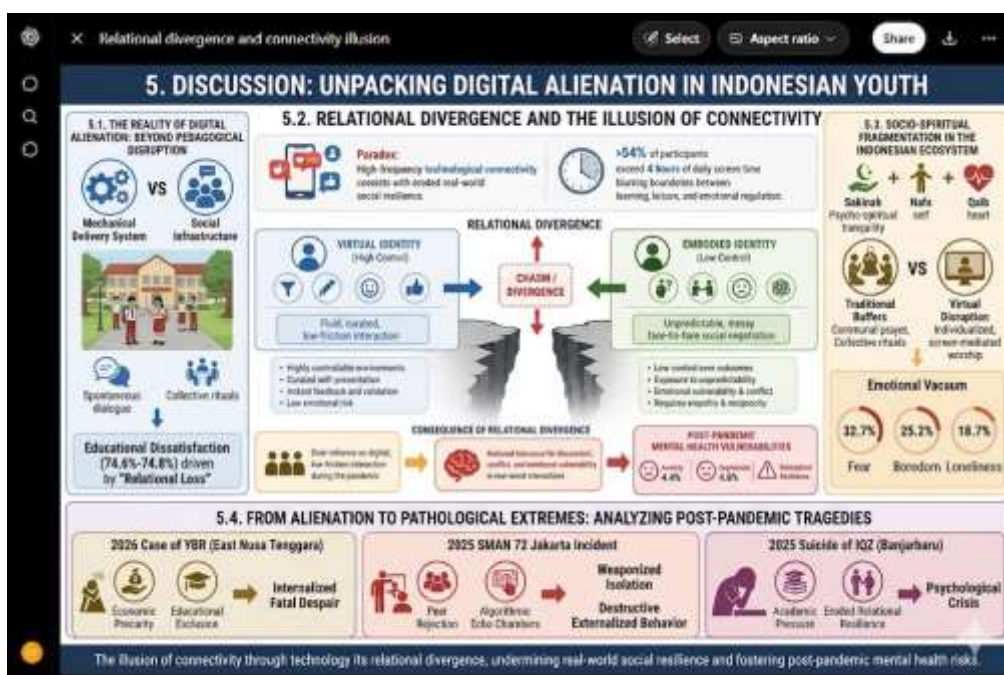
The September 2020 *Kisahku di Jaman Covid* survey ($N=107$) establishes a critical baseline for understanding these contemporary crises. The data reveal that a significant majority of children (74.8%) experienced profound dissatisfaction with online learning, driven primarily by social isolation, academic

overload, and emotional fatigue. The transition to digital platforms caused a blurring of life boundaries; over half of the respondents exceeded four hours of daily screen time, heavily conflating education with entertainment. Concurrently, religious practices became increasingly privatized, and family dynamics yielded mixed outcomes, contributing to an overwhelmingly negative emotional landscape dominated by fear (32.7%), boredom (25.2%), and loneliness (18.7%).

When integrated with the post-pandemic case illustrations and recent national data—such as the 2025–2026 CKG screening, which identified anxiety or depressive symptoms in nearly 10% of children—these findings substantiate the study’s central thesis: **prolonged mandatory online learning precipitated a profound state of digital alienation among Indonesian youth.**

While children remained digitally connected, they experienced a critical erosion of embodied social presence, peer bonding, communal worship, and emotional support. Because these elements are foundational to healthy development within Indonesia’s communal society, their disruption has manifested in heightened gadget dependency, weakened social resilience, and severe post-pandemic mental health vulnerabilities. Consequently, the evidence strongly suggests that addressing this crisis requires moving beyond individualized clinical interventions toward implementing comprehensive Relational Recovery Education Policies (RREP) that restore human-centric, communal learning environments.

Discussion



The empirical findings of this study offer a sobering look at how mandatory online learning transitioned into a durable state of digital alienation among Indonesian youth. By examining these results through the lens of our dual theoretical framework—combining classical alienation theory and digital sociology with Islamic Psychology—we can deconstruct the deep structural and relational transformations occurring within the post-pandemic landscape.

