



Moral Ecosystem and Pesantren Sustainability: A Multi-Site Qualitative Study in Indonesia

Taufikin Taufikin

Sunan Kudus State Islamic University, Indonesia

*Corresponding E-mail: taufikin@uinsuku.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines how the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) is maintained through moral practices and social relations beyond formal management systems. Using a qualitative multi-site case study across four Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that sustainability is shaped by moral ecosystem consisting of Kiai authority, pedagogy care, religious habituation, and parent trust. These elements interact dynamically to reproduce institutional stability and legitimacy. This study offers a novel conceptual framework as a moral ecosystem as an alternative to managerial approaches in understanding educational sustainability.

Keywords: *kiai authority, moral ecosystem, pesantren sustainability, religious habitus, social trust.*

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INTRODUCTION

In the current debate on the sustainability of education, scholars' attention has increasingly shifted from issues of institutional efficiency to the dimensions of meaning, ethics, and social cohesion that underpin the long-term viability of institutions (Biesta, 2015; Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). For decades, sustainability has been understood through indicators of management, organizational effectiveness, governance, and formal accountability (Acharya & Sachdeva, 2025; Ball, 2003). This framework places institutional stability as a result of structural design and administrative capacity. However, this approach often ignores the relational and moral dimensions that more fundamentally shape the vitality of educational communities (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Chen & Shih, 2025; Noddings, 2012).

Several studies show that religious-based educational institutions in various parts of the world exhibit relatively stable resilience amid the pressures of modernization and bureaucratic rationalization (Ismail et al., 2025; Rofiqi et al., 2026; Tanti et al., 2025; Torres-Olave, 2021). This resilience is not always in line with modern management models, but often relies on moral legitimacy, communal traditions, and symbolic authority that are not fully formalized (Bourdieu, 1986; Eloire, 2018). This phenomenon indicates that the sustainability of educational institutions cannot be reduced entirely to structural mechanisms; rather, it must be understood as a social process rooted in everyday practices (Braslavskiy, 2023; Giddens, 1991; Kornberger & Leixnering, 2025).

In the Indonesian context, Islamic boarding schools are a historical example of educational institutions that have survived across generations. Several classic works portray Islamic boarding schools as centers for the transmission of Islamic scientific traditions and as spaces for the formation of social ethics (Azra, 2018; Dhofier, 2011; Geertz, 1976). Recent studies highlight the transformation of pesantren in response to modernity, including the integration of the national curriculum, the digitization of learning, and relations with the state and the market (Hefner, 2022, 2023; Lukens-Bull, 2010; Nilan, 2009; Pohl, 2006). Although enriching our understanding of the institutional dynamics of pesantren, most of these studies emphasize structural and adaptive aspects. At the same time, everyday relational practices have not been fully positioned as a key source of sustainability.

An approach that focuses too much on organizational transformation risks ignoring how values and authority are subtly reproduced in social interactions. In classical sociology, the legitimacy of authority rests not only on formal structures but also on symbolic recognition that is continuously reproduced in practice (Anleu & Mack, 2017; Bourdieu, 1986; Eloire, 2018; Tyler, 2006). In the context of education, relationships of trust and moral cohesion have been shown to play a significant role in maintaining school stability (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Fenizia & Parrello, 2025; Holder et al., 2010; Temircan, 2023; Vaughan et al., 2026). Similarly, pedagogy based on care and affective relationships has long been seen as central to the formation of sustainable learning communities (Chen & Shih, 2025; Noddings, 2012).

At this point, Islamic boarding schools offer a relevant context for expanding this discourse. The authority of the kiai, for example, is not merely a structural position but a form of symbolic power recognized through exemplary behavior and moral consistency (Dhofier, 2011; Eloire, 2018; Taufikin, 2021). The ustaz's practice of caring for the santri builds emotional bonds that reinforce discipline without coercive mechanisms (Khamida et al., 2021; Noddings, 2012). The religious routines that santri undergo every day form an internalized moral habitus that has the potential to be reproduced across generations (Inayatussahara & Hasan, 2023; Mufrihah et al., 2025; Naaman, 2017). Meanwhile, parental trust develops through concrete experiences and reputations for moral conduct maintained within social networks (Adams et al., 2009; Strehlke et al., 2023).

