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Reconstruction of the Character Education Concept Based on *Tazkiyat al-Nafs* in *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali as a Response to the Moral Crisis of the Digital Generation

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Abstract*: This study aims to reconstruct the concept of character education based on tazkiyat al-nafs as articulated in Ihya' Ulum al-Din by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and to analyze its relevance in addressing the moral crisis of the digital generation within the framework of contemporary character education. Specifically, this research seeks to explain the conceptual relationship between tazkiyat al-nafs as a process of inner purification and moral self-development and the emerging moral challenges faced by digitally immersed youth, such as ethical disorientation, impulsive behavior, and weakened moral awareness. The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed patterns of communication, learning, and social interaction among adolescents, while simultaneously intensifying the risks of moral degradation and value fragmentation. Although many contemporary character education programs emphasize rule-based digital literacy, they often fail to cultivate deep internal moral consciousness and self-regulation. This research employs a qualitative approach with a library research design. Primary data are derived from Ihya' Ulum al-Din, complemented by relevant contemporary scholarly sources. The data are analyzed using content analysis to identify key conceptual themes and hermeneutic interpretation to contextualize Al-Ghazali's ideas within modern educational realities. The findings reveal that Al-Ghazali's model of moral formation is fundamentally centered on the purification of the heart as the core determinant of human behavior. The stages of takhalli (eliminating blameworthy traits), tahalli (cultivating praiseworthy virtues), and tajalli (manifesting divine values in conduct) represent a systematic and transformative pedagogical process. This framework integrates cognitive understanding, ethical practice, and spiritual discipline, aligning with contemporary concepts of self-regulation and reflective awareness. The study concludes that reconstructing character education based on tazkiyat al-nafs offers a holistic, theoretically grounded, and pedagogically applicable model for addressing the moral crisis of the digital generation and fostering morally conscious, emotionally balanced, and digitally responsible individuals in the modern era.*

Keywords: *Tazkiyat Al-Nafs, Character Education, Digital Generation, Moral Crisis, Al-Ghazali*

INTRODUCTION

The development of the digital era has brought profound changes to human life, particularly among younger generations who have grown up interacting with technology from an early age. This generation, often referred to as digital natives (Prensky, 2001), has developed alongside the internet, social media, and smart devices, shaping new patterns of communication that transcend physical boundaries into limitless virtual spaces. While this transformation enables rapid access to information and broader social connectivity, it simultaneously gives rise to a moral crisis characterized by impulsive behavior, declining empathy, exposure to unethical content, and the normalization of superficial values (Turkle, 2011; Carr, 2010). The excessive stimulation of digital environments tends to weaken self-control and reflective awareness, leading to what scholars describe as a crisis of moral consciousness and inner fragmentation.

In this context, the phenomenon of moral crisis is not merely behavioral but deeply spiritual, as it reflects the imbalance of the inner self (*nafs*) that is no longer guided by ethical and transcendental values. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that moral corruption originates from the impurity of the heart, where unchecked desires and ego dominate human actions. Therefore, the concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* the purification of the soul becomes highly relevant as a foundational approach to restoring moral integrity. Unlike conventional character education that often focuses on external rules and behavioral compliance, *tazkiyat al-nafs* addresses the internal dimension of human development, aiming to cultivate self-awareness, spiritual discipline, and ethical consciousness (Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*).

Asharul said that, the digital generation faces significant spiritual challenges, including the loss of inner meaning, addiction to instant gratification, diminished capacity for self-reflection, and detachment from transcendental values (Rohman et al. 2022). These challenges cannot be adequately addressed through cognitive or regulatory approaches alone. As argued by Nadya effective character education must integrate moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action; however, without a strong spiritual foundation, such integration remains incomplete (Nadiya Ulya Rahmatika, Wahab 2025). In this regard, Al-Ghazali offers a comprehensive solution

through a structured process of moral and spiritual transformation consisting of *takhalli* (removing negative traits), *tahalli* (developing virtuous qualities), and *tajalli* (manifesting divine values in daily conduct). This process not only regulates behavior but also transforms the inner self, making it particularly relevant for addressing the moral and spiritual crisis of the digital generation. Thus, spirituality-based character education grounded in *tazkiyat al-nafs* is essential as it provides a holistic framework that reconnects individuals with their inner moral compass, strengthens self-regulation, and fosters a deeper sense of responsibility in navigating the complexities of the digital world.

