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Exemplary Behavior, Religious Maturity, and Character Education at IAIN Ponorogo

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Abstract

Character education for students in Islamic higher education requires evidence-based strengthening because students live under increasingly complex academic, social, and digital pressures. This study aims to analyze the influence of exemplary conduct and religious maturity on the character education of Ma'had Al-Jami'ah students at IAIN Ponorogo. This study focuses on three variables: exemplary conduct as X1, religious maturity as X2, and character education as Y. The study employed a quantitative approach with a correlational ex post facto design. The population consisted of 421 second-semester students living in Ma'had Al-Jami'ah. A sample of 200 students was selected through stratified random sampling based on gender proportion. Data were collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire. Instrument testing used Pearson Product Moment validity and Cronbach's Alpha reliability. Data analysis involved prerequisite tests and partial regression tests using SPSS. The results show that exemplary conduct has a positive and significant effect on character education, with $t = 5.769$, $p = 0.000$, and $R \text{ Square} = 0.441$. Religious maturity also has a positive and significant effect, with $t = 2.221$, $p = 0.028$, and $R \text{ Square} = 0.415$. These findings confirm that character education in Ma'had should be developed through visible role modeling, value habituation, and mature religious understanding. The implication is that Ma'had managers need to design character-building programs that integrate behavioral models, religious reflection, and continuous evaluation.

Keywords: Character education, Exemplary conduct, Islamic education, Ma'had al-jami'ah, Religious maturity

Introduction

Character education in Islamic higher education becomes an empirical concern when students' daily behavior does not always reflect the religious values taught in formal learning and Ma'had programs. In Ma'had Al-Jami'ah settings, including IAIN Ponorogo, character formation is challenged by uneven worship discipline, limited consistency in academic adab, varying levels of social responsibility, and the gap between religious knowledge and daily moral practice. These challenges indicate that character education cannot be understood merely as a normative institutional agenda, but as a measurable educational problem that requires empirical analysis. Ma'had Al-Jami'ah is designed to connect religious instruction, dormitory discipline, mentoring, and social interaction; however, the extent to which students' character education is associated with exemplary behavior and religious maturity still needs to be tested. Recent literature emphasizes that character education becomes effective when institutions build moral culture, behavioral

models, and reflective practice in a planned and measurable manner (Berkowitz, 2021; Nata, 2022). Thus, this study examines the relationship between exemplary behavior, religious maturity, and character education among Ma'had Al-Jami'ah students at IAIN Ponorogo.

The main problem of student character education does not lie in the absence of moral knowledge, but in the weak consistency between value understanding and real action. Students may know the values of honesty, responsibility, and civility, yet they may still struggle to apply them in academic assignments, social relations, and technology use. This condition shows that character cannot be built only through lectures or information transfer. Character requires example, habituation, supervision, and mature inner awareness. The framework of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action explains that values become character only when they are understood, felt, and practiced repeatedly (Lickona, 2009; Suyadi, Nuryana, & Sutrisno, 2021).

Ma'had Al-Jami'ah is a strategic space for studying character education because this environment combines dormitory life, religious guidance, social interaction, and institutional discipline. Students learn not only in classrooms but also through worship schedules, halaqah, communal activities, dormitory rules, and relationships with mentors. This situation allows Islamic educational values to be practiced in real contexts. Within this ecosystem, exemplary conduct becomes an important factor because students observe how values are translated into action. Social learning theory explains that individuals learn through observation, imitation, reinforcement, and evaluation of the behavior of others (Bandura, 2023; Daheri, 2025; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

Exemplary behavior in this study refers to students' perceptions of the observable moral behavior demonstrated by Ma'had educational figures, especially *musyrif/musyrifah*, ustadz, lecturers involved in Ma'had activities, and Ma'had managers. It does not refer to students' self-assessment or peer behavior. The construct is grounded in the Islamic concept of *uswah hasanah*, where values become stronger when authoritative figures show consistency between speech, instruction, and daily action. In the Ma'had context, exemplary behavior is observed through discipline in congregational prayer, responsibility in carrying out duties, polite communication, social care, punctuality, academic honesty, and commitment to institutional rules. Thus, the behavioral referent of the instrument is the modelling provided by Ma'had educators and managers as perceived by students. This clarification is important because role modelling must be linked to identifiable actors whose conduct can be observed, assessed, and replicated in similar Islamic residential education settings (J. Halstead, 2022; Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2018).

