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Developing MEKAR Interactive Cards with Regional Songs as a Positive Character Medium for Junior High School Students

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ABSTRACT

Junior high school students are at a developmental stage in which positive character has to be practiced, not merely understood. At SMP Negeri 10 Tarakan, Indonesia, observation, an interview with the school counselor, and a student needs assessment showed that students still needed support in honesty, independence, politeness, social virtue, intellectual thinking, and logical reasoning, while classroom and group guidance relied mostly on verbal delivery. This study aimed to develop MEKAR (Media Kartu Interaktif), a set of interactive cards integrated with regional songs, and to determine its feasibility as a supporting medium for classroom and group guidance services. A research and development design adapted from the Borg and Gall model was carried out in five stages: identifying potentials and problems, collecting information, designing the product, validating the design, and revising the product. The product consists of an A5 guidebook and 40 cards measuring 9 × 5.5 cm, namely 30 question cards and 10 challenge cards, with regional songs and singing games built into the play mechanism. Data from four-point validation sheets completed by media, material, and language experts were analyzed using descriptive percentages, and the validators' comments guided the revision. The media expert rated the product at 86% (highly feasible), the material expert at 72% (feasible), and the language expert at 75% (feasible). MEKAR therefore meets the feasibility criteria for use in classroom and group guidance. Because no field trial was conducted, its effects on students' character remain to be tested.

INTRODUCTION

Character education is a central aim of schooling because the success of education is judged not only by how much knowledge students acquire but also by how well they understand values, regulate their own conduct, and act on those values in daily life. In Indonesia, character education has been positioned as a national priority, and schools are expected to cultivate values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, cooperation, tolerance, and social care through habituation, role modeling, and the integration of values into learning activities (Hidayati et al., 2020). Character in this sense involves moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action at the same time, so programs that only transmit information about what is good are unlikely to change the way students behave (Hidayati et al., 2020; Sarkadi et al., 2022). Research on character strengths reaches a similar conclusion. Strengths such as honesty, perseverance, kindness, and good judgment are closely related to the competencies young people need in the twenty-first century and can be fostered when schools provide

repeated opportunities to recognize and use them (Lavy, 2020). These strengths are also associated with several dimensions of well-being, including positive relationships and a sense of accomplishment (Wagner et al., 2020).

The junior high school (Sekolah Menengah Pertama, SMP) years coincide with early adolescence, a period marked by simultaneous emotional, social, and academic change. Students at this age are building a sense of who they are while becoming increasingly attentive to how others see them, and thinking about the self and thinking about others develop in close interaction during this period (Crone & Fuligni, 2020). Their heightened sensitivity to peers can encourage both prosocial and less adaptive behavior (Andrews et al., 2021). Character services at the junior high school level should therefore be communicative, suited to students' developmental characteristics, and designed so that students take an active part instead of listening passively. Evidence from universal school-based social and emotional learning programs supports this direction: compared with control conditions, students who take part in such programs show improvements in skills, attitudes, behavior, peer relationships, and school functioning, although the size of the benefit depends on program content and implementation quality (Cipriano et al., 2023).

The need for such support was evident at SMP Negeri 10 Tarakan, North Kalimantan. Field observation conducted over one week in September 2025 revealed patterns of student behavior that called for attention, especially in discipline and manners. Some students sought attention while teachers were explaining material in front of the class, for example by making irrelevant jokes or behaving in exaggerated ways to make their classmates laugh. Other students found it difficult to maintain academic honesty when completing assignments, and mutual respect among peers still needed to be strengthened. These observations suggested that students' understanding of ethics and responsibility had not yet been translated consistently into everyday conduct and that, if left unaddressed, such patterns could disrupt a learning climate that supports students' personal growth.

An interview with the school counselor on 8 September 2025 provided further context. The counselor had already delivered individual counseling, group counseling, group guidance, and classroom guidance to address students' positive character, and had used several media in these services. However, none of the media had been combined with regional songs. The counselor also observed that services relying mainly on spoken explanation sometimes reduced students' enthusiasm for the moral messages being conveyed and expressed the view that a more creative medium would help students understand and remember character values. The student needs assessment pointed in the same direction. Its personal domain produced a score of 31%, which the school interpreted as a substantial obstacle in students' understanding of core positive character values, namely honesty, independence, politeness, social virtue, intellectual thinking, and logical reasoning. Taken together, these findings indicated that character content had not been fully internalized and that a supporting medium was needed to make values easier to grasp and accept.

