

## Resisting Brain Rot: Spiritual Competence of Christian Religious Education Teachers at SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara

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### ABSTRACT

*The rapid growth of digital technology has transformed how students access information and form worldviews, but it has also introduced challenges such as “brain rot,” a decline in focus, reflection, and critical thinking caused by excessive consumption of superficial digital content. Within the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE), this issue is not only pedagogical but also spiritual, threatening students’ moral and faith formation. Grounded in 1 Timothy 4:16, which emphasizes vigilance over life and doctrine, this study examines how CRE teachers at UPTD SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara develop spiritual competence as a strategy to counter brain rot among junior high school students. This research employed a qualitative descriptive design supported by a systematic literature review (SLR). Fieldwork was conducted during the 2025/2026 academic year with 74 Christian students, two CRE teachers, and ten purposively selected students from broken concentration patterns. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, while the SLR synthesized 22 peer-reviewed studies from 2015–2024 to contextualize findings. Data were analyzed thematically using coding, triangulation, and integration of literature with field evidence. Results indicate that CRE teachers consistently modeled prayer, discipline, and integrity, integrated biblical principles with digital realities, and provided pastoral mentoring to students. Communal activities such as group reflections and service projects further strengthened collective resilience against distraction. The findings affirm that spiritual competence is a decisive factor in guiding students toward holistic formation. In conclusion, CRE teachers who embody spiritual integrity serve as role models, enabling students to resist brain rot and grow into faithful, reflective, and resilient individuals.*

**Keywords:** *Spiritual Competence, Brain Rot, Christian Religious Education*

### INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed the way students access information, communicate, and build their worldview. While technology

brings undeniable benefits for education, communication, and social interaction, it also presents serious challenges, particularly when it comes to the phenomenon known as “brain rot”. This term refers to the gradual decline in students’ ability to concentrate, reflect, and think critically as a result of excessive consumption of superficial digital content such as short-form videos, online games, or social media scrolling. In the context of Christian education, this phenomenon is more than just a psychological or pedagogical problem; it is also a spiritual crisis that threatens the holistic formation of students. Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Indonesia carries a dual mandate: to transmit biblical knowledge and to form students’ character in accordance with Christian values (Saragih, 2021). This responsibility becomes increasingly urgent when faced with brain rot, which erodes not only students’ intellectual engagement but also their spiritual sensitivity and moral integrity. Observations at UPTD SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara, revealed symptoms consistent with this challenge. Teachers noted that some students displayed short attention spans, declining enthusiasm for reflective learning, and a preference for entertainment-oriented digital content over meaningful engagement with Scripture and moral reflection. Such tendencies highlight the urgent need for CRE teachers to strengthen their spiritual competence in order to guide students toward resilience against the negative impacts of digital culture. Theological grounding for this study is found in 1 Timothy 4:16, where Paul exhorts Timothy: *“Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers”* (NIV). This verse underscores the importance of the teacher’s spiritual integrity and vigilance. The spiritual competence of CRE teachers involves not only doctrinal understanding but also the embodiment of faith in daily practice. By serving as living role models, teachers can inspire students to cultivate self-control, discernment, and spiritual discipline, all of which are crucial in resisting the superficiality promoted by brain rot.

In educational terms, teacher competence has long been recognized as a determining factor in student outcomes (Tilaar, 2017). Spiritual competence, as a specific dimension of teacher competence, refers to the teacher’s capacity to live out Christian values, integrate faith with teaching practice, and guide students in their spiritual journey (Hasudungan, 2020). At UPTD SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara, CRE teachers are expected not only to deliver lessons on Christian doctrine but also to model faith practices such as prayer, discipline, honesty, and perseverance. These practices equip students with inner strength and moral resilience, enabling them to navigate the temptations of digital distractions and to ground their identity in Christ. Moreover, addressing brain rot through CRE is not merely about regulating students’ digital use but about nurturing holistic formation. As Astari (2022) points out, the task of Christian education is to cultivate not only cognitive competence but also affective and spiritual maturity. In this regard, CRE teachers can help students reinterpret their digital habits in the light of biblical principles. For example, teachers can encourage students to reflect on Philippians 4:8, which calls believers to focus on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable, as a guide for evaluating digital content. By linking spiritual formation with digital literacy, CRE teachers can transform classrooms into spaces where students critically engage with the challenges of the digital era. In relation to brain rot, spiritual competence is not an abstract concept but a practical necessity. Teachers who are spiritually grounded can offer pastoral care to students experiencing disorientation due to broken concentration

