Research Paper

From Legal Formalism to Spiritual Authenticity: Revisiting Al-Ghazali's Critique of *Ghurur* in Contemporary Islamic Learning Communities

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Abstract

Contemporary Islamic learning communities increasingly experience a tension between legal formalism and spiritual authenticity. While access to Islamic knowledge has expanded through institutional and digital platforms, religious practice is often shaped by performativity, credentialism, and algorithm-driven visibility. This study revisits Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's concept of *ghurur* (spiritual self-deception) as a diagnostic framework for understanding this phenomenon within Indonesian Islamic education. Employing a qualitative multi-method design, the research integrates hermeneutic analysis of al-Ghazālī's works with multi-sited ethnography and digital ethnography across pesantren, majelis taklim, and online religious platforms. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and digital content analysis. The findings identify three dominant manifestations of *ghurur*: institutional (metric-driven religiosity), pedagogical (credentialism and authority performance), and digital (algorithmic piety). Female religious educators demonstrate higher sensitivity to subtle forms of *ghurur* and employ relational, reflective pedagogies to mitigate its effects. The study proposes a *Ghurur*–Authenticity Continuum and introduces a Critical Spiritual Pedagogy model that integrates classical Islamic spiritual psychology with contemporary educational practice. This framework offers a viable pathway for cultivating sincerity and spiritual authenticity in both traditional and digitally mediated Islamic learning environments.

Keywords *Al-Ghazālī, Ghurur, Islamic Education, Spiritual Authenticity, Digital Religion, Indonesia*

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of Islamic education in the twenty-first century has generated a paradox: while access to religious knowledge has become unprecedentedly widespread, concerns about sincerity, depth, and spiritual authenticity have intensified. Across diverse Islamic learning contexts, religious success is increasingly evaluated through visible and quantifiable indicators—ritual accuracy, institutional certification, and digital popularity—often at the expense of ethical reflexivity and inner transformation (Klutz, 2016; Pargament, 2001). This trend reflects a broader shift toward legal formalism, in which outward compliance with religious norms substitutes for sustained spiritual cultivation.

Classical Islamic spirituality has long warned against this imbalance. Early Sufi authorities such as al-Muḥāsibī (2000), al-Junayd (1998), and al-Makkī (1995) emphasized that religious knowledge must be accompanied by continuous self-accountability (*muhāsabah*), sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*), and inner discipline. Without these elements, religious practice risks becoming an instrument of self-glorification rather than a means of moral refinement. Similarly, al-Jawzī (2001) criticized deceptive religious practices that mask egoistic motives behind apparent devotion.

Although frequently framed as a contemporary crisis triggered by digitalization and

institutionalization, this tension was diagnosed nearly a millennium ago by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) through his concept of *ghurur* (spiritual self-deception). In *Al-Kashf wa al-Tabyīn fī Ghurūr al-Khalq*, al-Ghazālī warned that scholars (*'ulamā'*), worshippers, and ascetics could become deceived by their own religious achievements, mistaking mastery of ritual, knowledge, or public recognition for genuine proximity to God (al-Ghazālī, 2005a, 2005b). For al-Ghazālī, *ghurur* constitutes a subtle spiritual pathology in which religious knowledge and practice reinforce moral complacency rather than self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*).

In contemporary Indonesia, al-Ghazālī's diagnosis remains highly relevant. Islamic learning institutions such as *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) and *majelis taklim* (nonformal Islamic study circle) continue to serve as key sites of religious socialization and moral formation (Kersten, 2015; Muna & Aziz, 2024). However, they increasingly operate within systems that demand measurable outcomes, public visibility, and institutional legitimacy (Azra, 2017). The rapid expansion of digital religious platforms further intensifies this dynamic, producing forms of algorithm-driven religiosity shaped by metrics of engagement and popularity rather than sustained ethical introspection (Uyuni et al., 2025). Psychological studies of religion suggest that such environments may heighten spiritual struggle and internal conflict when external expectations overshadow personal meaning and sincerity (Pargament, 2001; Exline, 2013). As a result, religious authority and piety risk being evaluated through performative and symbolic capital rather than through transformative ethical impact.