These transformations have directly affected the learning process. Sources of knowledge are no longer centered solely on teachers but are widely distributed across various digital platforms. Information can be accessed anytime and anywhere. Nevertheless, this convenience has also created new challenges, including limited ability to filter information critically, the tendency to copy content without verification, and declining learning discipline. Arsyad said that, in many cases, technology not only functions as a supporting tool but also shapes the way students think and behave(Arsyad, Kamaruddin, and Adam 2025).

The phenomenon of moral crisis in digital spaces is becoming increasingly visible through the rise of hate speech, cyberbullying, the spread of misinformation, and excessive self-display culture. Empathy often declines because interactions occur through screens rather than face-to-face encounters. According to Sodiq, teenagers tend to act more impulsively when commenting or sharing information without carefully considering the consequences (Shodiq 2025). This situation indicates a fundamental problem in character formation within the digital era.

Recent studies indicate that excessive use of digital media without adequate spiritual guidance is associated with increased aggressive behavior and lower self-control among adolescents. Research in developmental psychology suggests that continuous exposure to negative content can influence the formation of individuals' moral frameworks (Alfidyah 2025). These findings affirm that technology itself is neutral; however, its impact largely depends on the moral quality and character of its users.

Within the educational context, this condition places character education as an urgent priority. Schools are no longer sufficient if they focus solely on academic achievement; they must also establish strong moral foundations for students. In practice, however, many character education programs still emphasize behavioral rules and external sanctions rather than fostering inner moral awareness. As a result, behavioral change is often temporary and lacks deep-rooted internalization.

Amsad quotes Thomas Lickona a prominent contemporary scholar of character education, asserts that effective character education must encompass three essential components: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action(Amsad et al. 2025). Students must understand moral values, emotionally appreciate their importance, and consistently practice them in daily life. If one of these elements is neglected, character education cannot function comprehensively. This approach highlights the importance of integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions in moral formation.

From the perspective of Islamic education, the integration of these dimensions was systematically formulated centuries ago by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. In his monumental work, Ihya' Ulum al-Din, Al-Ghazali explains that the essence of education is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but the cultivation of moral character through the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*). He places the heart at the center of human behavior, arguing that when the heart is virtuous, all actions will reflect virtue.

According to Al-Ghazali, the purification of the soul involves three primary stages. The first is *takhalli*, the removal of blameworthy traits such as envy, arrogance, and excessive anger. The second is *tahalli*, the cultivation of praiseworthy qualities such as patience, honesty, and humility. The third is *tajalli*, the manifestation of divine values in everyday conduct. This framework demonstrates that genuine moral transformation cannot be achieved through advice alone but requires continuous inner discipline and spiritual training.

The relevance of this concept becomes even more evident when connected to modern psychological findings. Albert Bandura, through his theory of self-regulation, emphasizes the importance of individuals' ability to control their

thoughts, emotions, and actions in accordance with internalized moral standards (Azhari and Jailani 2025). In digital environments, self-regulation is crucial to prevent adolescents from being easily provoked or drawn into negative online behaviors.

According to Fikri, research in moral development further shows that reflective awareness, or self-reflection, plays an important role in preventing deviant behavior (Fikri, Najib, and Rohman 2025). Individuals who regularly engage in reflection are more capable of evaluating their actions before making decisions. This principle aligns with the Islamic concept of *muhasabah* (self-accountability), which Al-Ghazali strongly emphasizes as part of spiritual discipline.