However, previous studies have largely treated these elements separately and failed to conceptualize their interdependence as a systemic relational framework. Despite the rapid growth of literature on Islamic boarding schools, integrative analyses that bring together moral authority, the pedagogy of care, religious habituation, and social trust within a unified analytical framework remain limited. Many studies examine these elements separately, without placing them within a mutually supportive relational system. In fact, in social practice theory, the sustainability of an institution depends on the reproduction of structured yet dynamic relationships and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1986; Eloire, 2018; Giddens, 1991).

Based on this gap, this study views the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools as the result of a moral ecosystem, namely a network of relationships in which authority, concern, habit formation, and trust mutually shape and strengthen the stability of the institution. This perspective seeks to transcend the managerial approach that dominates the literature on educational sustainability (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) by grounding institutional sustainability in morality and social relations. Based on initial observations, the urgency of this study is evident

in the context of contemporary Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, particularly PPATQ Raudlatul Falah in Central Java, Pesantren Ar-Rohmah Putra in Malang, IBS Ar-Rohmah Putri 1 and 2 in Malang, and Pesantren Al-Irsyad in Salatiga. These four pesantren represent a diverse yet intersecting landscape of development, where traditional moral authority, intense pedagogical relationships, and communal religious practices persist amidst the pressures of modernization, institutional expansion, and increasing public demands for educational accountability. In this context, sustainability can no longer be explained solely through formal systems or managerial reforms but is continually negotiated within the daily moral practices that shape trust, discipline, and legitimacy. This makes the moral ecosystem not only empirically evident but also crucial to examine today, as it reveals how pesantren maintain institutional continuity while adapting without losing their moral foundation.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the question: how is the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools produced and maintained through moral practices and social relations in everyday life? By examining four Islamic boarding schools in different contexts, this study seeks to formulate an analytical framework that is not only relevant to the study of Islamic boarding schools but also contributes to the global discourse on the sustainability of religious-based educational institutions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study orientation to understand the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools as a social process that grows in the daily practices of its actors. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study is not aimed at testing hypotheses or measuring relationships between variables, but rather at interpreting the meanings constructed in social interactions (Bearman, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Case studies allow researchers to investigate phenomena in depth in their natural context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not entirely clear (de Vries, 2020; Yin, 2014). The choice of a multisite design was based on the consideration that cross-context comparisons can enrich conceptual understanding without eliminating the complexity of each location.

The research was conducted at four Islamic boarding schools with distinct characteristics: PPATQ Raudlatul Falah in Central Java, Ar-Rohmah Putra Islamic Boarding School in Malang, IBS Ar-Rohmah Putri 1 and 2 in Malang, and Al-Irsyad Islamic Boarding School in Salatiga. The selection of locations was purposive, based on institutional stability, social reputation, and variations in educational management models. Purposive sampling strategies are commonly used in qualitative research to select cases that are rich in information and relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2014). This contextual variation allows the identification of recurring relational patterns and the observation of contextual differences (Miles et al., 2014).

There were 42 research participants, including kiai, ustaz, santri, and santri parents. They were selected based on their active involvement and direct experience in pesantren life. The determination of participants was based on depth of experience rather than statistical representation, in line with the principles of qualitative research that emphasize meaning and subjective perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The involvement of various groups of actors was intended to obtain a relational picture, because social reality is understood as a result of joint construction.

Data collection took place over eight months through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document review (Bowen, 2009; Knott et al., 2022; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Walsh, 2020). Semi-structured interviews were used to provide participants with space to openly articulate their experiences and reflections, while keeping the discussion relevant to the research focus. Participatory observation was conducted by attending learning activities, congregational worship, dormitory activities, and informal interactions in the pesantren environment. This technique allowed the researcher to understand social practices as they occurred in real situations, including non-verbal and affective dimensions that did not always emerge in interviews. In addition, internal documents such as vision and mission statements, rules and regulations, and activity archives were analyzed to understand the normative framework that shapes daily practices. The use of various data sources was intended as a form of triangulation to increase the credibility of the findings (Denzin, 2012).

