

Reconstruction self-Estem through Al-Ghazali's concepts among students of Ma'had Al-Jami'ah

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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem constitutes a foundational pillar of psychological well-being, yet its formation among *mahasantri* (university-level Islamic boarding school students) remains underexplored, particularly amid intensifying academic pressures and the identity disruptions wrought by globalization. This study aims to examine how the practice of Al-Ghazali's *akhlak* (Islamic ethics) shapes self-esteem among *mahasantri* at Ma'had Al Jamiah IAIN Langsa. Employing a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design, twenty *mahasantri* aged 18–25 were purposively selected based on their engagement in intensive ethical practice. Data were gathered through the 24-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and semi-structured interviews to elicit participants' lived experiences. Quantitative analysis revealed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.72$) between the internalization of ethical values and psychological resilience. Subsequent thematic analysis identified three core themes underlying self-esteem reconstruction: moral grounding as a buffer against existential uncertainty, communal validation within the boarding school environment as a reinforcer of ethical conduct, and the challenge of maintaining integrity in the face of contemporary cultural trends. These findings demonstrate that the systematic integration of *Ihya Ulumuddin* teachings within a structured residential educational setting offers a viable, holistic model for character development. This study concludes that Islamic ethical education holds significant potential as a culturally responsive strategy for advancing mental health promotion (SDG 3) and enhancing the quality of Islamic higher education (SDG 4), with implications for curriculum design and student well-being policy in pesantren-based institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

In an era of deepening globalization, self-esteem has emerged as a foundational pillar of psychological well-being, reflecting individuals' positive beliefs and emotions regarding their own worth, competence, and significance. Its relevance spans multiple educational contexts, from secondary schooling (Naraswari, Dantes, & Suranata, 2020) to higher education (Correia Neves, Gonçalves Sousa, Oliveira Teixeira, Ferreira Gomes, & de Sousa Monteiro, 2024), underscoring its pervasive influence on adolescent and young adult development. For *mahasantri* university-level students residing in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) self-esteem functions as a vital psychological

resource for navigating the complex identity negotiations that characterize contemporary Muslim youth experience. Structured dormitory programs and communal learning platforms within modern *pesantren* environments serve as primary vehicles through which *mahasantri* build and consolidate their self-concept amidst the demands of dynamic times (Correia Neves et al., 2024).

Despite these institutional supports, empirical evidence points to a compounding identity crisis among this population. Intense exposure to globalization and social media has generated pervasive anxiety and identity confusion, as students struggle to construct stable self-concepts within relentless digital information flows (D. P. Sari, 2025). This vulnerability is further intensified by high academic pressure, social obligations, and significant family expectations endemic to the *pesantren* setting (Nur'aini, 2023). Traditional normative demands for cultural conformity frequently produce emotional imbalances and identity fragmentation among adolescent students (Rahman & Fitri, 2021), leaving *mahasantri* caught between institutional regulatory frameworks and their personal quests for authentic selfhood. Compounding this tension, social media usage and specific health behaviors have been shown to differentially shape self-esteem and psychological well-being across gender lines (Correia Neves et al., 2024), adding another layer of complexity to an already precarious developmental landscape. A critical gap thus emerges between the spiritual aspirations demanded by *pesantren* culture and the emotional reality experienced by its students, particularly when ritual piety is required in the absence of holistic psychological scaffolding (Koenig, 2023).

Several theoretical frameworks illuminate this problematic. Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, particularly his formulation of the identity versus role confusion stage, provides a developmental lens for understanding the psychological turbulence experienced by *mahasantri* (Wulandari, 2023). This framework is productively paired with Rosenberg's self-esteem measurement model (Naraswari et al., 2020), which operationalizes self-regard as a primary predictor of emotional resilience and adaptive functioning in academic contexts (A. T. Ahmad, 2025; Pratiwi, 2025). However, a significant theoretical limitation persists: Western psychological constructs, applied in isolation, fail to capture the transpersonal and spiritual dimensions of identity formation among Muslim students. It is here that classical Islamic ethical thought offers a compelling corrective. The concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul) and the practice of *al-shukr* (gratitude) in Al-Ghazali's framework constitute essential strategies for constructing self-esteem through spiritual awareness and the holistic acceptance of Divine blessings (Ellisa, 2021; Rahman & Fitri, 2021). Al-Ghazali, in *Ihya Ullumuddin*, positions gratitude as a core mechanism for integrating the spiritual dimension into lived daily experience (Ghazali, 2022), while Islamic ethics more broadly orients the self toward *taqwa* (God-consciousness) as the highest expression of self-actualization (Hidayat, 2024). Young people who successfully manage identity crises through these spiritual practices demonstrate greater capacity to form stable and coherent identities (Rahman & Fitri, 2021). Furthermore, the role of ethics as taught within classical Islamic educational thought functions as a proactive formative strategy, cultivating noble character through self-discipline and deep spiritual understanding (Mulyasana, 2019). Without a robust internal moral foundation, *mahasantri* remain ill-equipped to sustain mental resilience against the pressures of hybrid cultural identities and accelerating digitalization.