School guidance and counseling services occupy a strategic position in responding to such needs because they are intended to be preventive and developmental, not only remedial. Classroom guidance enables the school counselor to reach every student in a class through direct, scheduled interaction, whereas group guidance uses the dynamics of a small group to discuss topics that matter for students' personal and social development. Both formats have shown promise for social and emotional outcomes. A classroom guidance curriculum for

ninth-grade students produced improvements in self-reported social resilience and emotion regulation compared with a comparison group (Martinez et al., 2022), and a school counselor-led classroom program strengthened students' social-emotional skills and overall competence (Chance et al., 2023). What both services require, however, is a medium that can turn the delivery of character messages from one-way communication into an active experience.

Games offer one way of creating such an experience. A meta-analysis of gamification found positive effects on cognitive, motivational, and behavioral learning outcomes (Sailer & Homner, 2020), and a more recent meta-analysis reported a large overall effect of gamification on student learning (Li et al., 2023). Systematic reviews indicate that game elements can increase engagement and participation (Zainuddin et al., 2020) and can support school engagement in primary and secondary education, although engagement should be evaluated across its behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions rather than through motivation alone (Ramírez Ruiz et al., 2024). Educational games have also been linked to learning outcomes, motivation, engagement, and satisfaction (Yu et al., 2021), and students exposed to a game-based lesson have reported greater engagement than in a conventional lecture (Hartt et al., 2020).

Analog games are particularly relevant for school counseling services, which often take place in ordinary classrooms with limited equipment. A systematic review of board, tabletop, and other analog games concluded that these games can produce a wide range of knowledge, cognitive, and psychological outcomes, but it also noted that many educational applications do not connect game mechanics clearly to what is meant to be learned (Sousa et al., 2023). An earlier review of interventions using board games similarly reported gains in knowledge, interaction among participants, and motivation (Noda et al., 2019). Card media are simple, portable, inexpensive, and suited to turn-taking, which allows a counselor to present a series of prompts to which students respond one after another. These features make cards a practical format for counselors working within limited-service time.

Local culture provides a further resource for character services. Studies in Indonesia have argued that local wisdom can serve as a foundation for character education because it carries values that students recognize from their own communities (Tohri et al., 2022). Traditional games have been used for this purpose: the Congklak game was associated with students' love of the homeland, environmental care, and tolerance (Syahrial et al., 2022), a modified Gobak Sodor game helped children develop responsibility, teamwork, communication, and care for one another (Irmansyah et al., 2020), and the Sundanese Bebentengan game was developed into a learning method grounded in local wisdom (Toharudin et al., 2021). Music adds an emotional dimension to such activities. A systematic review found that the educational use of music is associated with greater emotional intelligence, better academic performance, and stronger prosocial skills in children (Blasco-Magraner et al., 2021), and a review of music-exposure interventions identified emotion as the main mechanism through which music influences prosocial behavior (Grimani et al., 2024). Regional songs and singing games such as Ampar-Ampar Pisang, Cublak-Cublak Suweng, Ular Naga Panjang, Domikado, and Injit-Injit Semut are part of the cultural experience of many Indonesian children and can therefore make character activities more familiar and meaningful.

Although these strands of research suggest the potential of card-based and culturally grounded activities, few media for junior high school guidance services combine character-

related questions, reflective challenges, group activity, and regional songs in a single product. The present study addressed this gap by developing MEKAR (Media Kartu Interaktif), an interactive card set with regional songs, for students at SMP Negeri 10 Tarakan. MEKAR targets six indicators of positive character, namely honesty, independence, politeness, social virtue, intellectual thinking, and logical reasoning, and it presents not only questions but also reflective challenges, with songs embedded in the mechanism of play. The study aimed to develop MEKAR and to determine its feasibility as a supporting medium for classroom and group guidance services based on the judgments of media, material, and language experts. It did not aim to test the effect of the product on changes in students' character, which would require field testing.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a research and development (R&D) design because its main purpose was to produce a guidance medium and to examine its initial feasibility. The design was adapted from the Borg and Gall model, which continues to be used in Indonesian educational development research because it links needs assessment, product development, and expert evaluation in a traceable sequence (Widodo et al., 2025). Of the ten stages commonly described for this model, the study carried out the first five: identifying potentials and problems, collecting information, designing the product, validating the design, and revising the product (Figure 1). The simplification was made because the study focused on development and feasibility testing rather than on field effectiveness. Consequently, the product was not tried out with groups of students, and its effects on students' character were not measured.