patterns or addictive behaviors. They can also integrate restorative practices, such as Bible meditation, prayer, and community service, into the learning process. These practices foster habits of reflection, gratitude, and service that counteract the passive consumption patterns associated with brain rot. Thus, CRE teachers at UPTD SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara stand at the forefront of an urgent mission: to equip students with the intellectual, moral, and spiritual tools needed to thrive in a digital age marked by both opportunities and dangers. This study therefore seeks to examine the efforts of Christian Religious Education teachers in developing spiritual competence as a strategy to counter brain rot among students. Specifically, it investigates how teachers at UPTD SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara apply spiritual practices, integrate biblical principles into classroom instruction, and mentor students to remain faithful in an era of distraction. The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically by enriching the discourse on spiritual competence in Christian education and practically by offering teachers and schools concrete strategies for guiding students toward holistic formation. The urgency of this research lies in the intersection of three critical realities: the pervasive influence of digital culture on student behavior, the observable symptoms of brain rot among junior high school students, and the biblical mandate for teachers to guard both life and doctrine as emphasized in 1 Timothy 4:16. By exploring how CRE teachers embody spiritual competence in the classroom, this study aims to provide fresh insights into the role of Christian education in shaping resilient, faithful, and reflective learners in the face of contemporary challenges.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design supported by a systematic literature review (SLR) to gain a comprehensive understanding of how Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers develop spiritual competence as a means of countering brain rot among students. A qualitative descriptive approach was considered suitable because it provides rich, contextualized descriptions of teachers' practices and students' experiences, while the SLR allowed for the integration of existing scholarly findings to situate the research within broader academic discourse. The field study was conducted at UPTD SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara, Nias Barat, North Sumatra, during the 2025/2026 academic year. The school has a Christian student population of 74 individuals, representing a significant context for examining the role of CRE teachers in faith formation. The participants included two CRE teachers, who were directly responsible for instructing and mentoring Christian students, and ten students purposively selected from the broader Christian student population. The selected students were chosen based on teacher recommendations to represent a range of behaviors, including those most vulnerable to digital distractions and brain rot symptoms such as inattentiveness, superficial engagement, and lack of responsibility. The researcher observed classroom interactions, teacher-student relationships, and the integration of spiritual practices such as prayer, reflection, and biblical application. Special attention was paid to how teachers modeled discipline, honesty, and perseverance, and how these practices influenced student engagement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with CRE teachers and students. Teacher interviews focused on strategies for developing spiritual competence, challenges in addressing brain rot, and theological reflections on 1 Timothy 4:16. Student

interviews explored experiences of learning, perceptions of teacher guidance, and struggles in balancing digital habits with spiritual growth. Alongside field data, a systematic literature review was conducted to integrate insights from previous research on teacher competence, spiritual formation, and the phenomenon of brain rot in educational contexts. Databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and national repositories (GARUDA, Moraref) were searched using keywords: spiritual competence, Christian Religious Education, digital distraction, brain rot, and character formation. From over 50 initial studies, 22 peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2024 were selected based on relevance, methodological rigor, and thematic connection to CRE, teacher competence, and digital-era challenges. Key findings were analyzed thematically to highlight patterns in teacher competence, strategies for countering digital distractions, and theological perspectives on holistic education. This synthesis informed the interpretation of field findings and ensured that the study was grounded in existing literature while contributing new empirical insights. Transcripts from interviews and notes from observations were coded to identify recurring themes such as “teacher as role model,” “integration of Scripture with life,” and “digital resilience practices.” Findings from the SLR were then integrated into the analysis to compare local experiences at SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara with broader research trends, allowing for both contextual specificity and theoretical depth. The field research captured the lived realities of CRE teachers and students at UPTD SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara, while the literature review anchored these findings in the broader scholarly conversation on spiritual competence and brain rot.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate that Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers at UPTD SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara hold a central role in cultivating students’ spiritual competence as a means to counter the growing challenge of brain rot. Field findings, drawn from interviews, observations, and documentation of the seventy-four Christian students, show that teachers consistently integrated spiritual practices into their teaching, nurtured student reflection, and contextualized biblical principles within students’ daily lives. Students from this school were found to struggle with distractions, shortened attention spans, and lack of focus, issues commonly associated with brain rot in contemporary discourse. Against this backdrop, the CRE teachers positioned themselves as mentors, role models, and facilitators of spiritual growth. Their efforts align with the exhortation in 1 Timothy 4:16, where Paul instructs Timothy to keep watch over both his life and his teaching, a biblical mandate that captures the dual responsibility of teachers to embody the values they impart. One prominent finding is that CRE teachers acted as spiritual role models, demonstrating prayer, discipline, and integrity as daily practices in the classroom. Observations revealed that lessons were consistently opened and closed with prayer, while teachers emphasized fairness in discipline and patience in managing disruptions. Students frequently testified that such practices gave them a sense of calm and direction during class, helping them to focus on the lesson rather than being distracted. This finding resonates with Harianto (2018) and Nainggolan (2020), who argue that spiritual competence is expressed not only through knowledge of doctrine but also through embodied faith practices. The model provided by teachers becomes particularly powerful in countering brain rot, since fragmented attention and weakened concentration are often addressed not merely through regulation but through imitation