Data analysis was conducted in stages and was iterative in nature. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding. The initial coding process involved identifying relevant units of meaning and grouping them into broader thematic categories. This thematic analysis allowed the researchers to trace patterns of relationships and practices that emerged across participants and locations (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2025). During this process, the researchers moved back and forth between empirical data and conceptual reflection to maintain the connection between the findings and the analytical framework (Miles et al., 2014). Analytical memos are written periodically to document the development of interpretations and prevent excessive reduction of meaning.

Reflexive awareness is an important part of this research. The researcher's cultural proximity to the pesantren tradition provides an advantage in building trust and understanding the context, but it also has the potential to introduce interpretive bias. Therefore, the researcher systematically engaged in self-reflection through reflective memo writing and discussions with colleagues outside the research context, in line with the principle of reflexivity in qualitative research (Barrett et al., 2020; Berger, 2015; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Siouti & Ruokonen-Engler, 2025).

The reliability of the research was maintained through triangulation of sources and methods, limited confirmation of the summary of findings with several informants, and detailed documentation of the research process as an audit trail (Denzin, 2012). This strategy was intended to ensure that the interpretations produced had a clear and traceable empirical basis. All participants gave their consent after receiving an explanation of the research objectives and procedures. Their identities were disguised to maintain confidentiality, and the research was conducted with respect for the social and cultural norms of Islamic boarding schools. As a case-based study, the results of this research are not intended to be generalized statistically, but rather to deepen conceptual understanding of the moral practices and social relations that support the sustainability of religious-based educational institutions.

RESULTS

The Moral Authority of the Kiai as the Pivot of Institutional Values

The first finding (Table 1) shows that the kiai functions as a center of moral legitimacy, maintaining the direction and continuity of the pesantren. This authority does not operate primarily through bureaucratic apparatus or formal regulations, but rather through consistency of life, exemplary behavior, and symbolic presence in

community life. In various interviews, informants emphasized that the sustainability of the pesantren depends on the figure of the kiai as the guardian of values, not merely as an administrative decision-maker.

Interestingly, in some strategic situations, important decisions are not always made through lengthy formal meeting procedures. Considerations of values and benefits are more dominant than procedural mechanisms. This does not give rise to resistance, because the kiai's legitimacy has been embedded through consistent daily practices. Observations show that the presence of the kiai in recitations or ritual moments has an emotional stabilizing effect on the community. Thus, authority serves as a moral anchor, reducing the potential for institutional fragmentation.

Table 1. Themes of the Moral Authority of the Kiai in Daily Pesantren Practice

Main Theme	Data Source	Intensity of Occurrence	Empirical data (interview)	Analytical Interpretation
Exemplary life of the kiai	Interviews and observations	High	"The kiai does not merely give instructions; his life itself becomes an example."	Authority originates from lived practice
Value-based decision making	Policy observations	Moderate	Strategic decisions are made without complex bureaucratic procedures	Values are more dominant than procedures
Symbolic presence	Ritual observations	High	The presence of the kiai brings a sense of calm to the community	Moral stability of the institution

Source: Primary Data Analysis By Researcher

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One santri expressed this clearly:

"We follow the kiai not because of formal rules, but because we see how he lives every day. That is what makes us trust him." (Santri-02, PPATQ Raudlatul Falah)

Similarly, a senior ustaz stated:

"The kiai rarely speaks about rules in detail, but his actions already set the standard. We adjust ourselves to that." (Ustaz-01, Pesantren Ar-Rohmah Putra Malang)

Interestingly, in some strategic situations, important decisions are not always made through lengthy formal meeting procedures. Considerations of values and perceived benefits are more dominant than procedural mechanisms. This pattern was confirmed in interviews with institutional managers:

“Sometimes decisions are taken directly by the kiai without formal meetings. But we accept it, because we understand the moral reasoning behind it.” (Ustaz, Pesantren Islam Al-Irsyad Salatiga)

This does not give rise to resistance, because the kiai's legitimacy has been embedded through consistent daily practices. Observations further show that the presence of the kiai in recitations or ritual moments has an emotional stabilizing effect on the community. As one santri noted:

“When the kiai is present in the majlis, everything feels calmer and more organized.” (Santri-05, IBS Ar-Rohmah Putri 1 Malang)

Thus, authority functions not merely as a structural position but as a moral anchor that reduces the potential for institutional fragmentation and sustains collective alignment within the pesantren.