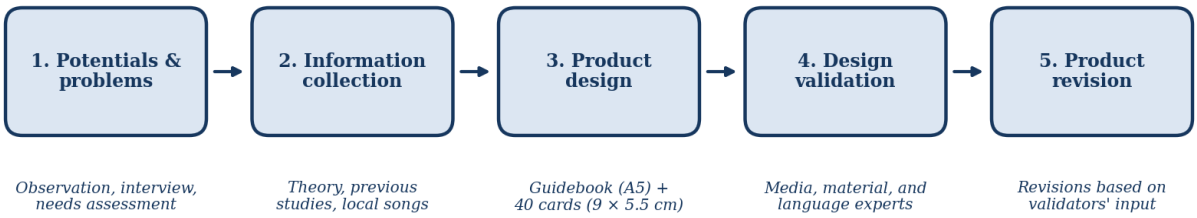


Figure 1. Development Stages of the MEKAR Interactive Cards

Development Procedure

The potentials and problems stage was carried out through one week of observation in September 2025 and an interview with the school counselor of SMP Negeri 10 Tarakan on 8 September 2025, supported by the results of the student needs assessment in the personal domain. This stage identified the need for a more engaging medium for conveying positive character values in classroom and group guidance. In the information collection stage, the researcher reviewed theories and previous studies on positive character, interactive card media, regional songs and local wisdom, and guidance services. These sources were used to formulate the product specification, including the six character indicators to be addressed.

In the product design stage, the researcher produced a guidebook and a set of cards. The guidebook was prepared in A5 format, and the cards were designed at 9 × 5.5 cm and printed on 260 g/m² art carton. The validation stage involved three expert assessments

covering media, material, and language aspects, and the revision stage used the validators' scores and comments to improve the product. The activities and outputs of each stage are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Stages, Activities, and Outputs of the Development Procedure

Stage	Main Activities	Output
1. Potentials and problems	One week of observation in September 2025, interview with the school counselor, and review of the student needs assessment	Identified need for an interactive character medium
2. Information collection	Review of theory and previous studies on positive character, card media, regional songs, local wisdom, and guidance services	Product specification and six character indicators
3. Product design	Designing an A5 guidebook and 40 cards (9 × 5.5 cm, 260 g/m² art carton) with regional songs in the play mechanism	Initial MEKAR prototype
4. Design validation	Assessment by media, material, and language experts using four-point validation sheets	Feasibility percentages and comments
5. Product revision	Revision of questions, theoretical content, service plan, and wording based on the validators' input	Revised MEKAR product

Source: Research procedure (2026)

Validators and Instruments

The design was validated by lecturers of the Guidance and Counseling Study Program, Universitas Borneo Tarakan. The material and language assessments were completed by the same lecturer using two separate validation sheets, and the media assessment was completed by a lecturer who is also the second author of this article; this involvement is reported here for transparency. All instruments used a four-point rating scale: very poor (1), poor (2), good (3), and very good (4). The media sheet covered the size of the product, visual design, readability, quality of illustrations, consistency of layout, and clarity of the instructions for use. The material sheet covered the suitability, accuracy, and currency of the content, its presentation, and its contextual relevance. The language sheet covered six indicators: straightforwardness, communicativeness, dialogic and interactive quality, suitability for students' developmental level, conformity with language rules, and the use of terms, symbols, and icons. Each sheet also provided space for open comments and suggestions. Expert judgment of this kind is a recognized source of content-validity evidence for newly developed instruments and materials (Romero Jeldres et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive percentages. For each validator, the total score obtained was divided by the maximum possible score and multiplied by 100 to produce a feasibility percentage, which was then interpreted using the criteria in Table 2. The validators' comments and suggestions were analyzed qualitatively and used as the basis for revising the product. In development research, these qualitative comments are as important as the percentages, because they indicate which parts of the product need to be improved before it is tried out with users.

