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Qudwah Hasanah in Al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulumuddin* and Its Relevance to the Exemplary Role of PAI Teachers in the Digital Era

Qudwah Hasanah dalam *Ihya' 'Ulumuddin* Karya Al-Ghazali dan Relevansinya bagi Peran Keteladanan Guru PAI di Era Digital

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Abstract

In the digital era, the exemplarity of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers is tested by social media culture. This study analyzes the relevance of Al-Ghazali's concept of *qudwah hasanah* in *Ihya' 'Ulumuddin* to the exemplary role of PAI teachers in the digital era. It employs qualitative library research, with *Kitab al-'Ilm* as the primary source and scholarly journal articles as secondary sources. Data were collected through documentation and analyzed using thematic analysis and contextual hermeneutic interpretation. Validity was checked by comparing the primary text, its translations, and the secondary literature in an analysis matrix. The findings show that four principles, namely harmony of knowledge and action, compassion, sincerity, and gentle advice, function as an ethical filter for PAI teachers. Each principle meets a specific tension in digital culture: curated self-presentation, fast and public communication, and the logic of the attention economy. The study formulates the digital moral guide (*mursyid al-akhlaq digital*) as an operational construct with four dimensions and indicators. Practically, the indicators can support teacher training, digital ethics guidelines, and teachers' self-reflection. Al-Ghazali's concept is therefore relevant when it is read critically and adapted to context, not applied automatically. Because the indicators have not been tested empirically, further survey and observation studies are needed.

Keywords: Al-Ghazali; Digital Era; Islamic Religious Education Teacher; *Qudwah Hasanah*; Role Modeling

Abstrak

Di era digital, keteladanan guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) diuji oleh budaya media sosial. Penelitian ini menganalisis relevansi konsep *qudwah hasanah* Al-Ghazali dalam *Ihya' 'Ulumuddin* terhadap peran keteladanan guru PAI di era digital. Penelitian kualitatif ini menggunakan studi pustaka dengan *Kitab al-'Ilm* sebagai sumber primer dan artikel jurnal ilmiah sebagai sumber sekunder. Data dikumpulkan melalui dokumentasi dan dianalisis dengan analisis tematik serta interpretasi hermeneutik kontekstual. Validitas diperiksa dengan membandingkan teks primer, terjemahannya, dan literatur sekunder dalam matriks analisis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa empat prinsip, yaitu keselarasan ilmu dan amal, kasih sayang, keikhlasan, dan nasihat yang beradab, berfungsi sebagai filter etis bagi guru PAI. Setiap prinsip berhadapan dengan ketegangan khas budaya digital, yaitu kurasi citra diri, komunikasi yang cepat dan publik, serta logika ekonomi perhatian (*attention economy*). Penelitian ini merumuskan *mursyid al-akhlaq digital* sebagai konstruk operasional berdimensi empat beserta

862 | Verdina Febriani *et al.*

indikasinya. Secara praktis, indikator tersebut dapat mendukung pelatihan guru, penyusunan pedoman etika digital, dan refleksi diri guru. Dengan demikian, konsep Al-Ghazali relevan apabila dibaca secara kritis dan diadaptasi sesuai konteks, bukan diterapkan secara otomatis. Karena indikator belum diuji secara empiris, penelitian lanjutan melalui survei dan observasi masih diperlukan.

Kata kunci: Al-Ghazali; era digital; guru PAI; keteladanan; *qudwah hasanah*

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Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a strategic role in shaping the morals, character, and spirituality of students, and teachers are the central figures who connect Islamic values with students' lived reality. In the Islamic educational tradition, exemplarity is the main method of transmitting values. It is grounded in the words of Allah on the *uswah hasanah* found in the Prophet (Islam et al., 2025; Nuronja & Jannah, 2025):

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُوا اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا

"Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) there is a good example (*uswah hasanah*) for you, namely for those who hope for Allah and the Day of Resurrection and who remember Allah often" (QS. Al-Ahzab [33]: 21).

