

Criteria for Choosing Friends from an Islamic Perspective and Their Relevance in the Modern Era

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ABSTRACT

The criteria for choosing friends from an Islamic perspective have become an urgent topic of discussion for today's youth. As social beings by nature, forming friendships is a fundamental human need. Technological advancements have made it easier to interact and build social networks. However, the ease of finding friends on online platforms does not necessarily correlate with emotional closeness. The unlimited choice of friends actually leads to confusion regarding the criteria for selecting them. Therefore, guidelines and direction from authentic teachings are necessary to ensure one does not make mistakes in choosing friends. This study is a library-based research project using a qualitative approach. The results consist of data descriptions derived from both primary and secondary sources. The findings reveal that in this study, the researcher utilized several perspectives: first, from the Qur'an and hadith; second, from the opinions of renowned scholars, including those of Sheikh az-Zarnuji as cited in his book *Ta'limul Muta'allim* and Imam al-Ghazali as cited in his book *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*. All of these perspectives are consistent with one another and do not contradict each other. They serve as relevant guidance for choosing good friends who can bring benefit and protect one from harm, as having good friends helps preserve one's moral character and religious commitment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Making friends is a natural human need. As social beings by nature, humans cannot live independently; they need to interact with others. As Ibn Khaldun stated, humans require ta'awun mutual aid because they are unable to meet their own needs on their own (Khaldun, 2000). Friends are people whom most people need in addition to their families. In fact, many people feel more comfortable confiding their innermost feelings to friends than to family. Prophet Adam (peace be upon him) felt lonely while in Paradise without a single friend even though Paradise was a place of great comfort and perfect bliss for humans. Eventually, Allah the Almighty created Eve as his companion in Paradise (Quran 7:189).

Psychologically speaking, having friends is a basic human need. While the Qur'an does not explicitly outline specific criteria for choosing friends, a passage in Surah al-Hujurat explains that "O mankind, indeed We have created you from a male and a female. Then We made you into nations and tribes so that you may come to know one another..." (Quran 49:13). This passage from Surah al-Hujurat implies that getting to know one another and forming friendships are not merely a choice but part of the purpose of creation. Without fulfilling this need for friendship, it is difficult for individuals to achieve self-actualization. The "need to belong" theory, developed by Baumeister and Leary, states that humans have an innate drive to form and maintain positive, stable, and meaningful interpersonal relationships at least one or two such relationships (R.F. Baumeister & M.R. Leary, 1995). Failure to meet this need can lead to psychological and physical distress.

In this modern age, the extraordinary sophistication of technology particularly in the field of communication can fundamentally reshape the landscape of friendship. Whereas in the past, a "friend" was someone one had actually met and interacted with positively, with the advancement of communication technology, a friend is no longer someone one must meet in person. In fact, one can make friends without ever seeing the other person's face. According to Nasrullah, social media can serve as an online platform that allows users to communicate, collaborate, share, and interact with other users (Nasrullah, 2025). According to Mansyur (2016), people who use social media are able to form friendships and interact with anyone, without the constraints of time or space.

A wide variety of social media apps are now widely available, providing a space for communication that allows people to form friendships known as "social media friends" or "online friends." Making friends with strangers is even easy through social media. The internet has significantly transformed human interaction (Purbohastuti, 2017). However, it's important to be aware that these friendships can also influence and impact a person's life, even without face-to-face meetings. Forming new friendships with people you've never met before is possible through social media. This aligns with the view that the internet has, to a greater or lesser extent, changed the patterns of human interaction.

A social circle can serve as a source of support that helps individuals cope with life's challenges and pressures (Astuti, 2024). The ease of finding friends on online platforms does not necessarily correlate with emotional closeness. The unlimited choice of friends actually leads to confusion regarding the criteria for selecting friends. The lack of understanding among the modern generation regarding how to choose friends makes it urgent to research how Islam provides guidance to its followers on selecting ideal friends both for their life in this world and for matters concerning the hereafter (Kurniawati, 2024).

2. METHODS

This study is a library-based research project that employs a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods are research methods used to generate descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from individuals, as well as observable behavior (Moleong, 2012). This study was conducted through the collection of library data, reading, note-taking, and the analysis of research materials.