Table 2. Criteria for Interpreting Feasibility Percentages

Percentage	Category	Decision
85.01–100%	Highly feasible	Usable without major revision
70.01–85.00%	Feasible	Usable with minor revision
50.01–70.00%	Less feasible	Requires substantial revision
1.00–50.00%	Not feasible	Not usable

Source: Research instrument criteria (2026)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Needs Identified in the Preliminary Stage

The preliminary stage showed that students' difficulties were related not only to knowledge of character values but also to how those values appeared in their conduct at school. Observation found attention-seeking behavior during lessons, challenges in maintaining academic honesty, and a need for greater mutual respect among classmates. The school counselor confirmed that guidance services had been delivered in several formats but that delivery relying mainly on oral explanation sometimes reduced students' enthusiasm, and that no medium combining character content with regional songs had been used. The personal-domain needs assessment score of 31% reinforced the need for a medium that would make character values easier to understand and discuss. These findings formed the basis for designing a medium that is interactive, suitable for small groups, and connected to students' cultural experience.

Description of the Product

The product developed is MEKAR, which consists of a guidebook and a set of interactive cards. The guidebook serves as a manual for the school counselor and contains instructions for use, supporting material on positive character, the full set of question and challenge cards, a guidance service implementation plan (Rencana Pelaksanaan Layanan, RPL), and a reference list. One set of MEKAR contains 40 cards: 30 question cards designed to elicit reflective responses about the six character indicators and 10 challenge cards that ask students to carry out an action related to a character value. Regional songs and singing games are placed within the play mechanism. They are used to build the atmosphere, to regulate turns and the flow of the activity, and to connect the guidance session with students' cultural experience. The cards are designed to be used in small groups so that students can respond in turn. The components of the product are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Components of the MEKAR Product

Component	Description
Guidebook	A5 format; contains instructions for use, supporting material on positive character, question and challenge cards, a service implementation plan (RPL), and references
Question cards	30 cards eliciting reflective responses on honesty, independence, politeness, social virtue, intellectual thinking, and logical reasoning
Challenge cards	10 cards asking students to perform an action or task related to a character value
Card specification	9 × 5.5 cm, printed on 260 g/m² art carton
Regional songs and games	Ampar-Ampar Pisang, Cublak-Cublak Suweng, Ular Naga Panjang, Domikado, and Injit-Injit Semut, used to set the atmosphere and regulate the play sequence

Source: Product design (2026)

Expert Validation

The results of the expert validation are presented in Table 4. The media assessment produced a percentage of 86%, which falls in the highly feasible category and indicates that the size, visual design, readability, illustrations, layout consistency, and instructions for use were generally appropriate. The material assessment produced 72%, which falls in the feasible category. This result shows that the substance of MEKAR can be used but still leaves room for refinement. The language assessment produced 75%, also in the feasible category, indicating that the language of the product is generally understandable for junior high school students but still requires improvements in writing and precision of wording.

Table 4. Results of Expert Validation of the MEKAR Interactive Cards

Validator	Aspects Assessed	Percentage	Category
Media expert	Product size, visual design, readability, illustrations, layout consistency, instructions for use	86%	Highly feasible
Material expert	Suitability, accuracy, and currency of content; presentation; contextual relevance	72%	Feasible
Language expert	Straightforwardness, communicativeness, dialogic quality, developmental suitability, language rules, terms and symbols	75%	Feasible

Source: Data processing results (2026)

Product Revision

The validators' comments were used as the basis for revision rather than relying on the percentages alone. The media expert mainly suggested aligning the questions more closely with higher-order thinking and correcting writing mechanics. The material expert recommended strengthening the background and theoretical basis of the guidebook, reformulating the questions as short case studies, and adjusting the time allocation in the service implementation plan to the characteristics of junior high school students. The language expert advised improving spelling and the precision of wording. The suggestions and the corresponding revisions are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Validators' Suggestions and Revisions Made

Validator	Suggestion	Revision
Media expert	Align questions with higher-order thinking; correct writing mechanics	Questions were reworded to require explanation and judgment; typographical errors were corrected
Material expert	Strengthen background and theory; convert questions into case studies; adjust RPL time allocation	Theoretical material in the guidebook was expanded; questions were reformulated as short case scenarios; RPL timing was adjusted to junior high school students
Language expert	Improve spelling and precision of wording	Wording on the cards and in the guidebook was revised for accuracy and clarity

Source: Validators' comments and revision results (2026)

Discussion

The results indicate that MEKAR meets the feasibility criteria for use as a supporting medium in classroom and group guidance services. All three validation results exceeded the minimum threshold for the feasible category, and the revisions addressed the specific weaknesses identified by the validators. The following sections discuss how the product responds to students' needs, how it moves character content from knowledge toward practice, what role the regional songs play, how the validation results should be interpreted, and what limitations should be considered.

