

Transformational Leadership of Kiai in Character Building of Islamic Boarding School Alumni: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of kiai (Islamic boarding school leader) leadership on character building of alumni from non-Salafi Islamic boarding schools using a phenomenological approach. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis with six phases of Braun and Clarke, the research involving one alumni participant identified four fundamental mechanisms: transformative learning based on exemplary leadership integrating knowledge transfer and character formation through role modeling, long-term internalization of religious values resistant to contemporary social change, capacity for value adaptation in plural society without compromising basic principles through critical inclusivism, and character sustainability through non-verbal modeling and informal *dakwah* strategies. Kiai leadership manifests transformational leadership principles uniquely by minimizing verbal rhetoric while maximizing concrete behavioral demonstration, emphasizing moral consistency over personal charisma, and prioritizing internal transformation over external compliance. The formed character is holistic, integrating cognitive dimensions of deep textual understanding, affective dimensions of value internalization, and psychomotor dimensions manifested in consistent social behavior. This research enriches transformational leadership literature by demonstrating that leadership effectiveness is contextual rather than universal, and contributes to character formation theory by identifying specific role modeling mechanisms in intensive learning environments, producing deep and sustainable character transformation.

1. Introduction

Character education has become a strategic priority in global educational systems as a response to the moral crisis experienced by contemporary youth (Jayawickreme et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2021). Amid rapid social transformation driven by globalization, digitalization, and shifting cultural values, educational institutions face complex challenges in developing individuals who are not only academically competent but also possess moral integrity and strong character (Warsah et al., 2024). The digital era has created an environment in which young people are simultaneously exposed to diverse, contradictory, and often conflicting value systems that challenge the traditional norms held by their communities (Chheang et al., 2024). In this global landscape, Indonesia's *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) institutions represent a distinctive and centuries-old tradition of character education. One that functions not merely as a site of religious instruction but as a center for moral development, personality formation, and the cultivation of community leaders (Jubba et al., 2021; Karim et al., 2023). The uniqueness of *pesantren* lies in its holistic integration of spiritual, intellectual, and moral dimensions through daily practices such as *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic text) study, congregational prayers, collective *dzikir* (religious recitation), and communal dormitory life, a confluence of experiences that creates a deeply transformative environment for students (Serliyani & Siregar, 2023; Shiddiq et al., 2024).

At the heart of the *pesantren* system is the *kiai*, whose role is widely recognized as central to the success of student character formation. Unlike a conventional teacher who transfers knowledge didactically, the *kiai* leads through exemplary conduct, wisdom, and a deeply personal relationship with each student (Dian et al., 2024; Hanafi et al., 2021; Trinova et al., 2022). This form of leadership is simultaneously charismatic and relational, combining traditional religious authority with attentiveness to the individual needs and development of students (Bahri, 2024; Karim et al., 2023). Such dynamics align closely with the broader literature on transformational leadership, which has consistently demonstrated significant effects on organizational culture, educator motivation, institutional performance, and student character formation (Barnová et al., 2022; De Nobile & Bilgin, 2022; Parveen et al., 2022). Transformational leaders distinguish themselves by prioritizing holistic individual development through inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, rather than focusing solely on academic targets (Kilag et al., 2024; Lancefield & Rangen, 2021; Liu & Huang,

2023). Understanding how these leadership dynamics operate within the culturally and spiritually distinctive context of *pesantren* is therefore both scientifically important and practically urgent that graduates face when navigating an increasingly plural and dynamic social environment beyond the boarding school setting.

The theoretical foundation for this study draws on three intersecting bodies of knowledge. First, transformational leadership scholarship has produced substantial evidence of this leadership style's efficacy in formal educational institutions, predominantly in Western contexts (Chunhui et al., 2024; Menon, 2024; Zeynalova, 2024). Second, Social Learning Theory offers a complementary perspective by emphasizing that value and behavior formation occurs fundamentally through observation and role modeling, a mechanism especially pertinent to the mentorship-intensive environment of *pesantren* (Rahayu et al., 2021). Third, Islamic educational philosophy, particularly the concepts of *tarbiyah* (holistic education), *ta'dib* (moral cultivation), and *tazkiyah* (spiritual purification) provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding the formative processes that unfold within *pesantren* (Gaffar et al., 2021).