Recent evidence published in the Indonesia Adolescent Health Profile 2024 by UNICEF identifies mental health disorders as one of the most pressing adolescent health challenges in Indonesia. With nearly 46 million adolescents nationwide, suicide has emerged as one of the five leading causes of adolescent mortality. UNICEF further emphasizes that mental health support systems, school-based screening, resilience-building programs, and adolescent-friendly health services require substantial strengthening to address growing psychosocial vulnerabilities among young people.

1. The Reality of Digital Alienation: Beyond Pedagogical Disruption

The data indicate that educational dissatisfaction among 74.6% to 74.8% of respondents was driven not by technical limitations, but by an acute sense of "relational loss". This finding confirms that schools do not function merely as mechanical delivery systems for academic content; rather, they are foundational social infrastructures.

When the physical classroom was virtualized, the informal dimensions of education—such as spontaneous peer dialogues, collective rituals, and unstructured play—were systematically eliminated. This structural shift caused an ontological rupture in the socialization process:

- **Interpersonal Estrangement:** In line with Schacht's relational dimension of alienation, the virtualization of school severed interhuman bonds, turning a space meant for affection and solidarity into an isolating, screen-mediated routine.
- **Atomization and Self-Alienation:** The findings validate Hegel's philosophy that individual consciousness requires active integration with a broader social substance to achieve self-actualization. Deprived of this communal connection, students suffered from the atomization born from losing unity with institutional and peer networks.

2. Relational Divergence and the Illusion of Connectivity

Our study highlights a profound paradox: while digital media allowed youth to maintain high-frequency technological connectivity, it simultaneously eroded their real-world social resilience. With over 54% of participants exceeding four hours of daily screen time, digital devices co-opted multiple areas of daily life, blurring the boundaries between learning, leisure, and emotional regulation.

This hyper-connectivity operationalizes Turkle's paradigm of being "alone together". While youth felt technically connected, they experienced an emotional flattening and a diminished capacity for real-world interaction. This dynamic is driven by relational divergence:

By heavily engaging with highly controllable, low-friction digital interfaces during the pandemic, youth became systematically unaccustomed to the emotional vulnerabilities, conflicts, and spontaneous reciprocity required by face-to-face social life. Post-pandemic pathologies—such as the high rates of anxiety (4.4%) and depression (4.8%) discovered during national health screenings—can be understood as a direct manifestation of this relational divergence. An important manifestation of relational divergence is the emergence of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), a condition characterized by persistent anxiety that others may be experiencing rewarding social interactions without one's participation. Studies among Indonesian adolescents indicate that intensive social media users frequently experience feelings of inferiority, insecurity, loneliness, and dissatisfaction arising from continuous exposure to idealized online lifestyles. Algorithm-driven platforms intensify social comparison processes and contribute to emotional vulnerability. Furthermore, clinical reports document withdrawal-like symptoms—including irritability, anxiety, restlessness, and sleep disturbances—when access to digital devices is restricted. These symptoms

indicate that prolonged digital immersion may fundamentally alter emotional regulation processes and coping strategies among young people.

3. Socio-Spiritual Fragmentation in the Indonesian Ecosystem

In the Indonesian cultural context, childhood and adolescence are deeply embedded in an interdependent ecosystem of family, school, and religious networks. The findings reveal that the virtualization of life significantly disrupted this communo-spiritual ecology.

A stark example of this disruption is the privatization of religious routines. In Islamic psychological frameworks, *sakinah* (psycho-spiritual tranquility) is not cultivated in isolation; it is dynamically stimulated through physical proximity, shared space, and collective rituals like *ta'aruf* or communal prayers within the *ummah*.

By shifting religious practices from place-based, communal worship to individualized, screen-mediated activities, digital learning diluted the traditional socio-spiritual buffers that protect youth mental health. This disruption left the *nafs* (self) and *qalb* (heart) relationally and spiritually fragmented, creating an emotional vacuum dominated by fear (32.7%), boredom (25.2%), and loneliness (18.7%).