In this study, data were obtained from various sources, such as reference books, scientific journals, textbooks, documents, magazines, and other sources (Mestika, 2008). The primary data sources in this study are the Qur'an al-Karim and the Hadith. The primary reference works are *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* by Imam al-Ghazali and *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim* by Sheikh al-Zarnuji. Secondary data serves to support and reinforce the primary data (Nasution, 2023). The author obtained secondary data from books, scientific journals, documents, and other sources related to the criteria for choosing friends. The results obtained from the research have to be supported by sufficient data. The research results and the discovery must be the answers, or the research hypothesis stated previously in the introduction part.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Choosing friends is not merely a social matter, but rather part of the strategy of Islamic education. Friends can provide benefits and have a positive impact on individuals, such as offering motivation, reminding one another to do good, and encouraging actions that lead to virtue. Conversely, friends with poor character can lead one into reprehensible behavior and even distance one from religion. It is a reality in the lives of many individuals whether teenagers or Islamic boarding school students that they are led astray due to the influence of friends. Data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission indicates that juvenile delinquency is often triggered by promiscuous behavior and the poor choice of negative peers (KPAI, 2023). In Islamic boarding school environments, cases of disciplinary violations often stem from the influence of bad peers. Good friends will instill virtuous traits, while bad friends will corrupt one's character and aspirations (Az-Zarnuji, 1981).

Friendship isn't just about how many people or friends one manages to make. Ideally, a friendship is a healthy bond that involves a sense of togetherness, trust, and emotional support. Moreover, in Islam, a good friend isn't just for fun. Islam offers its own perspective on what a friend should be. There are several hadiths that can serve as guidance in choosing good friends.

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ قَالَ : قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ : الْمَرْءُ عَلَى دِينِ خَلِيلِهِ ، فَلْيَنْظُرْ أَحَدُكُمْ مَنْ يُخَالِلُ .

Abu Hurairah reported that the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, said: "A person is influenced by the religion of his close friend. So let each one of you consider whom he chooses as a close friend." (Narrated by Abu Dawud)

حَدَّثَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ الْعَلَاءِ حَدَّثَنَا أَبُو أُسَامَةَ عَنْ بَرِيدٍ عَنْ ْ أَبِي بُرْدَةَ عَنْ أَبِي مُوسَى رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ ، عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ مَثَلُ الْجَلِيسِ الصَّالِحِ وَالسَّوِّءِ كَحَامِلِ الْمِسْكِ وَنَافِعِ الْكَبِيرِ فَحَامِلُ الْمِسْكِ إِمَّا أَنْ يُحْدِثَكَ وَإِمَّا أَنْ تَبْتَاعَ مِنْهُ وَإِمَّا أَنْ تَجِدَ مِنْهُ رِيحًا طَيِّبَةً ، وَنَافِعِ الْكَبِيرِ إِمَّا أَنْ يَخْرِقَ ثِيَابَكَ وَإِمَّا أَنْ تَجِدَ رِيحًا خَبِيثَةً .

Muhammad bin al-'Ala' narrated to us, saying: Abu Usamah narrated to us from Buraid, from Abu Burdah, from Abu Musa, may Allah be pleased with him, from the Prophet, peace be upon him, who said: "The example of a righteous friend and a bad friend is like that of a perfume seller and a blacksmith. "It may be that the perfume seller will give you a gift, or you will buy from him, or you will be perfumed by his scent, whereas the blacksmith will only burn your clothes, or you will be left with a foul odor." (Narrated by al-Bukhari, No. 5534)

These two hadiths show that, as social beings, humans need friends in their lives. And in life, individuals are susceptible to being influenced by their environment. If someone wants to preserve their faith, piety, and moral character, one of the best ways is to surround themselves with a good environment. Conversely, people who find themselves in an environment with bad influences will be susceptible to being affected by that negativity.

Criteria for Choosing Friends According to Sheikh Az Zarnuji

Sheikh Az Zarnuji outlined the criteria for choosing friends in his book *Ta'limul Muta'allim*, in Chapter 3, titled "Choosing Knowledge, Teachers, and Friends." Sheikh Az Zarnuji uses the word الشريك to describe a friend, a term that carries a broader meaning. The word الشريك means: friend, ally, partner, or companion (Munawwir, 1997). In this chapter, Sheikh Az Zarnuji provides guidance on choosing friends who possess the following qualities:

1. Diligence, which means being hardworking and not lazy. Sheikh az-Zarnuji strongly condemned laziness and procrastination, describing these traits as contagious diseases. He further explained that friends who have high aspirations in the pursuit of knowledge can serve as a source of encouragement and a reminder when one is feeling down.
2. Wara', meaning to exercise religious caution. This refers to the attitude of avoiding matters of doubt, let alone those that are forbidden. Sheikh az-Zarnuji placed the greatest emphasis on this criterion. The reason for this emphasis is that a friend who possesses wara' will protect both himself and his companions from things that could undermine the blessings of knowledge.
3. Good character ideally, a friend should possess noble morals and remain steadfast in doing good. Sheikh az-Zarnuji states that knowledge without good character becomes a disaster, and a friend with poor character will corrupt the student's conduct, even if the student possesses extensive knowledge.
4. Intelligent and quick to understand intelligence is a divine gift, but it is not the only measure. Sheikh az-Zarnuji offers the perspective that befriending intelligent people will facilitate the process of mudzakarah (scholarly discussion), thereby making study time more efficient. On the other hand, Sheikh az-Zarnuji makes an important point: intelligence without piety and good character will lead one into danger. As quoted from Sheikh az-Zarnuji, "Knowledge without piety is like a mirage in an open field." What he means is that knowledge devoid of piety is deceptive. It may appear impressive and remarkable, but in reality, it is empty. It offers no benefit and cannot quench the thirst of the heart (Az-Zarnuji, 1981).