Responding to Students' Developmental Needs

The need for MEKAR arose from actual conditions in the school rather than from a general wish to introduce a new product. The behaviors observed at SMP Negeri 10 Tarakan, such as seeking attention during lessons and struggling with academic honesty, are understandable in light of adolescent development. Early adolescence is a period in which self-related and other-related thinking become closely intertwined (Crone & Fuligni, 2020), and sensitivity to peers is high (Andrews et al., 2021). A medium that places students in small groups and asks them to respond to character-related prompts in front of their peers can therefore use this sensitivity constructively, turning peer attention into a context for discussing values rather than a source of disruption. This reasoning is consistent with evidence that universal social and emotional learning programs improve behavior and peer relationships when they are implemented with adequate quality (Cipriano et al., 2023).

From the perspective of service delivery, MEKAR also responds to the counselor's observation that predominantly oral delivery reduced students' enthusiasm. Classroom guidance reaches all students, but it can easily become a lecture. Card-based activities allow the counselor to divide a class into small groups so that more students have a chance to respond, while group guidance can use the cards as stimuli for sharing experiences, discussing social situations, and formulating behavioral choices. Studies of counselor-led classroom programs have shown that structured, interactive lessons can strengthen social-emotional skills (Chance et al., 2023; Martinez et al., 2022), and MEKAR is intended to support this kind of structured interaction rather than to replace the counselor's role.

From Knowing Values to Practising Them

The revision that reformulated questions as short case studies is particularly important. Values such as honesty, independence, politeness, social virtue, intellectual thinking, and logical reasoning are easier to discuss when students face a situation that requires a choice. With case-based questions, the cards do not merely check whether students can define a value but give them room to explain the reasons for their choices and to consider the consequences. This approach is consistent with the view that character involves moral knowledge, feeling, and action (Hidayati et al., 2020) and with the reflective and collaborative stages that have been used to integrate character education into classroom learning (Sarkadi et al., 2022). The challenge cards extend this logic by asking students to enact a value, which provides the repeated opportunities for using strengths that school-based character interventions emphasize (Lavy, 2020).

The emphasis on reflection also addresses a known weakness of game-based approaches. Reviews of analog games have noted that many educational applications fail to connect game mechanics with intended learning (Sousa et al., 2023), and research on school engagement warns that motivation and participation alone do not capture whether students are cognitively and emotionally engaged (Ramírez Ruiz et al., 2024). For MEKAR, this means that the attractiveness of the cards is not sufficient. The counselor needs to manage the rules, time, and group composition, ask follow-up questions, and close each round with a brief reflection so that the activity remains directed toward the objectives of the service.

Regional Songs as Cultural Context

The integration of regional songs is the most distinctive feature of MEKAR. The songs create an atmosphere that differs from verbal delivery and help connect the guidance activity with students' cultural experience. This function is supported by research showing that the educational use of music is associated with emotional development and prosocial skills (Blasco-Magraner et al., 2021) and that emotion is a central mechanism through which music can influence prosocial behavior (Grimani et al., 2024). The use of familiar singing games also follows a line of Indonesian studies in which traditional games served as vehicles for character values and social skills (Irmansyah et al., 2020; Syahrial et al., 2022; Toharudin et al., 2021) and in which local wisdom was proposed as a foundation for character education (Tohri et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, the songs should not be treated as the end goal of the activity. Their value depends on whether the counselor links the experience of singing or playing with a reflection on the character value being discussed. Without that link, the songs risk functioning only as entertainment. In practice, a round of play can be followed by questions such as what the group noticed about taking turns, how members responded when someone made a mistake, or how a situation on a card relates to their experience at school. In this way, the cultural element becomes a bridge between enjoyable activity and the internalization of values.