Pedagogy of Care as a Relational Bond

The second finding (Table 2) shows that sustainability does not rely solely on a central figure but is reproduced through the ustaz's pedagogy of care. The ustaz-santri relationship is intensive and transcends the formal classroom. Discipline is enforced through a persuasive and dialogical approach, not a coercive one. In observations, reprimands are often delivered in a personal tone, accompanied by explanations and attention to the santri's condition.

In pesantren with a large number of santri, care is realized through a mentoring system, such as dormitory guardians or musyrif. Meanwhile, in smaller pesantren, interactions are more direct and personal. Although different in form, the relational patterns are similar: emotional closeness becomes a medium for internalizing values. Students tend to interpret rules as part of a relationship rather than as structural pressure.

Table 2. Pedagogy of Care in Ustaz-Student Interactions

Main Theme	Data Source	Frequency of Occurrence	Empirical data	Analytical Interpretation
Personal mentoring	Interviews	High	Ustaz accompany students when they experience personal difficulties	Affective relationships as the foundation of discipline
Non-coercive discipline	Observations	High	Reprimands are delivered without the use of violence	Relational authority
Exemplary practice	Observations and documentation	Moderate	Ustaz participate in prayers and communal work with students	Values are taught through action

Source: Primary Data Analysis By Researcher

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This relational approach was strongly reflected in interview data. One santri explained:

"When we make mistakes, the ustaz does not get angry immediately. He asks first, listens, and then advises us. That makes us feel respected." (Santri-03, PPATQ Raudlatul Falah)

An ustaz also emphasized the intentional use of care in maintaining discipline:

"If we only rely on rules, students may obey temporarily. But when they feel cared for, they change from within." (Ustaz-02, Pesantren Ar-Rohmah Putra Malang)

In pesantren with a large number of santri, care is institutionalized through a mentoring system, such as dormitory guardians or *musyrif*. Meanwhile, in smaller pesantren, interactions are more direct and personal. Although different in form, the relational patterns remain similar: emotional closeness becomes a medium for internalizing values. This was highlighted by a musyrif:

"We live with the students every day, so we understand their character. Guidance is not only about rules, but about accompanying them." (Ustazah, IBS Ar-Rohmah Putri 2 Malang)

Students tend to interpret rules as part of a relationship rather than as structural pressure. As another santri stated:

"We follow the rules because we don't want to disappoint our ustaz, not because we are afraid of punishment." (Santri-06, Pesantren Islam Al-Irsyad Salatiga)

Thus, pedagogy of care functions as a relational mechanism through which discipline, moral formation, and institutional continuity are simultaneously reproduced.

Religious Habituation and Moral Disposition Formation

The third finding (Table 3) shows that the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools is rooted in consistent religious habituation practices. Routines of congregational worship, recitation, memorization, and communal life form repetitive and internalized patterns of behavior. Santri not only follow the rules but also gradually develop self-discipline.

In the early stages, students find it relatively challenging to adapt to the rhythm of pesantren life. However, after a certain period, external supervision decreases as routines become habits. Communal living also strengthens social solidarity and the ability to share responsibilities. Some alumni express a desire to return to serve as a form of long-term attachment. This shows that religious habitus does not end during the learning period but continues as institutional loyalty.