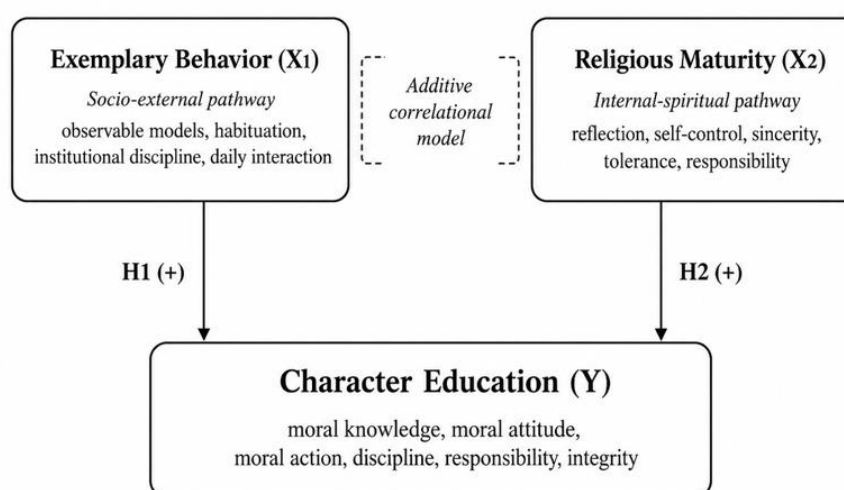
Religious maturity in this study is conceptually distinguished from religiosity, religious commitment, ritual observance, and spiritual well-being. Religiosity generally refers to the extent of belief, knowledge, practice, experience, and religious consequences in daily life. Religious commitment emphasizes loyalty and attachment to religious values, while ritual observance focuses on the consistency of worship practices. Spiritual well-being relates more to inner peace, meaning, and one's relationship with God. Religious maturity, however, refers to the quality of religious orientation that guides reflection, self-control, tolerance, sincerity, and responsibility. This construct is grounded in Allport's theory of mature religious sentiment, which views mature religion as reflective, integrated, morally consistent, and open to broader meaning. Therefore, the five dimensions form one coherent construct because they show how religious understanding is internalized into moral judgment, emotional regulation, ethical openness, sincere intention, and responsible conduct in social life (Paloutzian & Park, 2014; Rohmah, 2020).

Previous empirical studies have examined character education, religiosity, and religious learning in Islamic higher education and Ma'had settings from different perspectives. Islamic character learning at Ma'had Al-Jami'ah IAIN Samarinda was found to operate through structured

learning activities and religious habituation in the domains of human relations with God, other people, and the environment (Purwaningsih & Jannah, 2021). Another study showed that Ma'had Al-Jami'ah at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung contributed to strengthening student religiosity and building religious culture through the integration of residential guidance and Islamic university education (Al Muiz & Machali, 2023). Islamic educational programs in higher education have also been shown to support religiosity and social character in the context of Society 5.0 (Islamy, 2024). Meanwhile, religious character among Muslim university students has been measured as a multidimensional construct involving belief, commitment, ritual practice, experience, and consequence (Rukiyati, Hajaroh, Dwiningrum, & Kartika, 2025). However, these studies have not specifically tested the joint predictive contribution of exemplary behavior and religious maturity to character education among Ma'had students.

This study proposes an additive correlational model consisting of three core variables: exemplary behavior as X1, religious maturity as X2, and character education as Y. Exemplary behavior represents a socio-external pathway because students learn moral behavior through observable models, habituation, institutional discipline, and daily interaction in the Ma'had environment. Therefore, H1 states that exemplary behavior is positively associated with character education after accounting for religious maturity. Religious maturity represents an internal-spiritual pathway because students' reflective awareness, self-control, sincerity, tolerance, and responsibility guide the internalization and practice of Islamic values. Therefore, H2 states that religious maturity is positively associated with character education after accounting for exemplary behavior. H3 states that exemplary behavior and religious maturity are jointly associated with character education. This model assumes that both predictors provide independent and complementary pathways: exemplary behavior works through external modelling, while religious maturity works through internal moral regulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2021).

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Character Education in Ma'had



H3: Exemplary Behavior and Religious Maturity are jointly associated with Character Education.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the association between exemplary behavior, religious maturity, and character education among Ma'had Al-Jami'ah students at IAIN Ponorogo. In line with its observational, cross-sectional, ex post facto design, this study does not claim causal influence or direct effects, but examines whether exemplary behavior and religious maturity are statistically

related to and can predict students' character education. Theoretically, this article contributes to the development of an Islamic character education model that combines two complementary pathways: socio-external modelling through exemplary behavior and internal-spiritual regulation through religious maturity. Practically, the findings provide a basis for Ma'had managers to design character development programs that go beyond rule enforcement by strengthening observable role models, religious mentoring, moral habituation, and reflective awareness. Thus, student character education can be understood through the integration of institutional culture, behavioral examples, religious consciousness, and data-based evaluation (Ghozali, 2021; Sugiyono, 2016).