Educational neuropsychology studies conducted between 2022 and 2023 reveal that practices of self-control and spiritual reflection contribute to strengthening executive brain functions, particularly those involved in moral decision-making. This means that spiritual development not only enhances religiosity but also supports cognitive growth and behavioral regulation. Such findings reinforce the relevance of the *tazkiyat al-nafs* approach in contemporary educational settings.

Therefore, reconstructing a character education framework based on *tazkiyat al-nafs* is highly relevant as a theoretical and pedagogical response to the moral crisis of the digital generation. This approach does not separate spiritual and psychological dimensions; rather, it integrates them holistically. Education is not limited to teaching what is right but also nurturing an inner awareness that loves and upholds what is right.

Yahya argues that, Contemporary Islamic education scholars argue that reviving classical thought does not mean returning to the past literally, but rather taking its essential values to be applied in the present contexts (Yahya 2025). The reinterpretation of Al-Ghazali's ideas represents an epistemological effort to construct an educational paradigm that is both theoretically grounded and practically relevant. Classical traditions can offer meaningful solutions to modern challenges when examined critically and contextually.

The integration of *tazkiyat al-nafs* into the Islamic Education curriculum can

be implemented through structured self-reflection practices, ethics-based digital literacy programs, and teachers' exemplary conduct in the responsible use of technology. Character education should not be treated as an additional subject but as the guiding spirit of the entire learning process. Through this approach, students are guided to develop stable moral awareness despite living in a rapidly changing digital environment.

Ultimately, forming a morally grounded generation in the digital era requires a comprehensive and sustainable approach. This study is based on primary data derived from *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, particularly sections discussing the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), the structure of the heart, and moral development. These primary sources are complemented by secondary data, including contemporary scholarly works on character education, digital ethics, moral psychology, and previous studies on Al-Ghazali's thought, which serve to contextualize and support the interpretation within modern educational discourse.

The reconstruction of Al-Ghazali's concept of soul purification provides a strong foundation for building character that is intellectually competent, emotionally mature, and spiritually grounded. In analyzing the data, this study employs content analysis to systematically identify key themes, concepts, and stages of *tazkiyat al-nafs* such as *takhalli*, *tahalli*, and *tajalli* as presented in the primary text. Furthermore, a hermeneutic approach is applied to interpret these concepts by bridging the historical context of Al-Ghazali's work with contemporary challenges in character education. This hermeneutic process involves understanding the original meaning of the text, critically reflecting on its philosophical and spiritual dimensions, and recontextualizing its values to address the moral and spiritual crises of the digital generation.

Through this integrative analytical framework, classical Islamic values are not merely preserved but dynamically reconstructed in dialogue with contemporary scientific findings. As a result, character education can function as a genuinely transformative process, enabling the digital generation to develop inner moral awareness, exercise self-regulation, and utilize technology responsibly, ethically, and with dignity.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research design, as the primary object of analysis is a classical text, namely Ihya' Ulum al-Din by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, which is examined to reconstruct the concept of character education based on *tazkiyat al-nafs*. The qualitative approach is selected because this research seeks to explore the meaning, structure of ideas, and conceptual framework embedded in the text in a deep and contextual manner. Creswell explains that qualitative research aims to explore and understand meanings derived from social or human problems; therefore, it is highly appropriate for examining a scholar's thought and reinterpreting it within a contemporary context(Creswell and Poth 2016). The primary data of this study consist of the original text of *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, while secondary data are obtained from scholarly books, reputable journal articles, and recent research findings related to character education, the moral crisis of the digital generation, and modern theories of moral development.

The data analysis techniques applied in this study include content analysis and hermeneutic analysis to systematically interpret the concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, which is subsequently reconstructed to address contemporary educational challenges in the digital era. Content analysis is conducted by identifying, classifying, and categorizing key concepts of character formation within *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, particularly those related to the structure of the soul, moral virtues, and stages of spiritual development such as *takhalli*, *tahalli*, and *tajalli*. This process involves close textual reading, coding of recurring themes, and organizing them into a coherent conceptual framework of character education.