Within the more specific literature on *pesantren*, studies have predominantly adopted institutional or curricular perspectives, focusing on organizational structures, teaching methodologies, and evaluative outcomes (Fu'adi, 2023; Mau, 2024; Rohaeni et al., 2021). A smaller but growing number of qualitative studies have begun to acknowledge the transformational qualities of *kiai* leadership (Hanafi et al., 2021; Trinova et al., 2022). However, the dominant reliance on quantitative measurement tools across the field has produced limited insight into the lived, subjective experiences of alumni. How they internalize values, sustain them under social pressure, and transmit them to subsequent generations.

While numerous studies have examined transformational leadership in formal educational settings and the institutional dimensions of *pesantren*, few have addressed the specific mechanisms by which *kiai* leadership influences the long-term character formation of alumni within the unique cultural and spiritual context of Islamic boarding schools. The preponderance of transformational leadership research remains anchored in Western, secular educational contexts (Chunhui et al., 2024; Menon, 2024; Zeynalova, 2024), leaving the distinctive characteristics of *kiai*-style transformational leadership largely unexamined. Although some studies have identified the transformational nature of *kiai* leadership in broad terms (Hanafi et al., 2021; Trinova et al., 2022), none has yet undertaken a systematic phenomenological analysis mapping these specific characteristics against contemporary transformational leadership theory within the traditional *pesantren* setting. Equally significant is the absence of research exploring how alumni sustain *pesantren*-formed values in plural, dynamic social environments and transmit them to the next generation. The reliance of existing studies on quantitative and evaluative approaches (Fu'adi, 2023; Mau, 2024; Rohaeni et al., 2021) further limits access to the depth of understanding that alumni's subjective, experiential accounts can provide. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining, through a phenomenological lens, the lived experiences of *pesantren* alumni and the role of *kiai* transformational leadership in shaping their enduring moral and spiritual character.

This study addresses these gaps at a critical juncture, as character education faces mounting challenges in the digital era, where internalized values must endure and be transmitted across increasingly plural and dynamic social environments. By examining *kiai* leadership through a phenomenological lens, the research offers insights that extend beyond the *pesantren* context: findings on role modeling mechanisms in intensive learning environments can inform character education theory more broadly, provide practical guidance for institutional leaders and curriculum developers, and contribute to national education policy by demonstrating the value of transformational personal leadership in holistic character formation. The phenomenological approach is particularly suited to this purpose, as it yields depth of understanding about alumni's lived experiences that quantitative methods alone cannot provide.

The objective of this study is to deeply explore the influence of *kiai* leadership on the character formation of Islamic boarding school alumni through a phenomenological approach. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify and analyze the characteristics of *kiai* leadership that shape the character of student alumni; (2) explore the values internalized by alumni through *kiai* leadership and the mechanisms through which such internalization occurs; (3) understand the challenges alumni encounter when practicing *pesantren* values in plural and dynamic social environments; (4) reveal the strategies alumni employ to sustain and transmit these values to the next generation; and (5) contribute to transformational leadership and character formation theory by identifying role modeling mechanisms operative in intensive learning environments that produce durable value internalization. To this end, the phenomenological approach is selected for its capacity to reveal the essence of individual lived experience and the meanings that participants construct from those experiences (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Hossain et al., 2024), a methodological orientation well-suited to studying leadership phenomena through the lens of subjective understanding and direct personal experience rather than through the measurement of objective leader attributes alone (Adeniran et al., 2024). Through this inquiry, the study is expected to generate a comprehensive understanding of how *kiai* transformational leadership facilitates long-term internalization of moral and religious values, while offering practical contributions to character education development across diverse educational contexts.

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive-interpretive phenomenological design to explore the influence of kiai leadership on the character formation of *pesantren* alumni students. Phenomenology is chosen because of its ability to reveal the essence of lived experience and meaning constructed by individuals (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Hossain et al., 2024), focusing on subjective understanding and direct experience rather than on leader attributes or properties objectively (Adeniran et al., 2024). The research adopts a social phenomenology paradigm emphasizing how individuals interpret their environment and assign meaning to their experiences. The population comprises alumni of non-Salafi Islamic boarding schools who received direct education under kiai guidance, using purposive sampling with a criterion sampling technique to select participants with direct experience and rich information (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Inclusion criteria include being a non-salafi *pesantren* alumni, having received direct learning under kiai guidance, being able to articulate experience verbally well, willingness to participate voluntarily, and currently practicing *pesantren* values in daily life.