Interpreting the Validation Results

The differences among the three validation results are informative. The media aspect received the highest rating (86%), whereas the material aspect received the lowest (72%). This pattern suggests that the initial strength of MEKAR lies more in its form and appearance than in its substance, so improving the content should be a priority in further development. An

attractive medium still needs a clear relationship between its questions, its challenges, the character indicators, and the objectives of the guidance service. The material expert's suggestions to strengthen the theoretical basis, to use case studies, and to adjust the service plan to the characteristics of junior high school students address exactly this relationship.

The language rating of 75% indicates that the cards and guidebook are generally understandable but still need careful wording. Language for adolescents must be simple enough to be grasped quickly during a game, yet rich enough to provoke thinking and reflection. A highly feasible or feasible category therefore does not mean that a product needs no further improvement. In development research, qualitative suggestions remain an essential part of refinement, and expert judgment provides content-validity evidence that must later be complemented by evidence from actual users (Romero Jeldres et al., 2023). The sequence of validation followed by revision applied here is characteristic of the Borg and Gall model, which places expert review and design improvement before field testing (Widodo et al., 2025).

Comparison with Previous Studies

The development of MEKAR reinforces earlier findings on the potential of games and analog media as tools for learning and personal development. Gamification and educational games have been associated with better learning outcomes, motivation, and engagement (Li et al., 2023; Sailer & Homner, 2020; Yu et al., 2021; Zainuddin et al., 2020), and board and card games have been linked to gains in knowledge, interaction, and motivation (Noda et al., 2019; Sousa et al., 2023). Students also tend to prefer and engage more with game-based lessons than with lecture-based ones (Hartt et al., 2020). MEKAR differs from these products in its target level, which is junior high school guidance services, in its focus on six specific indicators of positive character, and in its integration of regional songs. Compared with traditional-game studies in Indonesian primary schools (Irmansyah et al., 2020; Syahrial et al., 2022), MEKAR places the cultural element inside a counseling medium designed to be facilitated by a school counselor rather than within a subject lesson.

Implications and Limitations

MEKAR has practical implications for school counselors because it can be used as an alternative medium in both classroom and group guidance. Counselors can adapt the cards to the theme of a session, select the number of cards according to the available time, and add reflection questions. Schools can also develop other culture-based activities as part of their character-strengthening programs, consistent with the role of local wisdom in character education (Tohri et al., 2022).

The study also has limitations. Methodologically, it stopped at the fifth stage of the Borg and Gall model, so no field trial was conducted with students and no changes in students' character were measured. The findings therefore show the feasibility of the product according to expert judgment, not its effectiveness. In addition, the material and language assessments were completed by the same validator, and the media validator was also a member of the author team, which may have influenced the ratings. Technically, the product depends on the durability of the card material, requires space for group activity, and relies on audio when songs are used to regulate the game. Future research should conduct field trials with larger samples and use quasi-experimental designs to examine the effect of MEKAR on positive

character. Such studies could combine behavioral observation, character questionnaires, interviews, and teacher ratings, and they should involve independent validators who are not part of the research team.

CONCLUSION

This research and development study produced MEKAR, an interactive card medium with regional songs consisting of an A5 guidebook and 40 cards measuring 9 × 5.5 cm, namely 30 question cards and 10 challenge cards, designed to support positive character services for students at SMP Negeri 10 Tarakan. The development followed the Borg and Gall model up to its fifth stage: identifying potentials and problems, collecting information, designing the product, validating the design, and revising the product. The media expert rated the product at 86% (highly feasible), the material expert at 72% (feasible), and the language expert at 75% (feasible). Revisions based on the validators' input included aligning the questions with higher-order thinking, reformulating them as short case studies, strengthening the theoretical material, adjusting the time allocation in the service plan, and improving the wording. MEKAR therefore meets the feasibility criteria for use as a supporting medium in classroom and group guidance services. Its main strength lies in combining question cards, challenge cards, group activity, and regional songs. Because the study did not reach the field-testing stage, this feasibility should not be equated with evidence of effectiveness, and future research should test the medium with students using experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

A.R.: conceptualization, investigation, product design (cards and guidebook), data collection, formal analysis, and writing–original draft. N.A.: supervision, methodology, media validation, and writing–review and editing. K.: supervision and writing–review and editing. R.: supervision and writing–review and editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript. The involvement of the second author as the media validator is reported in the Method section.

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