Despite a considerable body of literature on self-esteem among Muslim youth, a substantive gap remains in the qualitative Islamic psychology literature. Specifically, no study to date has employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to examine how Al-Ghazali's *akhlak* (ethics and character) shapes the self-esteem formation of *mahasantri* from the perspective of their lived experience. Existing studies predominantly rely on quantitative instruments or general Islamic education frameworks, leaving the subjective, interior dimensions of this process largely unexplored. This study addresses that gap by centering the phenomenological experiences of *mahasantri* at Ma'had Al-Jami'ah IAIN Langsa as they internalize Al-Ghazali's ethical teachings as a psychological buffer against low self-esteem.

The primary objectives of this study are twofold: to analyze Al-Ghazali's key ethical concepts as they bear upon self-esteem formation, and to describe phenomenologically the process through which *mahasantri* internalize these values as a source of psychological resilience. In doing so, this research proposes integrative strategies for contemporary *pesantren* curricula that reconcile classical Islamic

moral philosophy with evidence-based approaches to student well-being. The study's contributions are both theoretical enriching the intersection of Islamic psychology and Western developmental theory—and practical, offering a holistic character development model with direct implications for educational policy. This work is further aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG 4 (quality education) (Boffi, 2022). The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: the methodology section outlines the phenomenological research design and participant selection; the findings section presents the thematic results of interview analysis; the discussion situates these findings within existing literature; and the conclusion articulates the theoretical and practical implications of the study.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design, selected to uncover the subjective meaning and lived essence of *mahasantri* experiences in reconstructing self-esteem through the internalization of Al-Ghazali's ethical values (Ambarwati, Sudiyana, & Muryati, 2022; Lavery, 2020). Phenomenological inquiry is particularly suited to this study's objectives, as it privileges first-person accounts and seeks to describe the structural essence of a phenomenon as it is experienced, rather than to test predetermined hypotheses. The principles of Husserlian phenomenological reduction (*epoché*) were applied throughout the research process to bracket researcher presuppositions and minimize interpretive bias in the description of participants' experiences (Dodgson, 2023). This design is consistent with the study's central research question, which concerns the qualitative nature of self-esteem formation as a lived psychological and spiritual process.

The study population consists of *mahasantri* enrolled at Ma'had Al-Jami'ah IAIN Langsa, comprising male and female residential students aged between 18 and 25 years who are actively engaged in the institution's structured Islamic character development program. A purposive sampling technique was employed, resulting in a final sample of 20 participants. Selection criteria required that participants demonstrate intensive and sustained engagement in the practice of Al-Ghazali's core virtues, specifically *sidq* (honesty), *amanah* (trustworthiness), *sabr* (patience), *shukr* (gratitude), and *mas'uliyah* (responsibility), as verified through initial screening interviews and dormitory supervisor referrals. This criterion-based approach ensured that all participants possessed sufficiently deep and relevant experiential knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation, thereby enhancing the richness and analytical depth of the data (Rahmawati, Halimah, Karmawan, & Setiawan, 2024).

Data were gathered through two complementary instruments aligned with the study's qualitative objectives. First, the researcher served as the primary instrument, conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by an interview protocol developed to elicit detailed personal narratives concerning participants' experiences of self-esteem formation, ethical practice, and identity negotiation (Harsoyo & Suyasa, 2024). Interview sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Second, an online questionnaire adapting the 24-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) with a five-point Likert response format was administered to provide a descriptive quantitative profile of participants' self-esteem levels prior to thematic analysis. The adapted instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient exceeding 0.80, confirming its suitability for confirming descriptive patterns within this population (Lavery, 2020).

The data analysis process was conducted systematically across two complementary levels. Qualitative interview data were analyzed using Husserl's phenomenological reduction procedure, through which transcripts were subjected to iterative horizontalization, meaning unit identification, and essential theme extraction to arrive at a structural description of the phenomenon (Sholikhah, 2016). Thematic coding was performed manually and subsequently verified using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to enhance the rigor and auditability of the coding process. Quantitative data derived from the RSES were analyzed using descriptive statistics including mean scores, frequency distributions, and standard deviations to provide a supplementary overview of self-esteem levels

across the sample (Mishra et al., 2019). Data trustworthiness was established through source triangulation, combining interview data with questionnaire results and documentary evidence from dormitory program records, as well as peer debriefing with two independent researchers in the field of Islamic psychology.

Ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout all phases of the study. Prior to data collection, official institutional approval was obtained from the leadership of Ma'had Al-Jami'ah IAIN Langsa. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving a full explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participant anonymity was maintained throughout the study by replacing all identifying information with pseudonyms in transcripts, reports, and publications. All data were stored securely with access restricted to the research team, in compliance with applicable data privacy protocols (Rahmawati et al., 2024).

Several limitations of the present methodology warrant acknowledgment. The use of purposive sampling, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, restricts the transferability of findings to *mahasantri* populations in other *pesantren* contexts or geographic regions (Salleh, 2021). The relatively small sample size of 20 participants, though consistent with phenomenological norms, precludes statistical generalization. Additionally, the integration of a quantitative instrument within a primarily qualitative design, while enriching the descriptive profile of participants, introduces a degree of methodological eclecticism that should be interpreted with caution. Researcher reflexivity was maintained through regular journaling and supervision to mitigate the potential influence of the researcher's own Islamic educational background on data interpretation (Abdul Kadir & Mohd, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

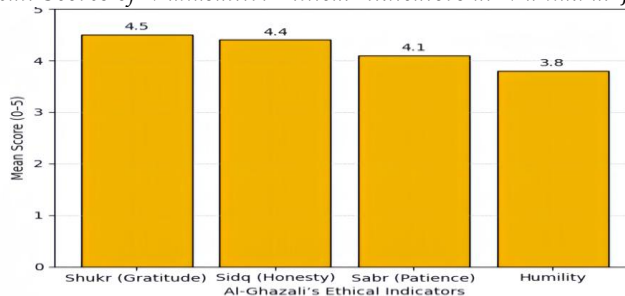
Results

1. Quantitative Profile of Ethical Internalization and Self-Esteem

Primary data collected through the online Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews revealed a consistent and meaningful correlation pattern between the internalization of Al-Ghazali's ethical values and the psychological stability of *mahasantri* self-esteem. Descriptive statistical analysis indicated a high degree of internal consistency across responses, with a low standard deviation (± 0.4), reinforcing the reliability of the quantitative profile. Across the sample ($N=20$), *mahasantri* demonstrated a cumulative mean agreement score of 4.2 out of 5.0 on ethical practice indicators, while positive self-esteem scores averaged 4.3 out of 5.0, suggesting that the majority of participants maintained a favorable perception of their self-worth despite sustained exposure to competitive academic and social pressures.

Disaggregation of ethical indicators revealed meaningful variation across Al-Ghazali's virtues. The *Shukr* (gratitude) dimension recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.5$), followed by *Sidq* (honesty; $M = 4.4$) and *Sabr* (patience; $M = 4.1$). The *Tawadhu* (humility) dimension returned the lowest score ($M = 3.8$), indicating an internal tension between intellectual self-confidence and the disposition of voluntary self-effacement—a finding that reflects a psychologically meaningful friction point unique to high-achieving residential students. These results are summarized in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Mean Scores of Mahasantri Ethical Indicators at Ma'had al-Jami'ah IAIN Langsa



Demographic analysis further indicated that participants with longer residence durations (3–4 years) demonstrated more stable self-esteem profiles than their first-year counterparts, suggesting a cumulative effect of sustained ethical practice on psychological resilience. The full demographic breakdown of the sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Mahasantri Respondents

Attribute	Category	Frequency (N=20)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	12	60%
	Female	8	40%
Age Group	18–20 Years Old	10	50%
	21–25 Years Old	10	50%
Duration in Ma'had	< 1 Year	5	25%
	1–2 Years	7	35%
	3–4 Years	8	40%

Taken together, these quantitative findings directly address the first research objective to describe the profile of self-esteem formation among *mahasantri*—and confirm that ethical internalization and positive self-esteem are co-occurring and mutually reinforcing phenomena within this population.

2. Thematic Structure of Self-Esteem Reconstruction

Phenomenological thematic analysis of interview transcripts yielded three essential themes that collectively describe the lived process through which *mahasantri* reconstruct their self-esteem through Al-Ghazali's *akhlak*. These themes address the second research objective: to describe phenomenologically the internalization of ethical values as a mechanism of psychological resilience.