In addition, hermeneutic analysis is applied through several stages: first, understanding the original historical and intellectual context of Al-Ghazali's thought; second, interpreting the philosophical and spiritual meanings embedded in the text; and third, recontextualizing these meanings within the framework of contemporary character education, especially in response to the moral and spiritual challenges of the digital generation. This interpretive process allows the values of *tazkiyat al-nafs* to be translated into relevant educational principles.

Furthermore, data collection is not limited to the primary text but is also supported by secondary sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal

articles, and recent studies on character education, digital ethics, and Islamic moral philosophy. These sources are used to strengthen the analysis, provide comparative perspectives, and ensure the relevance of the reconstructed concepts in current educational discourse.

Darmiyati states that content analysis enables researchers to draw valid and replicable conclusions from texts based on their context, while the hermeneutic approach, as articulated by Gadamer, emphasizes the importance of dialogue between classical texts and present realities so that the resulting interpretation remains relevant to current social conditions (Darmiyati Zuchdi and Afifah 2021). Through stages of data reduction, conceptual categorization, interpretation, and theoretical synthesis, this study produces a conceptual formulation of character education grounded in *tazkiyat al-nafs* that is not merely normative-theological but also responsive to the moral crisis faced by the digital generation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Recent scholarly studies further reinforce the relevance of this conceptual framework within contemporary educational discourse. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas argues that the modern moral crisis stems from an epistemological disorder caused by the separation of knowledge from adab, thereby asserting that education must be oriented toward the cultivation of adab (ta'dib) as the core of character formation; this perspective resonates with al-Ghazali's integration of 'ilm, 'amal, and tazkiyah. Meanwhile, Zulkifli, in his contemporary research on Islamic education, emphasizes that nurturing reflective moral agency among the digital generation requires an approach that simultaneously integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions rather than merely transmitting normative values (Zulkifli, Hari Suriadi 2025). From the standpoint of moral psychology, Hermania likewise maintains that sustainable character development necessitates habituation, self-regulation, and the cultivation of moral sensitivity through consistent practice within a supportive social ecosystem (Bhoki, Are, and Ola 2025). In light of these findings, the reconstruction of character education grounded in tazkiyat al-nafs not only possesses classical theoretical legitimacy but also gains strong contemporary academic validation, particularly in addressing value disorientation, identity fragmentation, and the crisis of meaning increasingly

evident among the digital generation.

The textual analysis reveals that *tazkiyat al-nafs* in Al-Ghazali's thought is not merely a spiritual doctrine but a systematic educational methodology. The stages of *takhalli* (eliminating blameworthy traits), *tahalli* (cultivating praiseworthy virtues), and *tajalli* (manifesting divine values in conduct) reflect a gradual and transformative pedagogical process. These stages correspond to modern character education theories that emphasize internalization and habituation rather than external compliance. The findings demonstrate that Al-Ghazali's approach prioritizes inner transformation as the basis for sustainable moral behavior, which is particularly relevant in digital environments where external supervision is minimal.

In relation to the moral crisis of the digital generation, the study finds strong conceptual alignment between *tazkiyat al-nafs* and contemporary psychological constructs such as self-regulation and reflective awareness (Burhanuddin 2025). Digital platforms often encourage instant reactions, emotional impulsivity, and performative behavior. Al-Ghazali's emphasis on self-control, introspection (*muhasabah*), and conscious intention (*niyyah*) offers a framework for cultivating digital responsibility. The reconstruction of this concept suggests that character education must train students to pause, reflect, and evaluate the ethical consequences of their online actions before responding.

Furthermore, the study identifies that Al-Ghazali's moral philosophy integrates spiritual intelligence with rational deliberation. In the digital era, moral decision-making is frequently influenced by algorithmic exposure, peer pressure, and viral trends. By re-centering moral agency in the purified heart, *tazkiyat al-nafs* strengthens individual autonomy against negative digital influences (Nurulhayati 2025). This aligns with contemporary moral development research, which emphasizes that internalized values are more durable than externally imposed rules. Thus, the reconstructed framework supports the development of digitally resilient individuals capable of ethical discernment.