Despite extensive scholarship on Islamic education, digital Islam, and religious authority, three significant gaps persist. First, al-Ghazālī's concept of *ghurur* has rarely been operationalized as an analytical framework for examining contemporary Islamic educational practices; it is more often treated as a moral warning than as a critical diagnostic tool (Griffel, 2009). Second, studies of Islamic education tend to prioritize institutional reform, curriculum development, and governance structures, while questions of inner spiritual formation and ethical self-awareness remain marginal (van Bruinessen, 1994). Third, gendered pedagogical approaches—particularly those employed by female religious educators within informal and semi-formal learning spaces—are underexplored in relation to spiritual authenticity, despite their growing influence in shaping contemporary Muslim piety (El Fadl, 2001; Uyuni et al., 2023).

This article positions itself at the intersection of Islamic educational studies, Ghazālian ethical thought, and contemporary analyses of digital religiosity. In this study, *ghurur* is operationalized as a condition in which religious authority, ritual competence, or public recognition inhibits critical self-reflection, spiritual humility, and ethical accountability. By applying this conceptual lens to contemporary Islamic learning communities in Indonesia—across institutional, pedagogical, gendered, and digital contexts—this study asks: How does *ghurur* manifest in contemporary Islamic education, and what pedagogical strategies can foster spiritual authenticity beyond legal formalism and performative piety?

By recontextualizing al-Ghazālī's concept of *ghurur* within present-day Islamic educational practices, this study contributes to broader debates on Islamic education by foregrounding spiritual authenticity as a central pedagogical and ethical concern rather than merely an institutional or technical outcome. To address these gaps, this paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the literature review synthesizes discussions on *ghurur*, Islamic education, gendered pedagogy, and digital religiosity. The methodology section outlines the qualitative multi-method design employed. Subsequently, the findings and discussion present the manifestations of *ghurur* and the proposed *Ghurur*–Authenticity Continuum. Finally, the conclusion highlights the study's implications and suggests directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Spiritual Authenticity in Contemporary Islamic Education
Al-Ghazālī and the Concept of Ghurur

This study is conceptually grounded in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's analysis of *ghurur*, understood as spiritual self-deception arising when outward religious conformity substitutes for inner moral transformation. In *al-Kashf wa al-Tabyīn fī Ghurūr al-Khalq*, al-Ghazālī demonstrates that *ghurur* primarily afflicts religiously committed individuals—scholars, ascetics, and educators—rather than the irreligious. It manifests as intellectual arrogance, ritual excess, and spiritual elitism, in which religious achievement obscures the need for ongoing self-examination and humility (al-Ghazālī, 2005a, 2005b).

Al-Ghazālī's critique underscores a persistent pedagogical problem: religious knowledge detached from *muḥāsabah* (self-examination) and *ikhlāṣ* (sincerity) risks reinforcing moral complacency rather than ethical refinement (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) (al-Ghazālī, 2005a, 2005b). While contemporary scholarship has widely acknowledged al-Ghazālī's moral psychology, discussions often privilege his epistemology or critique of philosophy, leaving *ghurur* underutilized as an analytical framework for examining lived religious practice, particularly within educational contexts (Chittick, 2000; Nasr, 2007).

Islamic Education, Legal Formalism, and Spiritual Formation

Research on Islamic education has documented how Muslim learning institutions navigate tradition, modernity, and state regulation. Studies of Indonesian pesantren, for example, highlight their institutional adaptability amid curricular reform, bureaucratization, and digital expansion (Lukens-Bull, 2005; Fathurrochman et al., 2021). More broadly, Islamic education has been identified as a key arena for shaping modern Muslim ethical subjectivities and religious dispositions (Hefner, 2009).

However, much of this literature emphasizes institutional structure, governance, and measurable learning outcomes, while treating spiritual formation as an implicit or secondary concern. Although tensions between classical traditions and contemporary demands have been noted, their implications for sincerity, motivation, and inner ethical coherence remain analytically marginal (Uyuni & Adnan, 2020). This emphasis on legal competence risks reproducing what al-Ghazālī critiqued centuries earlier: the emergence of religious actors who are formally proficient yet spiritually inattentive.