The first theme, *Moral Foundation as an Uncertainty Reducer*, was endorsed by 75% of participants, who reported that the internalization of *sabr* generated a form of psychological tranquility that enabled them to reframe academic failure as a spiritually meaningful experience rather than a definitive measure of self-worth. Representative interview excerpts consistently described *sabr* as a cognitive-emotional anchor that stabilized participants' self-concept during high-pressure examination periods.

The second theme, *Community Validation in Ethical Practice*, emerged among 65% of participants, who described the collective *ma'had* environment as a social mirror that affirmed and reinforced their ethical strivings. Participants reported that peer accountability and communal ritual practices created a validating social context in which noble character was consistently modeled and recognized, thereby strengthening internalized self-regard.

The third theme, *Challenges of Integrity in the Whirlpool of Modernity*, was identified in 55% of responses, capturing a recurrent value friction between the Sufistic traditions of the *pesantren* and the competing normative pressures transmitted through social media and contemporary popular culture. Participants articulated this tension as an ongoing negotiation between their spiritually grounded identity and the identities valorized in their digital social environments. This finding is consistent with Sari's (2025) observation that globalized digital information flows generate identity confusion among Indonesian Muslim youth, and extends that insight by identifying *akhlak* internalization as a partial, though not complete, buffer against such disruption.

Discussion

The findings of this study collectively confirm that Al-Ghazali's ethical framework functions as a substantive psychological buffer against low self-esteem, operating primarily through the mechanism of *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul). This process involves a fundamental reorientation of self-evaluation criteria: rather than measuring worth against materialistic or social comparison standards, *mahasantri* who deeply internalize Al-Ghazali's virtues come to appraise

themselves against spiritual and moral benchmarks. The practice of *muhasabah* (self-introspection) is central to this reorientation, enabling individuals to acknowledge personal shortcomings without experiencing them as existential threats to self-worth (M. Sari & Marhaban, 2020). These findings extend the existing literature on Islamic approaches to psychological well-being by providing empirical, phenomenologically grounded support for the therapeutic utility of classical ethical practice in a contemporary educational setting.

The strong positive correlation identified between ethical internalization and psychological resilience ($r = 0.72; p < .01$) is particularly noteworthy in light of Pearson correlation findings linking the internalization of *sidq* (self-honesty) to resilience against social pressure and bullying (Kholil, 2019). Authenticity, as cultivated through *sidq*, appears to function as a stabilizing psychological resource precisely because it decouples self-evaluation from external validation a dynamic that resonates with Rosenberg's (Hanan, 2024) conceptualization of stable self-esteem as internally anchored rather than contingent on social feedback.

Theoretically, these results invite a productive comparison with Western humanistic psychology. Where humanistic models rooted in Maslow's self-actualization paradigm emphasize the satisfaction and affirmation of the ego as the pathway to psychological flourishing, Al-Ghazali's model inverts this logic: self-esteem is not achieved through ego gratification but through ego submission and the deepening of transpersonal relationship with the Divine (R. Prabowo, 2022). This distinction carries significant implications for how Islamic educational psychology conceptualizes the relationship between identity, agency, and well-being, suggesting that culturally responsive models of psychological support must attend to the spiritual epistemology of their target populations rather than defaulting to universalized Western constructs. The convergence of Erikson's identity formation theory (Putri & Huwae, 2025) with Al-Ghazali's ethical framework, as applied in this study, thus represents a theoretically generative cross-paradigm synthesis.

The elevated *Shukr* (gratitude) scores are consistent with (F. Ahmad, 2022) finding that gratitude functions not merely as affective expression but as a cognitive-spiritual strategy for countering identity destabilization caused by social media's influence on Generation Z. The relatively lower scores on *Tawadhu* (humility), however, represent a finding that warrants careful interpretation. Rather than indicating a deficit in character development, this pattern may reflect a developmentally appropriate tension in young adults who are simultaneously cultivating intellectual competence and spiritual humility domains that, in the short term, may impose competing psychological demands. This unexpected finding suggests that future research should examine how the relationship between *tawadhu* and self-esteem evolves longitudinally as *mahasantri* progress through their studies.

The role of the *ma'had* community as an external amplifier of ethical internalization aligns with (Correia Neves et al., 2024) identification of communal platforms as vehicles for self-esteem consolidation, while extending that finding by demonstrating the specific mechanisms through which peer accountability and collective ritual function as social validators of ethical practice. This finding also carries a cautionary implication: the observed dependence on community support suggests that *mahasantri* who transition out of the *ma'had* environment without robust internalized coping strategies may be vulnerable to self-esteem instability upon reintegration into the wider community. This represents a meaningful limitation of institution-based character development programs and underscores the importance of designing curricula that foster autonomous moral agency alongside communal belonging.