of disciplined habits. Students, by watching teachers who consistently demonstrate attentiveness and devotion, are encouraged to resist the pull of distraction in their own lives. CRE teachers integrated biblical teachings with the lived experiences of their students, especially regarding digital culture. For example, Philippians 4:8 was frequently applied as a framework for evaluating the content students consumed online. In interviews, several students explained that the discussions on this passage challenged them to be more selective in choosing what to watch or read on social media. This form of integration not only bridged the gap between Scripture and daily practice but also provided students with moral tools for navigating the digital environment. The systematic literature review (SLR) confirms that such integration is essential for building resilience in students, as Arends (2012) underscores the need for education to connect abstract knowledge with real-life challenges, while Gulo (2023) notes that biblical teaching provides a timeless guide for ethical discernment in a rapidly changing digital age. By embedding Scripture into lessons that explicitly addressed students' digital habits, teachers ensured that CRE was not a subject confined to theological knowledge but a practical guide for daily living.

Another significant dimension of the teachers' efforts was pastoral mentoring and care. Beyond classroom instruction, teachers intentionally supported students struggling with distraction, fatigue, or spiritual apathy. Field data revealed that some students displayed clear symptoms of brain rot, such as difficulty completing assignments, a tendency to lose focus quickly, or even sleeping during lessons. Rather than resorting solely to punitive strategies, teachers adopted a pastoral approach, offering personal encouragement, prayer, and practical advice on balancing study with digital entertainment. This strategy reflects Tilaar's (2017) vision of education as holistic formation and aligns with findings from Hallatu et al. (2017), who emphasize the transformative impact of mentorship in fostering student openness and resilience. In this context, brain rot was addressed not merely as an academic problem but as a pastoral challenge, requiring teachers to accompany students in reshaping their habits and commitments. The research also highlights the communal strategies adopted by CRE teachers to strengthen students' collective resilience. Teachers facilitated group reflections in which students shared weekly experiences of applying biblical principles in their daily lives, particularly regarding the responsible use of technology. They also encouraged service-oriented projects, such as helping peers, engaging in school service, or participating in church activities. These communal activities reinforced a sense of accountability and belonging, enabling students to perceive their struggles with distraction not as isolated battles but as shared experiences within a supportive community. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory affirms the power of collaborative learning in shaping cognition, while Nainggolan (2020) links Christian pedagogy with the communal ethos of the early church, where shared practices and mutual accountability were central. In this study, communal resilience became a significant means of countering brain rot, since students learned to resist unhealthy digital patterns together while cultivating responsibility, empathy, and service. The integration of these findings with the systematic literature review underscores several broader patterns. First, the role of teachers as spiritual exemplars is consistently emphasized across the literature, highlighting that spiritual competence cannot be separated from teacher identity (Hasudungan, 2020; Saragih, 2021). Second, digital

culture, while posing real challenges such as distraction and apathy, is also acknowledged as an opportunity for guided learning when approached critically and responsibly (Astari, 2022). Third, holistic education, which addresses cognitive, affective, and spiritual domains, is affirmed as the most effective way to nurture character and competence in students (Tilaar, 2017). Fourth, mentorship and community-based strategies are found to foster resilience by ensuring that values are reinforced both relationally and socially (Hallatu et al., 2017). These patterns not only validate the findings from SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara but also situate them within a larger body of educational theory and practice. The implications of these findings extend to teachers, schools, and families. For teachers, the results emphasize the necessity of cultivating their own spiritual competence, since students often learn more from example than from verbal instruction. For schools, the importance of supporting CRE teachers through professional development and resources for digital literacy is clear, enabling them to contextualize biblical principles for contemporary issues. For families and churches, the study highlights the need for collaborative reinforcement of values, since students require a consistent ecosystem of support across different spheres of life. These implications mirror the exhortation of Paul in 1 Timothy 4:16, which insists that teachers' vigilance over life and doctrine not only ensures their own integrity but also contributes to the salvation and growth of their students. The study demonstrates that CRE teachers at UPTD SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara respond to the challenge of brain rot through a combination of personal example, biblical integration, pastoral mentoring, and communal reflection. These strategies, affirmed by broader educational research and consistent with biblical teaching, reveal that spiritual competence among teachers is an indispensable resource for student formation. As students face increasing pressures from digital culture, spiritually competent teachers provide the guidance and resilience needed to help them live wisely, faithfully, and attentively. In a world where distraction threatens to erode focus and faith, the witness of teachers who embody discipline and integrity stands as a powerful antidote, equipping students not only to resist brain rot but to grow into mature, responsible disciples.