Gendered Pedagogy and Digital Performative Religiosity

Parallel developments are emerging in scholarship on women's religious authority, challenging assumptions about gender and access to Islamic knowledge. Research highlights the growing role of female educators in pesantren and community-based learning, particularly in shaping relational and ethically reflective pedagogical spaces (van Doorn-Harder, 2006; Bano, 2017; Nurlaeli & Muhtifah, 2021). Recent studies suggest that women religious educators often emphasize relationality, emotional engagement, and ethical reflexivity in teaching practice (Uyuni et al., 2023). Yet these pedagogical orientations are rarely examined in relation to spiritual self-deception or *ghurur.*

Similar dynamics emerge within studies of digital Islam. Digital platforms expand access to religious knowledge while simultaneously intensifying performative religiosity shaped by visibility, audience metrics, and algorithmic validation (Millie, 2017; Rofiq & Ma'arif, 2023). Empirical studies in Indonesia indicate that such environments may shift religious orientation from inward transformation toward public recognition and symbolic capital (Zaini & Syafe'i, 2024). Despite extensive sociological analysis, digital religiosity is rarely examined through classical Islamic ethical

categories capable of diagnosing these patterns as manifestations of spiritual self-deception.

Synthesis: Toward Spiritual Authenticity as Pedagogical Concern

Taken together, existing scholarship reveals a persistent gap between institutional reform, legal instruction, and inner spiritual formation in contemporary Islamic education. Classical critiques of *ghurur*, studies of educational formalism, analyses of gendered pedagogy, and research on digital religiosity continue to develop in parallel rather than in dialogue. This study addresses this gap by mobilizing al-Ghazālī's concept of *ghurur* as an integrative analytical lens for examining contemporary Islamic learning communities. By bringing Islamic spiritual psychology into conversation with educational and digital studies, the research advances a framework for understanding spiritual authenticity as a pedagogical process rather than a fixed moral state.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a triangulated qualitative research design combining hermeneutic textual analysis, multi-sited ethnography, and digital ethnography to examine manifestations of *ghurur* (spiritual self-deception) and practices of spiritual authenticity in contemporary Indonesian Islamic education. Situated within a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, the study places al-Ghazālī's classical spiritual psychology in dialogue with lived pedagogical practices across both physical and digitally mediated learning environments.

Empirical data were generated through 10 months of multisited ethnographic fieldwork across 7 purposively selected Islamic learning communities, including traditional and modern pesantren as well as urban majelis taklim networks. The study was conducted in collaboration with community-based, higher education, and advanced traditional Islamic institutions. Participants were selected through purposive stratified sampling to ensure variation across gender, institutional roles, and levels of religious authority, resulting in a total of 72 participants. This sample size is considered adequate for a qualitative study of this scope, as it enabled in-depth, rich data collection across diverse sites and participant profiles until thematic saturation was achieved—the point at which new data no longer yielded significant additional insights into the core themes under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Data collection involved participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis, and digital ethnography. These methods captured both formal and informal dimensions of Islamic pedagogy, including classroom interactions, mentoring practices, curricular orientations, and online religious engagement. Digital ethnography focused on selected social media platforms and online learning spaces to examine platform-specific dynamics of religious performance and spiritual self-understanding.

Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), integrating deductive coding informed by al-Ghazālī's typologies of *ghurur* with inductive themes emerging from the data. Analytical attention was given to pedagogical practices, gendered dynamics, and comparisons between digital and non-digital learning environments. Methodological rigor was ensured through triangulation, prolonged engagement, reflexive analysis, and member checking. Ethical procedures followed standard academic protocols, including informed consent, anonymity, and secure data management.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 72)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	41	56.9
	Male	31	43.1
Primary Role	Educator (Ustadz/Ustadzah, Kyai)	35	48.6
	Santri / Student	22	30.6
	Institution Leader / Manager	9	12.5
	Digital Content Creator	6	8.3
Institution Type	Pesantren (Traditional/Modern)	40	55.6
	Majelis Taklim	20	27.8
	Islamic Higher Education	12	16.7
Age Range	20–35 years	28	38.9
	36–50 years	32	44.4
	> 50 years	12	16.7

As shown in Table 1, the participant sample comprises a balanced representation of educators, learners, and institutional leaders across various community types. This diverse engagement across seven learning settings provided a robust empirical foundation for identifying the following cross-contextual manifestations of *ghurur*.