The decision to employ a single-participant design in this study is not a pragmatic concession but a deliberate methodological choice rooted in the epistemological logic of phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenology is fundamentally concerned with revealing the *essence* of a phenomenon as it is lived and experienced by an individual consciousness, not with producing statistically generalizable patterns across large populations. Within this tradition, the adequacy of a study is judged by the depth, richness, and reflexive coherence of the experiential account it generates, rather than by the number of participants it includes. A single participant who can articulate their lived experience with exceptional clarity, contextual detail, and sustained reflective depth provides a more epistemologically sound basis for phenomenological analysis than multiple participants whose accounts may be thinner or less contextually anchored.

This design is particularly defensible given the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. The influence of *kiai* leadership on character formation is a deeply personal, longitudinal, and contextually embedded experience. One that unfolds across years of intimate daily interaction within a specific institutional setting. Such phenomena are not best understood through aggregation across many respondents; they require sustained, in-depth exploration of a single individual's meaning-making process. The present participant was selected precisely because she fulfilled all inclusion criteria and demonstrated an exceptional capacity to produce richly layered, reflective narratives across all inquiry domains. Iterative reading of the interview transcript confirmed that the data generated were sufficiently substantive, nuanced, and multi-dimensional to illuminate the phenomenon under study without requiring additional participants to achieve interpretive depth.

It is equally important to clarify what this design does not claim. The findings of this study are not presented as statistically representative of all *pesantren* alumni. Rather, consistent with the logic of phenomenological generalization, insights drawn from one person's lived experience can illuminate the essential structures of a phenomenon in ways that resonate with, and are transferable to, comparable experiences in similar contexts. The credibility of this study therefore rests on the analytical rigor applied to a single, richly documented case, rather than on the breadth of participant numbers.

The primary instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed through a systematic literature review on kiai leadership and character formation in *pesantren*. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow flexibility to pursue emerging themes while maintaining thematic focus (Hossain et al., 2024). Content validity was established through a three-stage process: (1) item development grounded in the reviewed literature, (2) review by *pesantren* education experts who assessed relevance and clarity, and (3) pilot testing with an alumnus not included in the main sample, after which items were refined accordingly (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). This iterative validation process ensured the instrument's capacity to elicit the thick, contextual descriptions required for rigorous phenomenological analysis.

Before data collection, the research received ethical approval from the institutional ethics committee. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at participant-chosen locations with a duration of 60-90 minutes (Singh et al., 2020), with informed consent covering research objectives, procedures, risks and benefits, confidentiality guarantees, and right to withdraw (Alhabsi, 2024). With participant consent, interviews were recorded using digital audio recorder and researchers made field notes for non-verbal observations and context. Recordings were transcribed verbatim by researchers themselves to ensure accuracy, with all identifying data removed or replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006, 2021), which is flexible for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes in the dataset (Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis process began with data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts for deep understanding, followed by systematic coding of the entire dataset with codes as descriptive labels that are inductive in nature, organization of codes into potential themes by grouping similar codes, review and refinement of themes to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness, identification of essence of each theme with descriptive naming, and writing final report that tells the complex story with representative quotations.

Ensuring the validity and trustworthiness of qualitative phenomenological research requires a distinct set of strategies appropriate to its interpretive, non-statistical nature. Rather than applying the conventional quantitative criteria of reliability and validity, this study adopts Lincoln and Guba's four-criterion framework (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) operationalized through multiple, interlocking validation procedures.

Credibility: The phenomenological analogue of internal validity was established through three complementary strategies. First, *prolonged engagement* was maintained: the researcher conducted multiple sessions of deep, iterative engagement with the interview transcript prior to and throughout the analysis, ensuring full immersion in the data before interpretive claims were advanced. Second, *member checking* served as a central validation mechanism: upon completion of preliminary theme construction, a summary of emergent themes and representative interpretations was returned to the participant for verification. She was invited to confirm, qualify, or contest the researcher's readings, and any discrepancies were resolved through dialogue and reflective revision of the analysis. This process ensured that the constructed meanings remained faithful to the participant's own understanding of her experience. Third, *reflexivity* was sustained throughout via a reflexive journal in which the researcher documented assumptions, positionality, and analytic decisions at each stage, minimizing the risk of unreflective projection onto the data.