In Islamic higher education, character education needs to be understood as an ecological process. Students live within a network of rules, relationships, academic culture, worship practices, and social experiences that influence one another. Therefore, character strengthening is not effective when it is treated only as learning material. Character must appear in the institutional atmosphere, communication patterns, activity management, and reward systems. Ma'had Al-Jami'ah has strong potential because all these elements are present in students' everyday lives. This potential needs empirical investigation so that character education does not remain merely normative, but becomes evidence-based (Lellya, Syahbudin, Juairiah, & Zahra, 2026; Mashuri, 2023).

Another issue that requires attention is the transformation of student character in the digital era. Fast access to information may broaden insight, but it also creates risks of plagiarism, instant culture, weak discipline, and declining self-control. Islamic character education must respond to this change with an approach that does not simply advise students, but builds ethical awareness. Exemplary conduct helps students see the practice of integrity, while religious maturity helps them evaluate information, make decisions, and maintain adab in digital and social spaces. These two factors are relevant to the needs of contemporary Islamic education (Agustina, Muryati, Nadia, & Lestari, 2025; Mokhtar, Tumiran, & Mohammed Zabidi, 2024; Muizzuddin, Masyhudi, & Sari, 2025).

The emphasis on exemplary conduct and religious maturity also has policy relevance. Many Islamic educational institutions already have character programs, but not all have clear evaluation indicators. Programs are often assessed from the number of activities, not from changes in student behavior. This article positions exemplary conduct and religious maturity as measurable indicators so that Ma'had managers can read program strengths more objectively. This approach is important because character education requires evidence of achievement, not only normative claims or routine activity reports (Alimron, Syarnubi, & Maryamah, 2023; Qomusuddin, Latifah, & Erihadiana, 2025).

This empirical focus also helps position character education as an issue of quality management. Ma'had can use the findings to determine program priorities, resource allocation, and forms of mentoring. When influential variables have been measured, institutions can improve programs more accurately. In this way, research does not stop at publication, but becomes a basis for improving Islamic education practice at the institutional level (Nata, 2019; Sarstedt et al., 2021).

Method

This study used a quantitative approach with a correlational ex post facto design. The quantitative approach was selected because the study examined the influence of independent variables on a dependent variable through numerical data and statistical analysis. The ex post facto design was used because the researcher did not provide treatment for exemplary conduct or religious maturity. Both variables already existed within the Ma'had environment before the study was conducted. The correlational design was used to determine measurable relationships and effects

among variables. This design fits educational research that aims to test hypotheses, measure variable variation, and draw conclusions based on statistical evidence (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990).

The research site was Ma'had Al-Jami'ah IAIN Ponorogo, a residential Islamic education program in which second-semester students live under structured mentoring, worship discipline, religious learning, character habituation, and dormitory regulations. The program involves guidance from *musyrif/musyrifah*, ustadz, lecturers, and Ma'had managers through congregational prayer, Qur'anic activities, religious mentoring, social discipline, and daily interaction. The population consisted of 421 second-semester residents in the 2024/2025 academic year, including 342 female and 79 male students. The sample size of 200 was determined through a defensible proportional sampling calculation with an approximately 5% error tolerance and adjusted to available valid responses. The sampling frame was the official list of Ma'had residents. Stratified random sampling was applied based on gender proportion, resulting in 162 female and 38 male respondents. Although students were administratively grouped in rooms or mentoring units, the unit of analysis was the individual student, not the residential group (Sugiyono, 2016; Taherdoost, 2021).

The study involved three variables. Exemplary behavior was the first independent variable (X1). Religious maturity was the second independent variable (X2). Internalized character values was the dependent variable (Y). The term *internalized character values* is used because the indicators in this study measure students' character outcomes rather than the educational program or process itself. Exemplary behavior was defined as observable moral behavior demonstrated by Ma'had educational figures, including *musyrif/musyrifah*, ustadz, lecturers involved in Ma'had activities, and Ma'had managers. Its indicators included discipline, honesty, responsibility, worship consistency, social care, and alignment between words and actions. Religious maturity was defined as the reflective, self-regulative, tolerant, sincere, and responsible orientation through which students understand and practice religious teachings. Internalized character values were defined as students' moral outcomes reflected in moral knowledge, moral attitude, moral action, discipline, responsibility, and integrity (Lickona, 2009).