4. From Alienation to Pathological Extremes: Analyzing Post-Pandemic Tragedies

The contemporary case illustrations provide tragic real-world context to the long-term dangers of unresolved digital alienation:

- Intersection with Structural Deprivation: The 2026 case of YBR in East Nusa Tenggara shows that when economic precarity intersects with digital demands, the resulting sense of educational exclusion can turn digital alienation into fatal despair. Without physical, safe, and embodied spaces for emotional processing, vulnerable children are left to internalize systemic pressures as personal rejection.
- Convergence with Algorithmic Radicalization: The 2025 SMAN 72 Jakarta incident illustrates a dangerous trajectory where severe peer rejection and a lack of offline emotional support drive an alienated youth toward algorithmic echo chambers. In the absence of robust, school-based mental health interventions, the internet can weaponize isolation, turning relational detachment into destructive externalized behavior.
- The Burden of Academic Pressure: The 2025 suicide of IQZ in Banjarbaru highlights how overwhelming post-pandemic academic expectations can trigger severe psychological crises when an individual's underlying relational resilience has already been eroded by years of digital isolation.

Clinical case studies from Indonesia provide additional evidence regarding the pathways through which digital alienation may evolve into severe psychosocial dysfunction. One frequently reported pattern involves adolescents who initially received unrestricted gadget access during online learning and subsequently developed excessive dependence on social media and gaming platforms. Documented cases reveal chronic sleep deprivation, social withdrawal, academic decline, severe emotional dysregulation, social anxiety, and secondary depressive symptoms following the transition back to face-to-face learning environments.

Additional studies conducted in Aceh identified adolescents exhibiting withdrawal symptoms, emotional instability, and maladaptive coping behaviors when separated from digital devices. Similar findings were reported in Pontianak, where preschool children with high levels of gadget addiction

demonstrated significantly greater anxiety, hyperactivity, and behavioral difficulties. Collectively, these findings indicate that the consequences of pandemic-era digital immersion may begin in childhood and persist across developmental stages if preventive and rehabilitative interventions are not implemented.

The scale of the problem is increasingly recognized by national institutions. In 2025, the Ministry of Health expanded the Free Health Screening Program to school settings, targeting approximately 53 million students across Indonesia. The inclusion of mental health screening within this large-scale preventive health initiative reflects growing governmental recognition that psychological wellbeing has become a strategic component of child development and educational success. The findings presented in this study therefore align not only with academic literature but also with emerging national public health priorities.

Ultimately, these findings show that the post-pandemic mental health crisis among Indonesian youth cannot be solved by treating individual clinical symptoms alone, nor can educational recovery be limited to remediating academic "learning loss". Because the pandemic educational disruption was fundamentally a relational and structural crisis, long-term recovery demands systemic interventions—such as the proposed Relational Recovery Education Policy (RREP)—designed to restore human-centric, communal, and embodied learning environments.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study has argued that compulsory online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly contributed to digital alienation among Indonesian youth. Based on the “Kisahku di Jaman Covid” survey (N=107) and supporting post-pandemic data, the findings reveal widespread dissatisfaction with online learning (74.8%), heightened gadget dependency, weakened peer interaction, privatization of religious practices, ambivalent family dynamics, and predominantly negative emotional responses dominated by boredom, loneliness, fear, and longing for ordinary social life. The central contribution of this article is to demonstrate that the pandemic educational disruption should be understood as a relational crisis, not merely a pedagogical or psychological problem. Digital platforms enabled schooling to continue, but they could not fully reproduce the embodied, communal, and affective functions of traditional school life. In Indonesia’s communal cultural context, this relational loss has profound implications for post-pandemic mental health and youth development. Relational Recovery Education Policy (RREP) To address these challenges, this article proposes a Relational Recovery Education Policy (RREP) framework. RREP draws inspiration from successful international practices while being deeply grounded in Indonesia’s communal values, religious traditions, and cultural realities. International Inspirations for RREP:

- Finland and Estonia have implemented “phenomenon-based” and outdoor learning approaches that emphasize holistic child development, collaboration, and reduced screen time, showing positive results in student wellbeing and social skills after the pandemic.
- Singapore’s “refreshed” curriculum and “Mental Wellbeing” initiatives include structured social-emotional learning (SEL), mentoring programs, and limits on digital device use in primary schools.
- New Zealand’s post-pandemic “Learning to Belong” programs focus on community reconnection, nature-based learning, and restorative practices.
- South Korea’s “Digital Detox” campaigns and after-school relational programs have successfully reduced youth smartphone addiction and improved family relationships.