PAI teachers are not only *mu'allim* (transmitters of knowledge) but also *murabbi* (educators) and *mursyid* (guides) who show harmony between knowledge and behavior (Murjani, 2025).

The digital era is changing the landscape of exemplary behavior. A national survey of 10,000 respondents aged 13–70 years, as reported by Sekarhati (2024), found that 56% of respondents encountered hoaxes mainly on social media and online media, and 45% were unsure whether they could distinguish hoaxes from true information. Among high school students, hoax-spreading behavior correlates with toxic disinhibition (Matondang & Afdal, 2023), digital literacy affects social media ethics (Manuella & Perdani, 2023), and 109 of 120 students in Kudus Regency use WhatsApp at a high frequency every day (Pratiwi & Rianto, 2023). For PAI teachers, the challenges are multilayered. Professional ethics now covers behavior in cyberspace (Ningrum et al., 2026; Safitri et al., 2025), legitimacy can shift toward popularity, as in the teacher-influencer phenomenon (Fatina et al., 2026), and digital role models shape adolescents' values (Hidayat & Astuti, 2026; Mazid et al., 2026).

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Qudwah Hasanah in Al-Ghazali's Ihya' 'Ulumuddin and Its Relevance... | 863

Previous research is mapped in Table 1.

Table 1. Map of Previous Research and Position of This Research

Study Groups	Research	Focus	Unexamined Aspects
Teachers' manners according to Al-Ghazali	Faizah et al. (2022); Permana et al. (2024); Jalaldeen and Al-Hidabi (2025); Izuddin et al. (2026); Munir (2026)	Compassion, sincerity, and manners of teachers	The digital space is not used as an analytical framework
Al-Ghazali and the modern context	Gayo et al. (2025); Arafat and Sodiq (2026); Fathurahman and Basuki (2026)	Moral crisis caused by technology, a comparison with Locke, and early childhood	Technology is discussed only in general terms or for early childhood
Exemplarity of PAI teachers in the digital era	Rochim and Khayati (2023); Indramawan et al. (2024); Gianistika et al. (2025); Kurniawan and Annisah (2025); Murjani (2025); Ilyuna et al. (2026)	The role of teachers in shaping religious and moral character	A classical ethical framework and the tension between sincerity and visibility
Ethics of the digital teaching profession	Safitri et al. (2025); Ningrum et al. (2026); Fatina et al. (2026)	Professional ethics and the teacher-influencer phenomenon	General ethical references, not the Al-Ghazali tradition

The mapping reveals a gap. Studies of Al-Ghazali are strong on the manners of teachers but have not tested his principles in the digital space. Studies of PAI teachers in the digital era are strong on roles and practices but do not draw on a classical ethical framework that explains why exemplarity matters and how it can be measured. This study examines four principles of Al-Ghazali's teacher exemplarity against the tensions of digital culture and formulates a construct, the *mursyid al-akhlaq digital*, together with its indicators. This is the novelty of the study: it moves the discussion from describing the ideal teacher or the teacher's role to testing classical principles against digital tensions and translating them into indicators.

This study addresses three research questions. The first asks how the concept of *qudwah hasanah* is understood according to Al-Ghazali in Kitab al-'Ilm. The second concerns the challenges and opportunities for the exemplarity of PAI teachers in the digital era. The third asks how the concept is relevant to, and can be actualized in, the dimensions and indicators of digital exemplarity. The study aims to answer all three questions. It contributes theoretically to the study of Islamic education grounded in classical thought, and practically to teachers and educational institutions.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research design, which is commonly used in PAI research (Subagiya, 2023), because it focuses on the meaning and relevance of ideas rather than on hypothesis testing. The research subjects are texts, namely Kitab al-'Ilm and scholarly literature, and no variables were measured. Because the data are textual, the study involved no field site or human participants. The research instrument is the researcher, supported by a coding sheet and an analysis matrix.