Data were collected using structured Likert-scale questionnaires with five response anchors, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The instruments were developed by adapting relevant theoretical indicators from previous literature and aligning them with the Ma'had context. The exemplary behavior scale consisted of 20 items covering observable modelling, discipline, honesty, responsibility, worship consistency, and social care. The religious maturity scale consisted of 24 items covering reflection, self-control, tolerance, sincerity, and responsibility. The internalized character values scale consisted of 25 items covering moral knowledge, moral attitude, moral action, discipline, responsibility, and integrity. Sample items included statements on observing Ma'had mentors' discipline, applying religious values responsibly, and practicing honesty in daily academic life. Content validation was conducted through expert judgment to assess indicator relevance, wording clarity, and contextual suitability. A pilot test involving 30 respondents used Pearson item-total correlation; items below r -table 0.361 were excluded from the final analysis (Ghozali, 2021; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019).

Reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha with a more conventional criterion of $\alpha \geq .70$ for acceptable internal consistency. This criterion was selected because the instruments were used to measure psychological and educational constructs that require adequate consistency across items. The results showed that the exemplary behavior instrument had a Cronbach's Alpha of .891 with 18 valid items, the religious maturity instrument had a Cronbach's Alpha of .933 with

23 valid items, and the internalized character values instrument had a Cronbach's Alpha of .941 with 24 valid items. These coefficients exceed the acceptable threshold and indicate strong internal consistency. Because the constructs include several dimensions, the study also acknowledges that future validation may report confidence intervals and additional reliability indices, such as McDonald's omega, to provide stronger evidence of scale reliability. Based on the obtained alpha values, the three instruments were considered reliable for further statistical analysis (Field, 2024; Kline, 2023).

Data analysis was conducted through prerequisite tests and a simultaneous multiple-regression model. The prerequisite tests included normality, multicollinearity, heteroscedasticity, and autocorrelation. Normality was examined using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, multicollinearity through tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor values, heteroscedasticity using the Glejser test, and autocorrelation using the Durbin-Watson statistic. To answer the research question on independent predictive contributions, exemplary behavior (X1) and religious maturity (X2) were entered simultaneously in one regression model with internalized character values (Y) as the dependent variable. This procedure was used because separate simple regressions cannot estimate the unique contribution of each predictor when X1 and X2 may be correlated. The analysis reported unstandardized coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), standardized beta, t-values, p-values, and 95% confidence intervals for each predictor. Model evaluation was based on the F-test, R^2 , and adjusted R^2 . Predictors were considered statistically significant when $p < .05$ (Field, 2024; Sarstedt et al., 2021).

Ethically, this study was conducted after obtaining formal research permission from the relevant institutional authority and Ma'had Al-Jami'ah management. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents received information about the purpose of the study, the type of data collected, and the academic use of the results. Informed consent was obtained by asking students to confirm their willingness to participate before accessing the questionnaire items. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that they could decline or stop responding without academic, administrative, or residential consequences. To reduce perceived pressure in the Ma'had environment, the questionnaire was completed individually, anonymously, and without the presence of mentors, lecturers, or Ma'had managers who might influence responses. The researcher also explained that there were no right or wrong answers and that students should answer based on their actual experience. Respondents' identities were kept confidential, and the data were analyzed only in aggregate form for academic purposes (Creswell, 2002; Taherdoost, 2021).

Table 1. Operationalization of research variables

Code	Variable	Main indicators	Instrument
X1	Exemplary conduct	Discipline, honesty, responsibility, worship consistency, care, alignment between words and actions	18 valid items
X2	Religious maturity	Reflective understanding, self-control, sincerity, tolerance, religious responsibility	23 valid items
Y	Character education	Moral knowledge, moral attitude, moral action, discipline, responsibility, integrity	24 valid items

Results

The results are presented in three stages: descriptive analysis, bivariate correlation analysis, and inferential testing. Before regression analysis, descriptive statistics were reported for each

construct, including the mean, standard deviation, minimum score, maximum score, and observed range. This step was used to describe the general tendency and distribution of students' responses on exemplary behavior, religious maturity, and internalized character values. A correlation matrix was then presented to show the direction and magnitude of bivariate relationships among X1, X2, and Y before interpreting the multiple-regression model. This matrix is important because it helps readers understand whether the predictors are related to the dependent variable and whether X1 and X2 are strongly correlated with each other. After these preliminary results, prerequisite tests and simultaneous multiple regression were conducted. The final analysis focused on whether exemplary behavior and religious maturity were independently and jointly associated with internalized character values among Ma'had students.

The validity assessment combined content validation and item-total correlation. Before pilot testing, the instruments were reviewed through expert judgment to evaluate indicator relevance, wording clarity, and contextual suitability for the Ma'had setting. The Pearson item-total test was then used as an initial empirical screening procedure, not as complete evidence of construct validity. For the exemplary behavior variable, 18 of 20 items were valid, while X1.6 and X1.17 were removed because their r-count values were below .361. The valid items ranged from .372 to .798. For internalized character values, 24 of 25 items were valid, while Y.16 was removed because its r-count value was .305. The valid items ranged from .435 to .809. However, this study acknowledges that item-total correlation cannot fully confirm the dimensional structure of theoretically rich constructs. Future studies should use exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis to test the socio-pedagogical and spiritual-reflective dimensions more rigorously.