Transferability: The degree to which findings may resonate with or inform other similar contexts was addressed through *thick description*: detailed documentation of the research context, participant selection criteria, and the cultural and institutional specificities of the *pesantren* environment. This transparency enables readers and future researchers to assess the extent to which the findings may apply to their own settings. Transferability in this study is understood not as direct replication but as eidetic resonance. The capacity of findings to illuminate structurally similar phenomena in analogous contexts.

Dependability: The qualitative equivalent of reliability was ensured through a comprehensive *audit trail*: a systematic record of all methodological decisions, analytic steps, and revisions made throughout the research process. This trail renders the entire research trajectory transparent and auditable, allowing external reviewers to trace the evolution of interpretations from raw data to finalized themes. Complementing this, *peer debriefing* was conducted with a colleague experienced in qualitative research, who critically reviewed the analytic process and offered independent commentary on emerging interpretations, helping to surface potential blind spots or instances of interpretive overreach.

Confirmability: The degree to which findings reflect the data rather than researcher bias was addressed through three convergent strategies: the audit trail described above, the reflexive journal maintained across the study, and the systematic inclusion of *extensive direct quotations* from the participant's interview in the presentation of findings. Direct quotations serve a dual function: they anchor analytical claims in the participant's own words, providing readers with the raw experiential material on which interpretations are grounded, and they enable readers to independently assess the plausibility of the researcher's thematic constructions. Together, these interlocking procedures constitute a robust validation framework that ensures the findings of this single-participant phenomenological study meet the standards of rigor appropriate to qualitative inquiry.

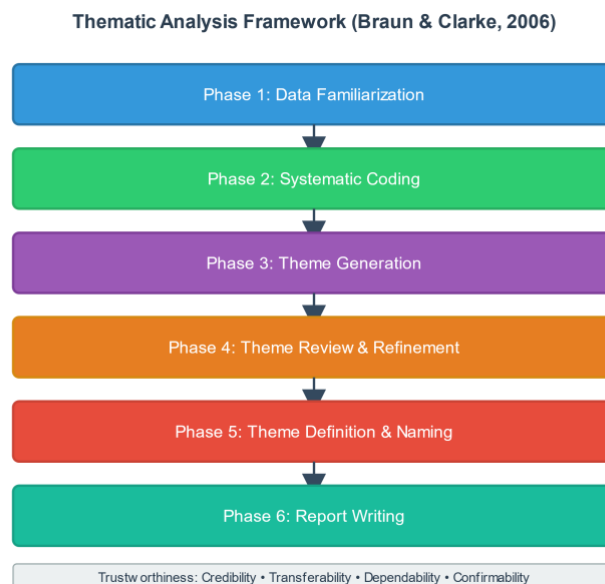


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis Framework

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The research involved one non-Salafi Islamic boarding school alumnus who received direct education under kiai guidance and continues to practice *pesantren* values in daily life. Thematic analysis identified four main themes describing the influence of kiai leadership on student alumni character formation.

First, the theme "Transformative Learning Method" shows that the participant's learning experience under Kiai leadership was a transformative process emphasizing not only knowledge transfer but also moral character formation. Kiai's leadership approach is holistic, integrating cognitive and affective dimensions. Participants identified effective kiai leadership characteristics, including patience, firmness, and modeling ability through exemplary behavior. Learning method emphasized behavior and value demonstration rather than a verbal-instructional approach alone. As expressed in the interview with S, *"He rarely gave long lectures. But every day we witnessed firsthand how he rose before Fajr, how he greeted even the most junior students by name with a smile. What sank deepest was not his words, but the way he lived."* This illustrates the kiai's minimal-verbal, maximal-behavioral leadership pattern, in which moral consistency demonstrated through daily conduct carries greater pedagogical weight than explicit instruction. As S recounted in the interview, *"When a student made a mistake, he would not correct them publicly. He would call them privately, speak gently, yet the words went straight to the heart. Firm but never humiliating. I still use that approach when raising my own children."* This reflects the *individualized consideration* dimension of transformational leadership: the kiai's corrective approach, being private and non-humiliating, was experienced as formative rather than punitive, with impact that endured into the alumni's own parenting practice. Kiai leadership tends toward transformational, with characteristics: minimal excessive verbalism yet maximal concrete example provision. Effectiveness is measured not from frequency of lectures but from consistency between words and actions, aligned with the concept of leading by example, emphasizing integrity and authenticity.