The primary source is Kitab al-'Ilm in *Ihya' 'Ulumuddin* (Al-Ghazali, 2004), especially the section on the duties of the teacher (*wazhifah al-mu'allim*) and the discussion of intention and sincerity. These sections were selected purposively using three criteria: they discuss the obligations or character of the teacher, they relate directly to exemplarity, and they can be connected to behavior in the digital space. These criteria yielded four principles as the units of analysis. The secondary sources are journal articles, mostly from the last ten years, on Al-Ghazali's thought, teacher exemplarity, digital ethics, and social media culture.

1 Data were collected through documentation and analyzed in four steps. The first step was coding the primary text. The second was thematic analysis, which proceeded through familiarization with the data, initial coding, and theme formation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The third was contextual hermeneutic interpretation, which attends to the historical background of the text and the interpreter's prejudices (Azizah, 2026). The fourth was synthesis into an analysis matrix (Table 2) and a synthesis table (Table 3).

Validity was maintained through source triangulation. Each primary citation was compared with Indonesian translations and secondary literature, and differences in meaning were recorded in the matrix. The findings are presented in three layers: identification from the primary source (the first subsection of Results and Discussion), literature synthesis (the second subsection), and the author's interpretation (the third to fifth subsections).

Results and Discussion

1 The Concept of *Qudwah Hasanah* According to Al-Ghazali in Kitab al-'Ilm

This subsection presents the results of identification from the primary source. Al-Ghazali does not formulate *qudwah hasanah* as a technical term. The concept is composed from the duties of the teacher that he describes. In this study, *qudwah hasanah* is therefore

Qudwah Hasanah in Al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulumuddin* and Its Relevance... | 865

defined as the exemplarity of a teacher that is manifested in the unity of knowledge, action, morals, and intention, so that the teacher's behavior is worthy of being a moral reference for students. For Al-Ghazali, education is the purification of the soul (*tazkiyatun nafs*), so exemplarity becomes a condition for the teacher's moral legitimacy (Al-Ghazali, 2004; Izuddin et al., 2026; Munir, 2026). Four principles were identified. The first is the harmony of knowledge and action. Al-Ghazali states:

أَنْ يَكُونَ الْعَالِمُ عَامِلًا بِعِلْمِهِ، فَلَا يُكَذِّبُ قَوْلُهُ فِعْلُهُ؛ لِأَنَّ الْعِلْمَ يُدْرِكُ بِالْبَصَائِرِ وَالْعَمَلَ يُدْرِكُ بِالْأَبْصَارِ

"A teacher must act upon his knowledge, so that his deeds do not belie his words, because knowledge is perceived through the eyes of the heart, whereas action is perceived through the eyes of the head" (Al-Ghazali, 2004). The credibility of teachers is thus determined by the harmony between knowledge and action, because students believe more in what they see than in what they hear.

The second principle is compassion: the teacher treats students as his own children (Al-Ghazali, 2004). The third is sincerity: the teacher does not ask for rewards, gifts, or gratitude but teaches for the sake of Allah (Al-Ghazali, 2004). The fourth is civilized advice: the teacher prevents bad morals through indirect hints (*ta'ridh*) and gentleness rather than reproach, because open candor can "tear the curtain of authority" (Al-Ghazali, 2004). Table 2 summarizes the four principles.

Table 2. Analysis Matrix of the Principles of Teacher Exemplarity in Kitab al-'Ilm

Principle	Key Ideas in the Text	Conceptual Category	Digital Context	Interpretation
Harmony of knowledge and action	The teacher acts upon his knowledge; his deeds do not belie his words	Integrity	Curated self-image; different behavior in the classroom and online	Harmony must be consistent across spaces, not merely visible
Compassion	Students are treated like one's own children	Affective relationship	Online communication is fast, brief, and publicly readable	Compassion is expressed in courteous online communication
Sincerity	Teaching for the sake of Allah, without reward, praise, or position	Orientation of intention	Metrics of reach, engagement, and popularity	Online presence is understood as a means, not a goal
Civilized advice	Preventing bad morals through indirect hints and gentleness, not openly	Method of guidance	Open reprimands can easily become a public spectacle	Correction is adjusted to the level and space of the mistake