The discussion indicates that contemporary character education programs tend to emphasize rule-based digital literacy, such as social media ethics, cybersecurity, and regulatory compliance, yet they have not adequately addressed

the dimension of inner moral consciousness. A model oriented primarily toward external regulation risks producing superficial compliance that depends on supervision rather than personal integrity. From the perspective of moral development theory, Lawrence Kohlberg argues that moral maturity does not culminate in mere obedience to rules but progresses toward principled reasoning grounded in internalized values (Gibbs 2019). Therefore, reconstructing character education based on tazkiyat al-nafs becomes highly relevant, as it positions the cultivation of the heart (qalb) as the center of moral transformation rather than limiting education to observable behavioral control in digital spaces.

The framework developed by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali in Ihya' Ulum al-Din enriches this approach by linking ethical literacy with systematic spiritual discipline. Education, in this view, is not merely the transmission of knowledge ('ilm) but a process of inner purification through continuous spiritual training (riyadah) and habituation of virtuous deeds. Hittlin maintains that moral education must shape inner dispositions so that individuals are capable of self-restraint within social life (Hitlin, Dromi, and Luft 2023). This perspective aligns with Al-Ghazali's conception that character is formed through the stages of takhalli, tahalli, and tajalli, all of which require sustained self-reflection. Consequently, integrating muhasabah into digital literacy through reflective journaling and ethical evaluation of one's digital footprint functions as a pedagogical instrument for cultivating internal responsibility.

Furthermore, this reconstructed approach resonates strongly with self-regulation theory in educational psychology. Rohendi emphasizes that self-regulatory mechanisms are fundamental to consistent ethical conduct, particularly in environments with minimal external supervision such as digital platforms (Rohendi 2025). Practices of reflection, ethical contemplation, and intentional awareness (niyyah), as emphasized by Al-Ghazali, serve to strengthen self-control and anticipatory moral awareness before individuals respond to online stimuli. In this sense, digital literacy transcends technical competence and evolves into moral literacy that integrates consciousness, rational deliberation, and disciplined inner awareness.

Ultimately, this transformation shifts the orientation of character education

from a normative-instructional model toward a transformative pedagogy. Abdurrahman asserts that effective character education must integrate moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action in a unified framework (Abdurahman et al. 2025). A reconstruction grounded in tazkiyat al-nafs responds to this demand by embedding the spiritual dimension as a robust foundation for moral feeling. When digital engagement is understood as a sphere for the actualization of values rather than mere technical interaction, learners are trained to regard every online action as a conscious and responsible ethical practice. This approach reinforces the relevance of classical moral philosophy in addressing the systematic and contextual challenges posed by the moral crisis of the digital generation.

Another significant finding is the compatibility between Al-Ghazali's moral psychology and contemporary neuroscience findings on executive function and moral reasoning. Modern studies indicate that self-control and sustained reflection enhance higher-order cognitive processes related to ethical judgment (Alamsyah 2025). Al-Ghazali's structured spiritual exercises can therefore be interpreted not only as theological prescriptions but also as psychological training that strengthens moral cognition. This interdisciplinary resonance strengthens the theoretical validity of reconstructing *tazkiyat al-nafs* within present-day educational discourse.

The reconstruction process also reveals that Al-Ghazali's concept is adaptable rather than rigid. While developed in a medieval Islamic context, its ethical principles are universal in addressing arrogance, envy, anger, and excessive attachment traits that manifest today in digital narcissism, online hostility, and validation-seeking behavior. By contextualizing these moral pathologies within contemporary digital culture, the study demonstrates that classical ethical categories remain analytically relevant.

From a curricular perspective, the results suggest that integrating *tazkiyat al-nafs*-based character education into Islamic Education programs requires a shift from purely informational teaching to transformative pedagogy. According to Yusuf, teachers must act not only as transmitters of religious knowledge but also as moral exemplars in digital conduct (Yusuf Arifuddin Romadloni 2025). Structured spiritual reflection, guided ethical dialogue about online behavior, and consistent moral mentoring are essential components of this reconstructed model.