Table 3. Religious Habituation and Disposition of Santri

Main Theme	Data Source	Frequency of Occurrence	Empirical data	Analytical Interpretation
Collective religious routines	Observations	High	Congregational prayers and collective Qur'anic recitation	Internalization of religious values

Communal living	Interviews	Moderate	Learning to share and practice patience	Development of social solidarity
Post-study loyalty	Interviews	Moderate	The desire to return and serve the pesantren after graduation	Intergenerational institutional sustainability

Source: Primary Data Analysis By Researcher

The third finding (Table 3) shows that the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools is rooted in consistent religious habituation practices. Routines of congregational worship, recitation, memorization, and communal life form repetitive and internalized patterns of behavior. Santri not only follow the rules but gradually develop self-discipline through continuous practice. This process is not instantaneous but emerges through repeated engagement in daily routines. One santri described the transition:

"At the beginning, it felt forced because everything was scheduled. But after some time, it became part of myself. Even without being told, I feel the need to do it." (Santri-04, PPATQ Raudlatul Falah)

Observations confirm that early-stage compliance is often driven by external control, but over time, supervision becomes less visible as routines are internalized. An ustaz explained:

"In the first months, we monitor them closely. But later, they remind each other. That is when habits start to form." (Ustaz-03, Pesantren Ar-Rohmah Putra Malang)

Communal living further strengthens this process by embedding discipline within shared social practices. Santri learn to negotiate space, manage conflict, and develop patience. As one student noted:

"Living together teaches us to be patient. We cannot be selfish because everything is shared." (Santri-07, IBS Ar-Rohmah Putri 1 Malang)

Beyond the period of study, this habituation generates a durable attachment to the institution. Several alumni expressed a desire to return and contribute:

"Even after graduating, I feel that this pesantren is part of me. I want to come back and serve here." (Alumni-02, Pesantren Islam Al-Irsyad Salatiga)

This indicates that religious habitus does not end with formal education but continues as a form of long-term institutional loyalty. Thus, habituation functions as a mechanism for embedding moral dispositions that sustain the continuity of the pesantren across generations.

Synthesis: Moral Configuration as a Relational System

Cross-finding analysis (Table 4) shows that the continuity of Islamic boarding schools is formed through dynamic interactions between four elements: moral authority, pedagogy of care, religious habituation, and social trust. The four elements do not stand alone, but reinforce each other. The authority of the kiai provides normative direction; the ustaz translates it into pedagogical relationships; the santri internalizes it through routine; and parents provide external legitimacy through continued trust.

Parental trust emerges as an important indicator of sustainability. Parents assess changes in their children's character, the consistency of caregivers, and the stability of

the environment as the main basis for maintaining their educational choices. Thus, social legitimacy is not built through administrative claims, but through concrete experiences that are verified personally.

Table 4. Synthesis of the Moral Configuration of Islamic Boarding Schools

Element	Actor	Function	Impact on Sustainability
Moral authority	Kiai	Guardian of values	Institutional stability and direction
Pedagogy of care	Ustaz	Affective relational engagement	Internal cohesion
Religious habituation	Santri	Internalization of values	Long-term loyalty
Social trust	Parents	External legitimacy	Sustained institutional support

Source: Synthesis By Researcher

This study confirm that the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools is a process of moral reproduction that takes place relationally in daily practice. Institutional stability is not primarily supported by administrative systems but rather by the consistency of values lived, exemplified, and internalized collectively. Sustainability thus emerges as an effect of a moral ecosystem that operates simultaneously at the symbolic, relational, and dispositional levels.

These findings further indicate that the four components: kiai, ustaz, santri, and parents, do not operate in isolation but interact simultaneously within a mutually reinforcing relational ecosystem. The kiai's moral authority establishes the normative horizon, which is translated by the ustaz into everyday pedagogical care, internalised by the santri through sustained habituation, and validated externally through the trust of parents. This interaction is not linear but recursive, where each element continuously shapes and stabilises the others through ongoing social practices. As such, sustainability emerges not from a single dominant factor, but from the dynamic equilibrium of interconnected moral, relational, and social processes embedded in daily life

DISCUSSION

Sustainability in Education Beyond the Managerial Paradigm

The findings of this study indicate a need to reorient the dominance of managerial approaches in understanding educational sustainability. Much of the literature still interprets sustainability through organizational performance, efficiency, and the ability to adapt to policies and environmental changes (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves, 1998; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Within this framework, sustainability is positioned as an institution's ability to maintain service quality through strategic planning, governance, and administrative controls.