The validity test for the religious maturity variable showed that 23 out of 24 items were valid. One item, X2.3, was invalid because the r-count value was 0.304, which was lower than the r-table value of 0.361. The r-count range of valid items was 0.437 to 0.812. These results show that the religious maturity instrument had an adequate measurement structure. Invalid items were removed so that the final analysis used only items that met the criteria. Removing invalid items is important for maintaining construct quality and preventing errors in data interpretation.

Reliability testing showed that all instruments had strong internal consistency. Cronbach's Alpha for exemplary conduct was 0.891. Cronbach's Alpha for religious maturity was 0.933. Cronbach's Alpha for character education was 0.941. All values exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.60, so the instruments were declared reliable. The highest value appeared in character education, which indicates that the items in variable Y had very strong consistency. These reliability results strengthen the feasibility of the data for hypothesis testing because respondents' answers showed stable patterns in each construct.

Table 2. Validity test summary

Variable	Initial items	Valid items	Invalid items	Valid r-count range
Exemplary conduct (X1)	20	18	2	0.372-0.798
Religious maturity (X2)	24	23	1	0.437-0.812
Character education (Y)	25	24	1	0.435-0.809

Table 3. Reliability test summary

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of items	Interpretation
Exemplary conduct (X1)	0.891	18	Reliable
Religious maturity (X2)	0.933	23	Reliable
Character education (Y)	0.941	24	Reliable

The regression assumptions were evaluated primarily through residual diagnostics rather than only through the marginal distributions of X_1 , X_2 , and Y . Residual normality was examined using standardized residuals and visual inspection of the Q-Q plot to determine whether the residuals followed an approximately normal pattern. Linearity was assessed by reviewing the relationship between standardized predicted values and residuals. Homoscedasticity was evaluated through the scatterplot of standardized residuals, where a random spread of points indicated that the variance of residuals was relatively constant. Multicollinearity was examined using tolerance and VIF values. The tolerance value for exemplary behavior was .367 with $VIF = 2.723$, while religious maturity had a tolerance value of .342 with $VIF = 2.921$, indicating no serious multicollinearity. Influential observations were checked through standardized residuals and leverage values. Because the data were cross-sectional, independence was interpreted cautiously by considering the individual response unit and possible residential grouping.

The heteroscedasticity test using the Glejser method showed eligible results. The significance value for exemplary conduct was 0.584, while the significance value for religious maturity was 0.114. Both values were greater than 0.05. This means that the model did not show heteroscedasticity symptoms. The autocorrelation test showed a Durbin-Watson value of 1.875. This value was between dU 1.809 and $4-dU$ 2.191, so it met the rule $dU < DW < 4-dU$. Thus, the regression model did not experience autocorrelation. All prerequisite tests supported the feasibility of the model for hypothesis testing.

The first hypothesis test should be interpreted as a bivariate association between exemplary behavior and internalized character values, not as a causal effect. The analysis showed that exemplary behavior was positively and significantly associated with internalized character values, with a t -value of 5.769, which was greater than the t -table value of 1.652. The significance value was $p < .001$, indicating that the association was statistically significant at the .05 level. In the simple regression model, the correlation coefficient was $R = .664$ and $R^2 = .441$. This means that exemplary behavior, when examined as a single predictor, accounted for 44.1% of the variance in internalized character values. However, this value should not be interpreted as the unique contribution of exemplary behavior after controlling for religious maturity. Because the VIF values indicate correlation between predictors, some explained variance may be shared with religious maturity. Therefore, the unique predictive contribution of exemplary behavior should be interpreted from the simultaneous multiple-regression model.

The second hypothesis test should also be interpreted as a bivariate predictive relationship, not as a unique or causal contribution. The analysis showed that religious maturity was positively and significantly associated with internalized character values, with a t -value of 2.221, which was greater than the t -table value of 1.652. The significance value was $p = .028$, indicating that the relationship was statistically significant at the .05 level. In the simple regression model, the correlation coefficient was $R = .644$, $R^2 = .415$, and adjusted $R^2 = .412$. This means that religious maturity, when tested as a single predictor, accounted for 41.5% of the variance in internalized character values. However, this value should not be interpreted as the unique contribution of religious maturity after controlling for exemplary behavior. Because exemplary behavior and religious maturity are related predictors, some explained variance may overlap. Therefore, the independent predictive contribution of religious maturity should be interpreted from the simultaneous multiple-regression model using standardized beta, p -value, confidence interval, and, if needed, semi-partial R^2 .