866 | *Verdina Febriani et al.*

Table 2 shows that the four principles can be read as four conceptual categories: integrity, affective relationship, orientation of intention, and method of guidance. These categories come from the author's coding of the key ideas in the text. In this reading, the first and third principles concern the consistency of the teacher's inner and outer life, namely what the teacher knows, does, and intends. The second and fourth principles concern how that consistency is expressed toward students, through affection and through careful correction. This arrangement explains why Al-Ghazali's view of exemplarity cannot be reduced to good behavior in front of students. It requires harmony among knowledge, action, morals, and intention, and it is this combination that makes a teacher's conduct worthy of imitation.

Challenges and Opportunities for the Exemplarity of PAI Teachers in the Digital Era

This subsection is a synthesis of the literature. Four concepts frame the discussion. The attention economy is a condition in which users' attention becomes a resource that platforms and creators compete for. Visibility refers to a person's presence on a platform, which has become a basis of social recognition. Engagement is a measure of interaction, such as likes, shares, and comments. Digital performativity is the consciously constructed staging of a self-image, including the image of authenticity. [Silva Ferreira \(2026\)](#) shows that recognition on platforms is measured by likes, shares, and numbers of followers, while [Dunn and Falkof \(2021\)](#) treat authenticity as a carefully constructed performance.

Three challenges emerge from the literature. The first is the inconsistency of teachers' behavior in the classroom and in the digital space. The use of social media without adequate literacy contributes to declining politeness, cyberbullying, and reduced respect for teachers ([Ningrum et al., 2026](#)). The second is exposure to negative content, including hoaxes ([Matondang & Afdal, 2023](#); [Sekarhati, 2024](#)). The third is a shift in the criteria of exemplarity from integrity to popularity ([Fatina et al., 2026](#); [Hidayat & Astuti, 2026](#)).

The literature also points to opportunities. Digital literacy can serve as a framework for character education ([Putra et al., 2025](#)), Islamic moral education can be developed amid technological change ([Kurniawan & Annisah, 2025](#)), and digital learning can help form Islamic character ([Gianistika et al., 2025](#)). Teachers can act as role models, guides, and filters of digital influence ([Murjani, 2025](#)). In addition, Al-Ghazali's emphasis on moral habituation and self-control is useful for building positive digital

Qudwah Hasanah in Al-Ghazali's Ihya' 'Ulumuddin and Its Relevance... | 867

habits (Fathurahman & Basuki, 2026). Taken together, these sources suggest that the digital space presents teachers with a double situation. It brings risks of inconsistency, exposure to negative content, and popularity-driven legitimacy, and it also brings opportunities for value-based literacy and guidance. The question for exemplarity is therefore not only whether teachers should be present in the digital space, but on what moral basis they appear there.

Conceptual Synthesis and Indicators of the Digital Mursyid al-Akhlaq

This subsection presents the author's interpretation of the two previous layers. The relevance of each principle is not automatic, because each meets a specific tension in the digital space. The *mursyid al-akhlaq digital* is operationally defined as a PAI teacher who guides students' morals in the digital space while displaying consistent exemplarity across the real and digital spaces. The normative basis of the construct is Al-Ghazali's four principles (Table 2). Its contextual basis is the literature on performativity and visibility (Dunn & Falkof, 2021; Silva Ferreira, 2026), on *riya'* in online piety (Achfandhy & Rohmatulloh, 2024), and on the ethics of the digital teaching profession (Ningrum et al., 2026; Safitri et al., 2025). The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Synthesis of Al-Ghazali's Principles, Digital Challenges, Actualization, and Indicators