However, the findings of this study challenge this assumption. Administrative mechanisms do not primarily support the sustainability of pesantren, but rather the sustainability of values practiced in daily social relations. These findings contrast with the dominant managerial perspective, as they demonstrate that sustainability emerges

more from a collectively lived moral commitment than from formal structures alone. In other words, sustainability is not a technical outcome of governance but the result of the reproduction of values within ongoing social practices.

On the other hand, this finding extends the work of Biesta (2015, 2020) and Priestley et al. (2015), who view education as a value-laden, normative practice. This study demonstrates that this normative dimension does not remain at the conceptual level but is genuinely reproduced in concrete social interactions within institutional life. Values are not merely taught but enacted, negotiated, and upheld in daily practice.

Furthermore, these findings align with studies on Islamic education that emphasize cultural and ethical dimensions in building institutional resilience (Hefner, 2022, 2023; Taufikin et al., 2026), yet offer a more operational explanation of how such resilience functions in practice. Thus, the sustainability of education needs to be reconstructed as a moral-relational process, not merely a managerial achievement. This shift forms the basis for understanding how leadership, pedagogy, and the formation of habitus work simultaneously to maintain institutional continuity.

The Moral Authority of the Kiai and Relational Leadership

The role of the kiai in this study offers a more in-depth contribution to the discussion of values-based educational leadership. In pesantren literature, the kiai is generally portrayed as a charismatic religious authority who shapes the direction of the community (Bruinessen, 1990; Dakir & Umiarso, 2022; Dhofier, 2011). However, these interpretations tend to view authority as a personal attribute or an inheritance rooted in tradition.

This study challenges that assumption. Findings indicate that the kiai's authority is not merely innate or inherited but is continuously produced through consistent social practices. Exemplary behavior, moral consistency, and direct involvement in daily communal life function as the primary mechanisms maintaining legitimacy. In this sense, authority is not static but is actualized and reproduced.

These findings expand the Weberian interpretation of charismatic authority (Breuilly, 2011; Brown, 2018; Conger, 1993; Decherf, 2011), which emphasizes individual traits as the source of charisma. Conversely, this study demonstrates that charisma in pesantren is relationally formed and socially maintained. Charisma resides not only in the individual but in the community's ongoing recognition.

At the same time, this interpretation aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, in which authority is produced through recognition and legitimation rather than formal enforcement (Bourdieu, 1986; Eloire, 2018). However, this study goes further by demonstrating how such symbolic power is stabilized through routine interactions and moral consistency, rather than merely through structural positions.

Compared with studies on Islamic educational leadership in other contexts, which often emphasize institutional hierarchies or doctrinal authority (Hefner, 2022, 2023; Taufikin et al., 2025), these findings highlight a leadership that is more practice-based and relational. Authority emerges through lived examples, not through formal control. Thus, the sustainability of pesantren depends not only on the presence of charismatic leaders, but on the continuous reproduction of moral relationships that preserve the meaning of that authority from generation to generation.

Pedagogy of Care and the Affective Dimensions of Education

Findings regarding the pedagogical practices of ustadz indicate that the sustainability of pesantren is supported not only by structures and central figures but also by the affective relationships built through daily interactions. In much of the literature, pedagogy is often understood as a process of knowledge transfer and effective classroom management. However, the findings of this study reveal that in pesantren, pedagogy functions as a living relationship rooted in care, emotional closeness, and direct engagement.

This finding reinforces Nel Noddings' (Chen & Shih, 2025; Noddings, 2012) notion that places care at the core of educational practice. However, this research does not stop there. Care-based pedagogy in Islamic boarding schools not only impacts individual learning processes but also serves as a mechanism that maintains the broader social cohesion of the institution. The relationship between teachers and students forms an emotional bond that makes rules feel less like pressure and more like part of the relationship.

In this context, the findings of this study align with the concept of relational trust by Anthony and Schneider (2003) and Fenizia & Parrello Schneider (2025), which emphasizes the importance of trust in school stability. However, this study expands upon it by demonstrating that trust in Islamic boarding schools is not built through formal systems, but through intense, personal, and repeated interactions.