The comparison between exemplary behavior and religious maturity should be interpreted within the same simultaneous multiple-regression model, not from separate t -values or separate R^2

values. Therefore, this study does not claim that exemplary behavior is more dominant solely because it has a higher t-value or R^2 in a separate model. The relative contribution of each predictor should be evaluated by comparing standardized beta coefficients, significance values, confidence intervals, and, where possible, semi-partial R^2 within the same regression model. Conceptually, both variables are treated as complementary pathways. Exemplary behavior represents a socio-external pathway through observable role models, habituation, institutional discipline, and daily interaction in Ma'had. Religious maturity represents an internal-spiritual pathway through reflection, self-control, sincerity, tolerance, and responsibility. Thus, student internalized character values are better understood through the combined presence of external moral modelling and internal religious regulation rather than through an unsupported claim of predictor dominance.

The validity and reliability results indicate that the instruments were acceptable for preliminary analysis, but this study recognizes the need to distinguish the constructs more carefully. Exemplary behavior (X1) was defined as students' perceptions of observable role modelling demonstrated by Ma'had educational figures, such as discipline, honesty, responsibility, worship consistency, social care, and consistency between words and actions. Internalized character values (Y), however, referred to students' own moral understanding, attitudes, and actions in academic and social life. Although these constructs are conceptually different, some indicators may appear close in meaning, especially discipline, honesty, responsibility, and moral behavior. This overlap may increase the correlation between X1 and Y. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Future validation should examine discriminant validity through exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis to ensure that exemplary behavior, religious maturity, and internalized character values are empirically distinguishable constructs and not inflated by item overlap.

The quantitative findings show that student character education in Ma'had does not stand alone. Character values grow through the meeting between social experience and religious awareness. Exemplary conduct provides external stimulation through real examples. Religious maturity provides internal encouragement through value awareness. When these two elements are present together, students have a greater opportunity to transform moral knowledge into habit. This result gives Ma'had managers a basis for integrating habituation programs with religious deepening programs. Both need to be designed as one system of character development.

Accordingly, all main results support the article's focus and show a clear direction for the sustainable strengthening of Ma'had student character.

Table 4. Prerequisite test summary

Test	Indicator	Value	Description
Normality X1	K-S Sig.	0.227	Normal
Normality X2	K-S Sig.	0.124	Normal
Normality Y	K-S Sig.	0.137	Normal
Multicollinearity X1	Tolerance/VIF	0.367 / 2.723	No problem
Multicollinearity X2	Tolerance/VIF	0.342 / 2.921	No problem
Heteroscedasticity X1	Glejser Sig.	0.584	No problem
Heteroscedasticity X2	Glejser Sig.	0.114	No problem
Autocorrelation	Durbin-Watson	1.875	No problem

Table 5. Hypothesis test summary

Hypothesis	Variable relationship	t-count	Sig.	R Square	Decision
H1	Exemplary conduct -> Character education	5.769	0.000	0.441	Accepted
H2	Religious maturity -> Character education	2.221	0.028	0.415	Accepted

Discussion

The finding that exemplary behavior is positively and significantly associated with internalized character values strengthens the argument that role modelling is an important socio-pedagogical pathway in Islamic residential education. This result is consistent with studies showing that Islamic character formation is strengthened when students encounter visible examples of discipline, politeness, responsibility, and religious commitment from teachers or institutional mentors (Pratomo & Yanuarti, 2025). It also corresponds with research on Ma'had Al-Jami'ah, which found that character learning develops through structured religious habituation, mentoring, and daily educational interaction (Purwaningsih & Jannah, 2021). However, this finding differs from studies that emphasize curriculum design or religious culture as general institutional programs without isolating role modelling as a specific predictor of student character. The Ma'had context may explain this stronger association because students do not only receive religious instruction, but also observe *musyrif/musyrifah*, ustadz, lecturers, and managers in repeated daily interactions. Thus, exemplary behavior becomes concrete, proximate, and experientially accessible within students' residential life (Bandura, 2023; Pratomo & Yanuarti, 2025; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

The R Square value of 0.441 shows that exemplary conduct makes a substantial contribution to character education. This means that the quality of behavioral examples in Ma'had can explain nearly half of the variation in student character within this model. This finding is important because dormitory environments have high interaction intensity. Students observe how mentors perform worship, manage time, communicate politely, resolve conflicts, and maintain responsibility. When these examples are consistent, students obtain clear behavioral standards. Therefore, exemplary conduct needs to be designed as an institutional culture, not merely left to the personal character of individual mentors (Berkowitz, 2021).