Furthermore, Sheikh al-Zarnuji also warned about the dangers of bad friends, because, according to him, there are three forms of harm caused by bad friends: first, the loss of the blessing of time, because time is wasted on futile matters. Second, the loss of the blessing of knowledge, because knowledge will not enter an impure heart. Third, the emergence of qaswat al-qalb—a hardening of the heart that prevents one from accepting advice and guidance (Az-Zarnuji, 1981).

Regarding the topic of choosing friends, Sheikh Az-Zarnuji has a popular poem:

عَنِ الْمَرْءِ لَا تَسْأَلْ وَسَلَّ قَرِيْبَهُ # فَكُلُّ قَرِيْبٍ بِالْمَقَارِنِ يَتَّبِعِي

"You don't need to ask about a person (who they are); just ask who their friends are, for every friend will follow the person they associate with."

Know that, whether consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, a friend's behavior will influence their companion. Therefore, be careful in choosing friends, as advised by the righteous scholars, so that you may always possess praiseworthy character and not fall into reprehensible behavior that leads to ruin.

Criteria for Choosing Friends According to Imam al-Ghazali

In his work *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, Imam al-Ghazali discusses the chapter on the etiquette of friendship and socializing in the section titled *Rubu' al-Adah*. In this chapter, Imam al-Ghazali equates friends with siblings; thus, the use of the word "sibling" here carries the same meaning as "friend" and applies to people from all walks of life. Regarding friendships, Imam al-Ghazali outlines five criteria for choosing friends that must be considered:

1. Being rational means being someone who understands issues based on the truth and accepts advice from both oneself and others.
2. Having praiseworthy character means possessing good morals; do not befriend those who cannot control themselves when angry or driven by desire.
3. Pious and not wicked: This refers to a person who fears Allah SWT, avoids major sins, and is trustworthy. For surely, a person who fears Allah SWT will steer clear of and avoid what Allah SWT has forbidden.
4. Zuhud, or detachment from worldly affairs: Zuhud is a behavior that guards one against worldly influences, enabling those who practice it to focus more on the hereafter. Since befriending those who are attached to the world is poisonous, avoid people who are likely to set a bad example.
5. Honesty: Do not befriend a liar, for you will be drawn into their lies. A liar can make the truth seem distant while making falsehoods seem close. A liar will provide information that is untrue and full of lies (Al Ghazali, tt.)

On the other hand, Ja'far al-Shadiq, may Allah be pleased with him, emphasized the importance of choosing friends wisely (Al-Ghazali, tt.). He said, "Do not befriend five types of people: first, a liar if you befriend him, you will be caught up in his deceit. Second, a fool they will not benefit you; on the contrary, they will harm you. Third, a miser because he will withhold something you desperately need from you. Fourth, a coward; befriending him will trap you in a difficult situation, yet he will leave you alone. Fifth, a wicked person; someone like this will willingly betray you and sacrifice you for his own pleasure.

As social beings, people must understand and know with whom they interact whether that friend can bring benefit or, on the contrary, cause harm. Having good friends helps preserve one's moral character and faith. However, if you cannot find friends who bring benefit or goodness, it is better to be alone. As quoted from Abu Dzar (may Allah be pleased with him): "Being alone is better than having a bad companion, but a good companion is even better."

Based on the discussion above, it is extremely important for today's generation to know and fully understand the criteria for choosing friends. From the very beginning, Islam has provided guidance so that its followers do not make mistakes when it comes to "choosing friends." The discussion on the criteria for choosing friends is highly relevant for today's tech-savvy generation; do not simply follow the crowd without a guiding principle. Let us take a closer look and deepen our understanding of the noble teachings of the noble Prophet and the righteous predecessors (salafus shalih), so that we, too, may possess noble character and lead an ideal life that brings happiness in this world and the hereafter.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Islamic teachings provide a comprehensive value-based framework for choosing friends. Drawing on the Qur'an, hadith, and the perspectives of Sheikh Az-Zarnuji and Imam al-Ghazali, the study identifies moral character, piety, honesty, rationality, and positive influence as essential considerations in friendship. These criteria remain relevant in the modern era, particularly as digital interaction expands social relationships and increases exposure to diverse influences.

The study contributes to understanding friendship as an important element of moral and religious development rather than merely a social relationship. Future research should empirically examine the application of these Islamic criteria among adolescents, students, and social media users to explore their influence on character development and contemporary social behavior.

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