Dimension (Principle)	Digital Challenge	Form of Actualization	Indicator
Cross-space integrity (harmony of knowledge and action)	Authenticity can be staged; apparent harmony is not necessarily real	Maintaining the same behavior in the classroom and online, including when responding to differences and displaying a lifestyle	Online uploads and communication are consistent with the values taught; there are no contradictions that students can discover
Media sincerity (sincerity)	Engagement metrics drive online <i>riya'</i>	Managing visibility consciously and carefully; treating metrics as a means	Uploads are intended to educate; teachers can explain their intentions in using media; teachers do not chase follower counts
<i>Rahmah</i> in online communication (compassion)	Fast and public communication	Responding to students with patience and courtesy; providing channels for guidance	Courteous tone of communication; teachers respond to students' problems; teachers do not embarrass students in public spaces
Tiered advice (civilized advice)	Open reprimands are easily watched by others	<i>Tiered rahmah</i> : minor and private mistakes are handled through private messages; public issues	A private reprimand comes first; a public reprimand is firm but preserves dignity

through clear and civilized
communication

Table 3 shows that every principle requires adaptation. First, the harmony of knowledge and action faces the problem of curation. A teacher's "action" on social media can be edited and displayed selectively, so apparent harmony does not necessarily reflect integrity (Dunn & Falkof, 2021). Consistency must therefore be maintained across spaces, and it is not enough merely to avoid contradictory content. Second, sincerity clashes with the logic of the attention economy. Teachers need to be seen in order to be role models, but the effort to be visible can trap them in digital *riya'* (Achfandhy & Rohmatulloh, 2024). The way out is to shift from pursuing visibility to managing it consciously and within limits, because metrics are only a means (Silva Ferreira, 2026). Third, compassion and the method of *ta'ridh* work well in face-to-face relationships. In a fast and public digital space, however, an approach that is too subtle risks not being understood, whereas open reprimands are easily watched by others. A tiered *rahmah* is therefore needed: private reprimands for minor mistakes and clear but dignified communication for public issues. Each adaptation keeps the content of Al-Ghazali's principle and changes only the way it is practiced in the digital space.

The four dimensions in Table 3 are cross-space integrity, media sincerity, *rahmah* in online communication, and tiered advice. Each dimension is paired with a digital challenge, a form of actualization, and indicators that can be observed, such as uploads that are consistent with the values taught, uploads intended to educate, a courteous tone of communication, and private reprimands that come before public ones. In this way, the construct turns abstract principles into questions that teachers and institutions can ask about actual behavior.

Dialogue of Findings with Previous Research

The findings on the four principles agree with studies showing that, according to Al-Ghazali, teachers must be compassionate, follow the example of the Prophet, and serve as moral role models (Faizah et al., 2022; Gayo et al., 2025; Izuddin et al., 2026; Jalaldeen & Al-Hidabi, 2025). Munir (2026) adds that contemporary Islamic education tends to emphasize cognitive and administrative aspects, so the spiritual and moral dimensions of teachers need to be restored through self-purification. This strengthens *tazkiyatun nafs* as the basis of exemplarity. The difference is that these studies stop at the nature of the ideal teacher. Gayo et al. (2025) mention technology only as a background

Qudwah Hasanah in Al-Ghazali's Ihya' 'Ulumuddin and Its Relevance... | 869

to the moral crisis, [Arafat and Sodiq \(2026\)](#) treat digital issues as a recommendation, [Fathurahman and Basuki \(2026\)](#) focus on early childhood, and [Permana et al. \(2024\)](#) examine students' manners toward teachers rather than teachers' exemplarity.

With respect to studies of the exemplary role of PAI teachers in the digital era, these findings provide a normative foundation. [Murjani \(2025\)](#) formulates the roles of teachers as role models, facilitators, supervisors, and filters. [Rochim and Khayati \(2023\)](#) examine a single elementary school. [Ilyuna et al. \(2026\)](#) and [Indramawan et al. \(2024\)](#) affirm the role of PAI teachers as exemplary models in the digital environment and the era of disruption. These studies explain what teachers do, whereas this study explains why exemplarity matters and how it can be measured (Table 3). The indicators also complement the ethical framework of the digital teaching profession proposed by [Ningrum et al. \(2026\)](#) by giving it normative roots in the Al-Ghazali tradition.