Forms of *Ghurur* in Contemporary Islamic Education

Across diverse Islamic learning settings—majelis taklim, pesantren, and Islamic higher education—*ghurur* emerged as a structurally embedded phenomenon rather than an individual moral lapse. Religious success was commonly assessed through externally visible indicators such as certification, institutional reputation, and digital visibility, often marginalizing sustained attention to inner ethical transformation. This pattern confirms al-Ghazālī's insight that spiritual self-deception tends to flourish within spaces of devotion and learning rather than at their peripheries (al-Ghazālī, 2005a, 2005b).

Empirical analysis identified three interrelated forms of *ghurur*. At the institutional level, performance-oriented cultures emphasized branding, competition, and reputational metrics, producing forms of curated piety aligned with public expectations. At the pedagogical level, educators displayed subtler manifestations, including credentialism, pedagogical perfectionism, and savior-oriented authority, which occasionally reinforced hierarchical dependency and reduced reflexive engagement. At the learner level, *ghurur* appeared as instrumental religiosity, where participation in religious learning was oriented toward symbolic capital, certification, or social recognition rather than ethical self-cultivation. These forms operated relationally, generating an ecosystem of performative religiosity sustained across institutional roles.

Gendered and Digital Dynamics of *Ghurur*

Gender and digital mediation significantly shaped how *ghurur* was recognized and negotiated. Female educators demonstrated greater sensitivity to internalized and socially masked forms of self-deception, favoring pedagogical strategies grounded in relational vulnerability,

process-oriented learning, and collective accountability. Male educators more frequently relied on corrective instruction, conceptual clarification, and structural regulation, prioritizing observable compliance. Rather than suggesting normative superiority, these findings indicate that pedagogical responses to *ghurur* are shaped by gendered experiences, institutional expectations, and authority configurations (Bano, 2017; van Doorn-Harder, 2006).

Digital platforms intensified existing tendencies toward performative religiosity without creating fundamentally new forms. Algorithmic systems amplified visibility-driven practices long associated with *riya'*, rewarding emotional performance and public engagement. Platform-specific affordances shaped religious expression in distinct ways: Instagram privileged curated piety, YouTube incentivized charismatic authority, and TikTok encouraged simplification of complex religious discourse (Zaini & Syafe'i, 2024). Participants often demonstrated critical awareness of these dynamics while continuing to expand their digital presence, reflecting a structural tension between ethical concern and institutional or economic pressure. This finding underscores the limits of moralistic critique and points to the need for pedagogical and structural responses.

Pedagogical Interventions and the Ghurur–Authenticity Continuum

Synthesizing cross-case findings, this study conceptualizes *ghurur* not as a binary moral condition but as a developmental continuum of religious engagement. The proposed *Ghurur–Authenticity Continuum* ranges from explicit performativity to integrated sincerity, with most participants located in intermediate stages characterized by mixed motives and partial awareness. This supports al-Ghazālī's emphasis on gradual purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) while translating his spiritual psychology into a contemporary pedagogical framework.

Across research sites, several locally developed interventions demonstrated potential to mitigate *ghurur*. Reflective practices such as *muhasabah* circles, anonymous questioning mechanisms, and intentional modeling of imperfection by educators reduced performative pressure and facilitated more sincere engagement. These findings highlight a persistent awareness–action gap: recognizing *ghurur* does not automatically lead to transformation without structured pedagogical support. By empirically operationalizing al-Ghazālī's framework, this study bridges classical Islamic spiritual psychology with contemporary educational practice, offering an integrative model for cultivating spiritual authenticity within both institutional and digitally mediated Islamic learning environments.

Emergent Interventions and the Ghurur–Authenticity Continuum

Across research sites, locally developed pedagogical interventions—such as *muhasabah* circles, anonymous questioning systems, and educators' intentional modeling of imperfection— demonstrated tangible potential to reduce performative pressure and foster more sincere engagement with religious learning. Synthesizing cross-case findings, this study conceptualizes *ghurur* not as a fixed moral flaw but as a developmental continuum shaped by awareness, intention, and social context. This dynamic pattern is captured in the *Ghurur–Authenticity Continuum* (Figure 1), which illustrates shifts in religious engagement across institutional, educator, and learner levels.