## CONCLUSION

This study has underscored the crucial role of Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers in shaping students' spiritual competence as a means of countering the phenomenon commonly described as brain rot. The empirical findings from UPTD SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara, where seventy-four Christian students were observed, confirm that students today face significant challenges in maintaining focus, developing discipline, and resisting the allure of digital distractions. These issues not only impact academic performance but also affect character and spiritual growth. In response, CRE teachers have demonstrated consistent efforts to integrate spiritual practices, provide biblical frameworks, and offer pastoral mentoring that holistically nurtures students' intellectual, moral, and spiritual lives. Such efforts resonate with the exhortation in 1 Timothy 4:16, where Paul reminds Timothy to keep watch over both his teaching and his life, a dual responsibility that embodies the spiritual competency required of teachers in every age. The conclusion that emerges from this study is that spiritual competence is not an optional attribute for CRE teachers but an essential foundation for their ministry and pedagogy. Teachers who embody faith through prayer, integrity, and discipline serve as living examples that inspire

students to imitate their habits and attitudes. Character is more caught than taught; students often internalize values not simply from words but from consistent examples set by adults in positions of influence. In this study, it was evident that students' ability to resist distraction and cultivate focus was enhanced when they observed teachers demonstrating attentiveness and self-discipline. Thus, teacher identity and personal spirituality become inseparable from the educational process, confirming the holistic perspective advanced, who emphasizes that education must encompass cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions. Another key conclusion concerns the importance of integrating biblical principles with the lived realities of students. CRE at SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara was effective when teachers applied Scripture to students' daily struggles with technology and attention. For instance, Philippians 4:8 served as a filter for students to evaluate the quality of their digital engagement, while other passages were used to frame discussions on responsibility, honesty, and perseverance. This contextualized approach ensured that CRE was not confined to abstract doctrine but became a practical guide for navigating modern challenges. Meaningful learning occurs when students connect academic or spiritual knowledge with real-life experiences. This study's findings demonstrate that such integration empowers students not only to think critically about their choices but also to align their behavior with Christian values. The communal and pastoral dimensions of the teachers' efforts also carry significant implications. By fostering group reflection, encouraging service projects, and providing individual mentoring, CRE teachers created a culture of accountability and support among students. This approach is consistent with constructivist theory, which stresses the importance of social interaction in learning, as well as with the communal ethos of Christian pedagogy, which values shared growth and discipleship. Students reported that learning together in community reduced their sense of isolation and made it easier to resist the pull of distractions. Thus, the conclusion can be drawn that resilience against brain rot is most effective when approached collectively, not merely as an individual struggle.

These conclusions also point to several practical recommendations. For teachers, it is essential to continue developing their own spiritual lives, since their credibility and effectiveness stem from their lived example as much as from their formal teaching. For schools, the findings highlight the need for institutional support in providing professional development focused on digital literacy, pastoral care, and innovative pedagogies that strengthen student engagement. For families and churches, collaboration with schools is vital in creating a consistent environment where biblical values are reinforced across contexts. This threefold partnership-teacher, school, and family-creates a holistic ecosystem in which students are nurtured to resist distractions and grow in faith. The broader implication of this study is that combating brain rot in Christian education requires a reorientation toward spiritual formation as the foundation of all learning. Technology will remain a pervasive aspect of students' lives, and distractions will continue to evolve in form. Yet the enduring antidote lies in the cultivation of focus, discipline, and wisdom rooted in Christian faith. CRE teachers at UPTD SMPN 5 Mandrehe Utara exemplify how this can be done through spiritual competence, biblical integration, pastoral mentoring, and communal practices. Their efforts testify to the truth of Paul's exhortation in 1 Timothy 4:16: by watching their life and doctrine closely, teachers not only safeguard their own integrity but also guide their students toward salvation and

maturity. The study concludes that spiritually competent CRE teachers play a decisive role in helping students resist brain rot and grow into attentive, disciplined, and faithful individuals. Their efforts serve as a reminder that Christian education is not merely about transferring knowledge but about forming whole persons-intellectually sharp, morally grounded, and spiritually resilient. In an age of increasing distraction, the presence of teachers who embody integrity and devotion becomes not only relevant but indispensable. The church, schools, and society at large must therefore invest in strengthening the spiritual competence of CRE teachers, recognizing that in their hands lies the shaping of a generation capable of living wisely and faithfully in the midst of digital challenges.

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