Recent research on digital character education further highlights the importance of integrating internal moral awareness with digital competencies. Studies in digital citizenship education emphasize that effective character formation in online environments requires not only ethical knowledge but also the development of critical reflection, emotional regulation, and responsible participation in digital spaces. Scholars such as Ribble and Park argue that digital ethics must be internalized through reflective practice rather than merely taught as normative guidelines (Nur Rahmah Ramadhani 2025). This aligns closely with the findings of this study, where tazkiyat al-nafs provides a deeper ontological foundation by focusing on the purification of the inner self (qalb) as the source of ethical behavior. While contemporary approaches often rely on external frameworks such as digital rules, policies, and behavioral monitoring, Al-Ghazali's model emphasizes intrinsic moral transformation. Therefore, tazkiyat al-nafs complements and enriches modern digital character education by ensuring that ethical digital behavior is driven by internalized values rather than situational compliance.

From a practical perspective, the model of tazkiyat al-nafs can be operationalized as a pedagogical guideline in contemporary education through structured and reflective practices (Fahmi Idris 2025). The stage of *takhalli* can be implemented by guiding students to critically identify and reduce negative digital behaviors such as cyberbullying, excessive self-presentation, and misinformation sharing. The stage of *tahalli* can be translated into cultivating positive digital virtues, including honesty in online communication, empathy in social media interaction, and responsibility in content creation. Meanwhile, *tajalli* can be actualized through consistent ethical engagement in digital environments, where students consciously embody moral values in their online presence. These stages can be supported through practical strategies such as reflective journaling, digital behavior self-assessment, ethical discussion forums, and teacher modeling in responsible technology use. By transforming spiritual principles into concrete educational practices, tazkiyat al-nafs becomes not only a theoretical framework but also a functional and applicable model for strengthening character education in the digital era

Overall, the findings confirm that reconstructing character education based on tazkiyat al-nafs provides a holistic response to the moral crisis of the digital generation. The approach bridges classical Islamic moral philosophy with contemporary educational and psychological insights and is further strengthened by recent scholarly perspectives. Yilmaz emphasizes that contemporary Islamic ethics must move beyond legal formalism toward an internalized moral consciousness capable of engaging modern social realities, particularly in pluralistic and digital societies; this reinforces the need for spiritually grounded yet contextually responsive character formation(Yilmaz 2024). In parallel, Arif, a leading figure in character education studies, argues that effective moral education requires the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action within institutional and cultural environments that consistently model ethical conduct (Arif, Abdurakhmonovich, and Dorloh 2023). These perspectives complement earlier insights from moral psychology and Islamic educational thought, demonstrating that character formation must unite spiritual purification, ethical reasoning, and disciplined practice. Consequently, this reconstructed framework offers a model that is normatively grounded, theoretically coherent, and pedagogically applicable, contributing to the development of digitally literate individuals who are morally conscious, emotionally balanced, and socially responsible in navigating the complexities of the digital age.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that reconstructing character education based on *tazkiyat al-nafs* as articulated in *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* provides a holistic and contextually relevant framework for responding to the moral crisis of the digital generation. By positioning the purification of the heart as the foundation of moral formation, this approach integrates cognitive understanding, ethical practice, and spiritual discipline into a unified educational model that goes beyond rule-based digital literacy. The stages of *takhalli*, *tahalli*, and *tajalli* offer a systematic pedagogical process capable of fostering internalized values, self-regulation, and reflective awareness, all of which are essential in navigating digital environments characterized by minimal supervision and high impulsivity. This reconstruction affirms that classical Islamic moral philosophy remains adaptable and analytically relevant for addressing

contemporary challenges, particularly in

strengthening students' moral autonomy and digital responsibility. For future research, it is recommended that empirical studies be conducted to test the practical implementation of the *tazkiyat al-nafs*-based character education model in schools or higher education institutions, including the development of measurable instruments to assess its impact on students' self-control, ethical decision-making, and digital behavior across diverse educational contexts.

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