| level 1 explicit Ghurur : consciousness performance and Social Rewrd driven | Level 2 Unconscious Ghurur: mixed motives and unaware self-deception | Level 3 Transitional Awareness: Recognition of purification efforts | Level 4 Integrated Authenticity: Aligned intentions and internal consistency |

Performative ——————— Increasing Awareness and Sincerity ————— Authentic

Figure 1. The *Ghurur–Authenticity Continuum*: A developmental model of religious engagement from performative compliance to integrated spiritual authenticity

As illustrated in Figure 1, the continuum comprises four fluid stages: Level 1 (Explicit *Ghurur*) reflects consciously performative religiosity driven by external validation; Level 2 (Unconscious *Ghurur*) involves mixed motivations where sincerity coexists with unrecognized performative impulses; Level 3 (Transitional Awareness) marks growing recognition of internal inconsistencies and engagement in self-reflective purification; and Level 4 (Integrated Authenticity) represents a more stable alignment between intention and practice with reduced reliance on external recognition.

Distributional patterns indicate that most participants clustered within the intermediate stages (Levels 2 and 3), suggesting that *ghurur* operates primarily as a subtle and situational phenomenon rather than an overt or static condition. This finding underscores the pedagogical importance of reflective interventions that facilitate movement toward higher levels of authenticity rather than relying solely on normative correction.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has explored the challenge of spiritual authenticity in contemporary Islamic education by placing al-Ghazālī's concept of *ghurur* in dialogue with lived pedagogical practices across Indonesian Islamic learning communities. Through an integrative qualitative approach, the findings demonstrate that *ghurur* remains a relevant and analytically robust framework for diagnosing contemporary forms of legal formalism and performative religiosity.

Empirically, the study shows that *ghurur* today operates less through overt ritual excess than through subtle, institutionalized mechanisms, including credential-oriented learning, performance-based evaluation, and digitally mediated visibility. These dynamics represent a contextual transformation of classical concerns rather than a departure from them.

The findings further indicate that pedagogical orientation matters. Gendered teaching practices—particularly those employed by female religious educators—were more attuned to recognizing implicit forms of spiritual self-deception and fostering reflective sincerity through relational, process-oriented approaches. In contrast, more corrective and procedural pedagogies tended to reproduce compliance without deeper self-examination.

The study also highlights the pedagogical potential of reintegrating *ushul al-fiqh* and *tasawwuf*. Practices such as *muhasabah* circles and anonymous questioning systems helped reduce performative pressure while strengthening ethical reflexivity and theological engagement. In digital contexts, platforms were found to intensify existing dynamics of *ghurur* by amplifying visibility and comparison, underscoring the need for critical digital literacy within Islamic education.

Synthesizing these insights, the study proposes a Critical Spiritual Pedagogy grounded in the *Ghurur*–Authenticity Continuum, conceptualizing spiritual authenticity as a developmental process shaped by intention, awareness, pedagogy, and social context. This framework offers a theologically grounded yet empirically informed pathway for cultivating sincerity within both traditional and digitally mediated Islamic learning environments.

This study carries several key implications. Theoretically, it demonstrates the enduring analytical power of classical Islamic spiritual concepts, such as ghurur, for diagnosing modern religious phenomena. Pedagogically, it provides educators and institutions with a tangible framework—the *Ghurur*–Authenticity Continuum and Critical Spiritual Pedagogy—to design learning environments that prioritize reflective self-examination alongside legal-ritual competency. Practically, it calls for integrating critical digital literacy into Islamic education to help learners navigate the pressures of algorithmic visibility.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on qualitative data from a limited number of Islamic learning communities in Indonesia, thereby limiting the scope for broader generalization. Second, reliance on self-reported data may involve social desirability bias, particularly given the sensitive nature of spiritual sincerity. Third, digital ethnography was limited to selected platforms and publicly accessible content, leaving private and hybrid online–offline interactions unexplored. Fourth, the conceptualization of *ghurur* primarily draws on al-Ghazālī and classical Sufi literature, which may not fully represent diverse contemporary Islamic perspectives. Finally, the Ghurur–Authenticity Continuum remains an exploratory model that requires further empirical validation.

For future research, longitudinal studies examining changes in spiritual authenticity over time and comparative studies across different Muslim contexts are recommended. Mixed-methods approaches integrating qualitative and psychological measures may also strengthen future analyses.

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