On the other hand, these findings contrast with global education studies that emphasize curriculum, standards, and control over learning as the primary factors in success (Brill et al., 2018; Ordofa & Asgedom, 2022). This study demonstrates that it is precisely warm, sustained relationships that are the more decisive factor in maintaining institutional sustainability. Thus, the pedagogy of care functions as a connecting mechanism between values and practices. It translates moral authority into concrete experiences for the students. In the long term, these relationships not only shape individuals but also maintain the stability and sustainability of the pesantren community as a whole.

Religious Habitus and the Reproduction of Sustainability

Findings on religious habituation indicate that the sustainability of the pesantren is not merely maintained through structures or relationships, but through the formation of dispositions embedded in daily practices. Routine activities such as congregational prayer, recitation, memorization, and communal life are not merely obligations but form repetitive behavioral patterns that eventually become internalized. In this process, students do not merely comply with rules but gradually develop a reflective and stable sense of self.

This finding aligns with the lived religion perspective, which emphasizes that religious experience is shaped by daily practices rather than doctrine alone (Inayatussahara & Hasan, 2023; Mufrihah et al., 2025; Taufikin et al., 2025). However, this study goes further by demonstrating that such practices not only shape individual religiosity but also serve as the primary mechanism for maintaining institutional sustainability.

Within Pierre Bourdieu's framework, repeated practices generate habitus—a disposition that guides how individuals think and act (Bourdieu, 1986; Eloire, 2018). This study confirms this concept while simultaneously expanding upon it. Religious habitus in pesantren not only shapes individuals but also functions as a mechanism of social reproduction that maintains institutional stability across generations.

On the other hand, these findings contrast with classical studies that position pesantren as centers of knowledge transmission (Dhofier, 2011; Geertz, 1976; Taufikin et al., 2026). This study demonstrates that what is more fundamental is not the transfer of knowledge, but the formation of dispositions. Knowledge can change, but habitus tends to persist.

Furthermore, compared to global education studies that often separate learning from social life (Biesta, 2020; Meyer, 2016; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009), pesantren actually demonstrate a strong integration of the two. Learning practices and daily life are unified within a single, sustainable system. Thus, the sustainability of pesantren is not merely structural or relational but also dispositional. Religious habitus serves as the foundation that keeps values alive, even after students leave the institution.

Social Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

Findings regarding parental trust indicate that the sustainability of pesantren is not determined solely by internal dynamics but also by the social legitimacy built outside the institution. This trust does not stem from formal mechanisms such as accreditation or performance reports, but rather from parents' direct experiences with changes in their children's character and the consistency of the values upheld by the pesantren.

This finding aligns with social capital theory, which posits that trust is the foundation of institutional stability (Adams et al., 2009; Strehlke et al., 2023). However, this study demonstrates that trust in pesantren is more contextual and experience-based. Parents do not evaluate the institution based on administrative indicators, but on concrete evidence in their children's daily lives. Here, legitimacy is not built through formal claims, but through continuous social verification.

On the other hand, these findings contrast with modern educational accountability models that emphasize standards, evaluations, and performance as the primary measures of legitimacy (Ball, 2003; Ordofa & Asgedom, 2022; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). In the pesantren context, legitimacy instead grows from organic trust relationships formed between the institution and families. This suggests that performance-based approaches are not always sufficient to explain the sustainability of value-based institutions.

Compared with global studies on Islamic education (Aminudin & Hasan, 2025; Marginson, 2008, 2014; Nurhayati et al., 2025), this research adds a dimension often overlooked: the role of the family as a key actor in maintaining sustainability. Parental trust serves not only as external support but also strengthens the pesantren's position within a broader social network. Thus, social trust serves as external legitimacy, reinforcing the pesantren's moral ecosystem. Without this trust, the institution's sustainability would be undermined. Conversely, when trust is maintained, the pesantren not only survives but is also continuously reproduced within the social network.