Several methodological limitations temper the generalizability of these findings. The sample was drawn exclusively from one urban *pesantren*-affiliated institution, restricting the transferability of results to rural or structurally different *pesantren* contexts (T. Prabowo, 2020). The relatively small purposive sample, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, precludes broader statistical generalization. Future research would benefit from comparative multi-site designs that incorporate rural *pesantren* populations and employ longitudinal methods to track the developmental trajectory of ethically grounded self-esteem over time.

In terms of practical implications, these findings carry direct relevance for the design of Islamic educational curricula that are responsive to the mental health needs of contemporary students. The integration of structured *riyadhah* (ethical exercise) modules that combine classical *tazkiyatun nafs* practices with evidence-informed cognitive-behavioral strategies represents a promising curricular direction (Ningsih, 2025). Equally important is the development of capacity among *pesantren* educators and counselors to provide psychologically informed accompaniment for *mahasantri* navigating emotional and identity challenges in digitally saturated environments. By positioning spirituality as the epistemological foundation of self-esteem development, Islamic educational institutions are uniquely positioned to contribute to the realization of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), producing graduates who embody both moral integrity and demonstrable psychological resilience (National Academies of Sciences and Medicine, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the systematic internalization of Al-Ghazali's ethical values constitutes a meaningful and culturally grounded foundation for self-esteem formation among *mahasantri* at Ma'had Al-Jami'ah IAIN Langsa. The consistent practice of *sidq*, *sabr*, and *shukr*, embedded within the structured communal life of the *ma'had*, enables students to reorient their self-evaluative standards away from social comparison and toward spiritual and moral integrity a reorientation that proves psychologically stabilizing in the face of identity pressures generated by academic demands and digital culture. The mechanism of *tazkiyatun nafs*, when practiced with regularity and communal reinforcement, functions as an effective internal buffer against the identity fragmentation that characterizes the globalization era, offering a spiritually coherent alternative to the ego-centered frameworks that dominate Western psychological approaches to self-esteem.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in its demonstration that classical Islamic ethical thought and contemporary psychological constructs are not mutually exclusive but productively complementary. By integrating Al-Ghazali's moral philosophy with Eriksonian identity theory and Rosenberg's self-esteem framework, this study advances a cross-paradigmatic model that enriches Islamic educational psychology and broadens the conceptual vocabulary available for understanding Muslim youth well-being. Practically, the findings affirm the urgent need for *pesantren*-based institutions to adopt holistic, mental-health-responsive curricula that formalize structured *riyadhah* modules alongside academic programming, thereby supporting both SDG 3 and SDG 4 imperatives through character development grounded in spiritual resilience.

This study is not without limitations. Its single-institution, purposive design constrains the transferability of findings to other *pesantren* contexts, and the cross-sectional nature of the data cannot capture the longitudinal trajectory of ethically grounded self-esteem development. Future research should therefore pursue multi-site comparative studies across urban and rural *pesantren* settings, employ longitudinal designs to trace the developmental arc of *akhlak* internalization over time, and examine how the transition from the *ma'had* environment to the wider community affects the durability of self-esteem gains. Scholars are also encouraged to explore gender-differentiated experiences of ethical internalization, given the demographic composition of this sample, and to investigate whether the model identified here holds explanatory power in non-*pesantren* Islamic educational contexts. Collectively, such efforts would deepen the field's understanding of spiritually grounded well-being and strengthen the evidence base for faith-integrated approaches to student mental health.

LIMITATIONS

This study acknowledges several constraints that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The sample was drawn exclusively from a single urban institution, restricting transferability to rural *pesantren* or structurally different educational contexts. Reliance on self-reported interview data introduces susceptibility to social desirability bias, as participants within a religiously normative environment may have presented their ethical practice and psychological states in institutionally favorable ways. The cross-sectional design further limits the study's capacity

to capture the fluctuating, non-linear nature of self-esteem reconstruction across varying academic pressures and life transitions, leaving unresolved whether observed gains persist beyond the *ma'had* environment. Additionally, the purposive sampling strategy, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, may have systematically excluded *mahasantri* with lower levels of ethical internalization whose experiences could yield a more contrastive understanding of the phenomenon. Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal, multi-site, and mixed-methods designs that expand across urban and rural *pesantren* populations to build a more robust and generalizable evidence base for faith-integrated approaches to student psychological well-being.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

ZK was responsible for the conceptualization of the research idea, field data collection through interviews and questionnaires, and the preparation of the original manuscript draft. M contributed to the methodological design, supervised the thematic and statistical data analysis, and performed critical reviews and final editing of the manuscript to ensure the accuracy of the theoretical interpretation regarding Al-Ghazali's ethical concepts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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