Exemplary conduct also strengthens habituation. Character education is not sufficient through moral instruction because students need space to repeat good actions until they become habits. In Ma'had, habituation may occur through congregational prayer, religious study, cleanliness activities, time discipline, and social ethics. However, habituation loses strength when it is not supported by consistent examples. Students can judge whether rules are merely formal or truly part of the culture. Therefore, this study sends a practical message that Ma'had needs to formulate mentor exemplary standards, evaluation mechanisms, and moral communication training (Bisel, 2017; Utari & Hazizah, 2025).

The finding that religious maturity significantly influences character education shows that character is not only shaped from outside. Character also requires internal awareness. Religious maturity helps students understand religion as a source of ethics, not merely as ritual routine. Religiously mature students can connect worship with social responsibility, knowledge with adab, and Muslim identity with polite behavior. This is important in Islamic higher education because students face diverse information and moral challenges that cannot always be answered by technical rules (Sahin, 2013).

The R Square value of 0.415 for religious maturity indicates a strong contribution. Religious maturity can become an internal controller when students are not under direct supervision. External regulation through rules works only as long as the rules are visible and monitored. By contrast, religious maturity works through awareness, responsibility, and the belief that actions have moral and spiritual consequences. Ma'had programs need to strengthen this aspect through reflective halaqah, contextual moral studies, spiritual counseling, and discussions of academic ethics cases. In this way, students obey not because they fear sanctions, but because they understand values (Fradito & Ferina, 2026).

The comparison between X1 and X2 shows that exemplary conduct is slightly more dominant statistically. This dominance can be understood because Ma'had is a shared living space rich in interaction. Visible behavior usually works more quickly than internal reflection, which requires a longer process. However, the dominance of exemplary conduct does not reduce the importance of religious maturity. Both need to be integrated. Exemplary conduct provides the concrete form of values, while religious maturity provides meaning and inner commitment. Character education that relies only on examples may become weak when the model is absent. Character education that relies only on understanding may become weak when no concrete example is present (Sanderse, 2024).

The contribution of this article should be understood as a conceptual interpretation of two independent predictors, not as evidence of causal pathways or mechanisms of character formation. The regression analysis does not estimate a path model, mediation model, or structural equation model; therefore, the terms "pathway" and "model" are used only in a limited conceptual sense. Empirically, the study shows that exemplary behavior and religious maturity are associated with internalized character values among Ma'had students. Exemplary behavior represents an external socio-pedagogical correlate because students encounter observable moral examples from *musyrif/musyrifah*, ustadz, lecturers, and Ma'had managers in daily residential life. Religious maturity represents an internal spiritual-reflective correlate because it relates to students' reflection, self-control, sincerity, tolerance, and responsibility. These two predictors are complementary, but the present study does not claim to prove the mechanisms through which character is formed. Thus, Ma'had is positioned as an important educational ecology where religious learning, adab, habituation, and social interaction are empirically related to students' internalized character values (Afwadzi & Miski, 2021; Khasanah, Hamzani, & Aravik, 2023).

The practical implications of this study should be divided into two categories. First, the findings support implications that are directly related to the observed associations. Because exemplary behavior was associated with internalized character values, Ma'had managers may strengthen observable role modelling through mentor behavior standards, service discipline, communication ethics, and consistency between instruction and practice. Because religious maturity was associated with internalized character values, Ma'had programs may place greater attention on reflective religious understanding, self-control, sincerity, tolerance, and responsibility, not only on increasing ritual frequency. Second, several recommendations should be treated as proposed program interventions that require future evaluation. Periodic character assessment, structured reflective programs, mentor training, and data-based monitoring are promising strategies, but this study does not directly test their effectiveness. Therefore, these interventions should be evaluated in future studies using stronger designs, such as longitudinal, quasi-experimental, or mixed-method approaches, to determine whether they actually improve students' character development.

The limitations of this study should be understood in relation to its design, data source, and research context. First, the study used a correlational ex post facto and cross-sectional design, so the findings can only show associations and predictive relationships, not causal influence. Second, the research was conducted at a single site, namely Ma'had Al-Jami'ah IAIN Ponorogo, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other Ma'had or Islamic residential education contexts. Third, the data were collected through self-report questionnaires, so responses may be influenced by subjective perception, social-desirability bias, and students' tendency to provide normatively acceptable answers. Fourth, because X1, X2, and Y were measured from the same respondents at the same time, common-method variance may have inflated the observed relationships. Fifth,

possible conceptual overlap between exemplary behavior and internalized character values should be considered. Finally, students may be clustered within rooms, mentors, or residential groups, which may affect the independence of observations. Future research should use multi-site, longitudinal, mixed-method, or SEM-based designs supported by interviews, observations, and stronger construct validation (Plano Clark, 2017).