Five Pillars of Relational Recovery Education Policy (RREP) – Indonesian Context

1. **Rehumanization of Schooling** Make face-to-face, embodied learning the primary mode of education. Introduce mandatory gadget-free days (at least two per week), expanded outdoor learning, play-based activities, sports, arts, and cultural extracurricular programs. Schools should become centers of communal life again, incorporating gotong royong (mutual cooperation) projects and regular silaturahmi activities. This pillar is inspired by Finland's outdoor education model but adapted to Indonesian values of togetherness and local wisdom.
2. **Critical Digital Literacy and Conscious Technology Use** Integrate comprehensive digital literacy into the national curriculum, religious education (Pendidikan Agama), and civic education. Students should learn about digital alienation, algorithmic influence, emotional regulation, cyberbullying, and healthy screen habits. Schools should implement "Digital Sabbath" practices and device-free zones. This adapts Singapore's structured SEL programs to Indonesia's religious and moral education framework.
3. **Integrated School-Based Mental Health System** Strengthen collaboration between the Ministries of Education, Health, and Religious Affairs to establish accessible counseling services, annual mental health screening (expanding the CKG program), peer-support groups, and referral pathways. Train teachers and religious educators (ustadz/pendeta) as first-line mental health supporters. This builds upon successful community-based mental health models from Kerala (India) and adapts them to Indonesia's strong religious infrastructure.
4. **Human-Centered Hybrid Learning Model** Limit digital learning to supplementary purposes with strict age-appropriate screen-time guidelines. Prioritize synchronous, interactive face-to-face sessions. Develop blended models that maintain relational quality rather than maximizing technological efficiency. This draws lessons from Estonia's balanced digital education approach while ensuring cultural and spiritual dimensions remain central.
5. **Family and Community Strengthening** Launch nationwide parenting programs focused on digital parenting, emotional communication, and quality family time. Strengthen religious communities (majelis taklim, youth Islamic circles, church youth groups) and neighborhood initiatives to rebuild social support networks. Encourage interfaith youth activities and gotong royong-based mental health awareness campaigns. This pillar is rooted in Indonesia's strong family and communal values.

Implementation Strategy

RREP should be piloted in selected provinces before national rollout, with strong monitoring and evaluation involving universities and child protection institutions. Funding can combine government budgets, CSR from technology companies, and international development partners (UNICEF, WHO). Success indicators should include reduced screen dependency, improved peer relationships, lower anxiety/depression rates, and increased sense of belonging among students. In conclusion, although digital technology was essential for educational continuity during the pandemic, prolonged reliance on it has carried significant relational and spiritual costs. Rebuilding resilient Indonesian youth requires more than academic remediation or technological solutions. It demands the deliberate restoration of embodied presence, communal belonging, and spiritual equilibrium. The Relational Recovery Education Policy (RREP) provides a culturally grounded, actionable pathway to heal the post-pandemic relational trauma

and prepare future generations for balanced living in the digital age. The urgency of addressing digital alienation is reflected in recent regulatory developments in Indonesia. In 2026, the Government of Indonesia introduced restrictions on social media access for children under sixteen years of age, citing concerns regarding cyberbullying, digital addiction, online exploitation, and adverse mental health outcomes. This policy shift demonstrates growing governmental recognition that excessive and unregulated digital exposure constitutes a significant child protection and public health issue. The proposed Relational Recovery Education Policy (RREP) can therefore complement existing national efforts by focusing not only on digital restriction but also on rebuilding relational, emotional, and communal resilience among young people

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