The perspectives differ on the question of legitimacy. [Fatina et al. \(2026\)](#) found that teachers' legitimacy is shaped by popularity and algorithms, and adolescents interpret influencer content ambivalently ([Hidayat & Astuti, 2026](#); [Mazid et al., 2026](#)). Within Al-Ghazali's framework, legitimacy still rests on the harmony of knowledge and action and on purity of intention. This is consistent with the finding of [Rozy \(2024\)](#) that media-literate religious figures do not automatically hold strong authority, and with the finding of [Achfandhy and Rohmatulloh \(2024\)](#) that pressure for online validation creates ethical ambiguity in the form of *riya'*. Presence and reach in the digital space are therefore legitimate as means, but they should not become the measure of exemplarity.

These comparisons show where this study is positioned. It does not replace studies of Al-Ghazali's ethics of teaching or studies of the roles of PAI teachers. It links them. The first group supplies the normative principles, the second supplies the digital context, and the literature on the ethics of the digital teaching profession supplies the professional framework in which the indicators can be applied.

This study makes three new contributions. The first is the separation of the findings into three layers, which makes it easier for readers to verify the origin of each claim. The second is the *mursyid al-akhlaq digital* with its four dimensions and indicators. The third is the tiered *rahmah* as an adaptation of *ta'ridh* for a fast and public digital space. Because hermeneutic reading recognizes the role of interpretive prejudice ([Azizah, 2026](#)), this interpretation is offered as an open proposal to be tested and criticized.

870 | Verdina Febriani et al.

Implications for Developing the Exemplarity of PAI Teachers

Practically, four steps can be taken. First, schools can provide value-based digital literacy training for teachers (Putra et al., 2025), with sincerity in media use and the management of visibility as core material. Second, education units can prepare digital ethics guidelines for teachers (Safitri et al., 2025), using the indicators in Table 3 as a reference. Third, learning projects can require students to create valuable content, so that values are internalized through learning experiences (Rauf et al., 2026). Fourth, teachers can use the indicators in Table 3 as a tool for self-reflection: whether an upload is educational, whether it is consistent with the values being taught, and whether the intention behind it is still guarded. In this way, exemplarity rooted in the *uswah hasanah* (Islam et al., 2025; Nuronias & Jannah, 2025) can be realized consistently in both real and digital spaces.

These implications also point to the direction of later work. Because the indicators are derived from texts and literature, their value for teachers depends on how they work in practice. They should therefore be treated as a starting framework that schools and researchers can refine, not as a finished instrument.

Conclusion

Qudwah hasanah in Kitab al-'Ilm is understood as a unity of knowledge, action, morals, and intention that operates through four principles: harmony of knowledge and action, compassion, sincerity, and civilized advice. In the digital era, the exemplarity of PAI teachers faces challenges in the form of behavioral inconsistency, exposure to negative content, and a shift in the criteria of exemplarity from integrity to popularity. It also has opportunities to expand its reach and strengthen value-based digital literacy. The relevance of Al-Ghazali's concept is not automatic, because each principle meets a specific tension in digital culture. Theoretically, this study contributes the *mursyid al-akhlaq digital* construct with four dimensions and indicators, the three-layer separation of findings, and the testing of Al-Ghazali's principles against digital tensions, which distinguishes it from studies that affirm the nature of the ideal teacher or describe the role of the teacher. Practically, the indicators can support teacher training, digital ethics guidelines, and teachers' self-reflection.

This study is limited to a literature review of Kitab al-'Ilm and related sections in one edition, together with the available secondary literature, so the formulated

Qudwah Hasanah in Al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulumuddin* and Its Relevance... | 871

indicators have not been tested empirically. Further research is recommended to test the validity of the indicators through surveys and observations of teachers and students, and to test the effectiveness of the tiered *rahmah* in online communication.

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872 | *Verdina Febriani et al.*

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IQRO: Journal of Islamic Education

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