The results are relevant to the concept of adab in Islamic education. Adab does not only mean politeness. It also refers to the proper placement of knowledge, self, others, and God within the right relationship. Exemplary conduct helps students see the form of adab in daily action. Religious maturity helps students understand the spiritual and moral reasons behind such action. In the Ma'had context, adab appears in the way students respect teachers, maintain cleanliness, speak politely, complete assignments, and take responsibility for the community. Therefore, strengthening adab needs to become the core of Islamic character education (J. Halstead, 2022; Hamid, 2025).

This finding also shows the importance of Ma'had mentor leadership. Mentors are not only activity supervisors, but educational actors who shape the moral climate. Mentors who arrive on time, give direction politely, and apply rules consistently create trust. This trust makes it easier for students to accept the values being taught. Conversely, mentor inconsistency can weaken the moral authority of the program. Therefore, Ma'had management needs to prepare mentors through pedagogical training, communication ethics, basic counseling, and character-based performance evaluation (Arinda et al., 2025; Voronkova, Vasylychuk, Nikitenko, Kaganov, & Metelenko, 2023).

From the side of religious maturity, Ma'had programs need to provide space for dialogue. Early adult students often face questions about the meaning of worship, identity, social relationships, and the future. When these questions are not accompanied, religiosity may stop at formality. Reflective halaqah can help students connect religious teachings with life experiences. Case discussions about academic honesty, social media use, organizational responsibility, and friendships can strengthen the ability to make ethical decisions. Thus, religion becomes a consciousness that guides action, not merely a schedule of activities (Suryadi, 2024).

The model offered in this article can be developed into a Ma'had evaluation program. First, institutions can formulate mentor exemplary indicators and measure student perceptions periodically. Second, institutions can measure religious maturity through indicators of reflection, tolerance, self-control, and responsibility. Third, institutions can link the measurement results with character education outcomes. This evaluation helps managers identify which parts of the program need strengthening. With data, character development does not depend only on general impressions, but on evidence that can be academically accounted for (Sarstedt et al., 2021).

The findings of this study provide a clearer academic contribution by positioning exemplary conduct and religious maturity as two complementary factors in Islamic character education. Exemplary conduct represents the social and pedagogical dimension of character formation because it works through visible moral examples, daily interaction, institutional discipline, and mentor consistency. Religious maturity represents the internal and spiritual dimension because it works through reflective understanding, self-control, moral responsibility, and the ability to connect religious values with real behavior. The combination of these two variables explains that character education in Ma'had is not shaped only by formal instruction, but also by lived experience, moral culture, and religious awareness (Bandura, 2023; M. Halstead, 2004).

Future research may examine additional psychological, pedagogical, and institutional factors that influence student character education in Ma'had settings. Variables such as learning motivation, self-efficacy, peer culture, mentor leadership, institutional climate, and digital ethics

can be tested in broader models. Further studies may also use mixed methods to combine statistical analysis with interviews and observation. This approach can explain not only whether certain variables influence character education, but also how these influences occur in daily Ma'had life. Such development will strengthen empirical studies on Islamic character education in higher education and offer a stronger basis for improving character development programs in Islamic campus-based residential education (Plano Clark, 2017).

Based on these results, this article does not position Ma'had as a mere campus supplement, but as a center of student development. Ma'had can strengthen academic, spiritual, and social character at the same time. However, this function works only when programs are not merely administrative. Managers need to organize mentor roles, Ma'had curriculum, evaluation patterns, and communication with faculties. This integration will make character education more sustainable because students receive consistent value messages from the dormitory, classroom, and campus environment (Azra, 2006).

Conclusion

This study concludes that exemplary behavior and religious maturity are positively associated with internalized character values among Ma'had Al-Jami'ah students at IAIN Ponorogo. Within this single Ma'had sample, the findings indicate that students who perceive stronger observable moral modelling from Ma'had educational figures and who report higher religious maturity tend to show stronger internalization of character values. Theoretically, this study contributes to Islamic character education by distinguishing two complementary predictors: exemplary behavior as a socio-external correlate and religious maturity as an internal spiritual-reflective correlate. Practically, the findings suggest that Ma'had managers may strengthen character development by improving consistent role modelling and reflective religious mentoring. However, these implications should be interpreted cautiously because the study is cross-sectional, self-reported, and correlational.

Theoretically, this study strengthens the view that Islamic character education is not formed only through the transmission of values, but also through social experience and religious awareness. Exemplary conduct works as a social pathway that provides concrete moral models, while religious maturity works as a spiritual pathway that strengthens self-control and moral responsibility. Practically, Ma'had administrators need to strengthen a culture of exemplary conduct, value habituation, reflective halaqah, religious mentoring, and regular program evaluation. Future studies may expand the research setting, apply a mixed-methods approach, and explore students' lived experiences qualitatively so that the mechanisms of character formation can be understood more deeply.

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