Pesantren as a Moral Ecosystem: Theoretical Contributions

By integrating all empirical findings, this study proposes the concept of pesantren as a moral ecosystem (see Figure 1). This concept refers to a relational system that enables institutional sustainability through dynamic interactions between moral leadership, caring pedagogical practices, religious habits, and community social trust.

The moral ecosystem framework offers a conceptual approach that broadens the understanding of educational sustainability. Unlike managerial approaches that emphasize organizational efficiency, this framework grounds institutional sustainability in moral relations and shared life experiences. In this perspective, educational sustainability is not only the result of strategic planning or policy reform, but also of the educational community's ability to maintain stable values, beliefs, and social relations.

Theoretically, this concept opens up space for dialogue with various fields of study, including moral leadership, educational sociology, and global educational sustainability studies. In addition, this research makes an important empirical contribution by presenting perspectives from the context of Islamic education in the Global South, which has been relatively underrepresented in the international literature on educational sustainability.

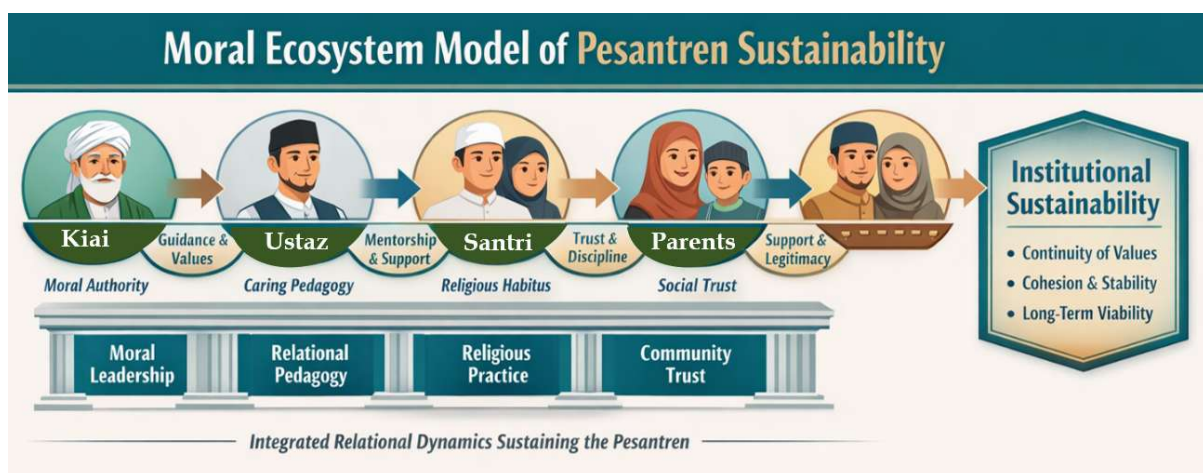


Figure 1. Moral Ecosystem Model of Pesantren Sustainability

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that the sustainability of Islamic boarding schools cannot be understood solely through a managerial or administrative lens; rather, it is more accurately described as a relational process rooted in the moral practices of the educational community. Based on multisite findings across four pesantren, institutional sustainability emerges from the dynamic interaction between the moral authority of the kiai, the caring pedagogy of the ustaz, the religious socialization of the santri, and the social trust of parents. These four elements form a network of relationships that continuously reproduces values, social cohesion, and institutional legitimacy in the daily life of the pesantren. Thus, the stability of the pesantren is not primarily supported by organizational structures or formal systems, but by the sustainability of shared moral practices.

Theoretically, this study offers the moral ecosystem framework as an alternative approach to understanding the sustainability of religion-based education, emphasizing the interaction between moral leadership, affective pedagogical relationships, the internalization of values, and social legitimacy. This framework expands the discourse on educational sustainability, which has long been dominated by managerial approaches, by incorporating ethical, relational, and cultural dimensions. In practice, these findings underscore the importance of strengthening moral relationships and social trust rather than pursuing structural reforms alone.

However, a limitation of this study lies in its relatively homogeneous context, so generalizations must be made with caution. Future research is recommended to expand the context across regions or countries and to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to deepen understanding of the dynamics of sustainability within value-based educational institutions.

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