Second, the theme "Religious Value Internalization" shows successful long-term value internalization. Participants identified specific values still deeply embedded, with special emphasis on understanding and practicing religious teachings. One prominent value is commitment to wearing proper dress based on a deep understanding of religious texts, with verses still remembered from memorization. As S stated in the interview, *"I still remember the scriptural basis to this day. He did not simply ask us to memorize; he explained the reasoning behind it. So when I was outside the pesantren and people questioned it, I was not confused. I had my own reasons, not merely imitation."* This evidences deep textual understanding as the mechanism through which values are internalized beyond surface compliance: the participant's capacity for independent reasoning reflects the kiai's emphasis on intellectual grounding as the foundation for long-term value resilience. As expressed in the interview with S, *"Many of my friends changed their appearance after years in the city. Sometimes I wondered, am I the one being left behind? But as soon as I recalled why I had learned this, why the kiai taught it. The doubt disappeared. That conviction has taken root too deeply to be shaken merely by others' views."* This demonstrates value resilience in practice: the participant's internalized conviction, grounded in reasoned understanding rather than social conformity, functions as an autonomous buffer against external pressure, a key indicator of sustained character formation. Awareness of social pressures that could shift religious values does not reduce participant commitment. Kiai leadership also shaped broader personality aspects, including communication, social relations, and resilience. Character formation includes: communication ethics through good speech, respect for others, gratitude through thanksgiving, and persistence through perseverance, forming a holistic character foundation applicable in various contexts.

Third, the theme "Social Adaptation Challenge" explores the dynamics of alumni practicing internalized values when facing plural and dynamic social realities. Participants identified challenges involving needing to respect value differences without compromising held principles. As S shared in the interview, *"At my current workplace there are all kinds of people different religions, different backgrounds. I used to worry whether I could remain myself. It turned out that the kiai had taught me that respecting others is itself part of my own religion. No need to impose, no need to withdraw."* This illustrates the mature critical inclusivism central to this theme: the participant navigates value plurality not through a compromise of principles but through a religiously grounded framework of mutual respect, demonstrating that *pesantren* education does not produce social exclusivism. As expressed in the interview with S, *"If I see something I consider inappropriate, I do not protest immediately. I try to find the right moment, an approach that does not offend. My kiai was the same, he never made people feel attacked. People opened up precisely because they felt respected first."* This reflects the humble persuasive dialogue pattern: the participant consciously replicates the kiai's communication style when navigating disagreement, showing that what is transmitted through kiai leadership extends beyond abstract values to encompass concrete interpersonal conduct. Adaptation strategies include: recognition of value plurality, non-judgmental attitude toward differences, awareness of personal imperfection, and a persuasive rather than coercive approach. Findings show *pesantren* education does not produce exclusivism but critical inclusivism. Participants described value application in social interactions with a humble attitude (*tawadhu*) as a foundation for interaction and orientation toward continuous improvement despite small steps.

Fourth, the theme "Pesantren Character Sustainability" explores mechanisms of alumni maintaining character and spreading *pesantren* values in surrounding environments. Participants identified the social environment as a crucial factor with a selective association strategy with similarly valued individuals as a protective mechanism against character degradation. As S explained in the interview, "I know I am not made of iron. So I am selective about my social circle, not out of arrogance, but because I know myself and how easily I can be influenced. The people I am close to now mostly share similar values. That is not coincidence; it is a deliberate choice I made." This demonstrates selective community association as a conscious protective mechanism for character sustainability: the participant's deliberate construction of a value-aligned social environment reflects mature self-awareness about the importance of social context in long-term character maintenance. As expressed in the interview with S, "I do not often preach to those around me. But I try to stay consistent in what I do. Sometimes people ask, 'How do you stay calm facing that problem?' and from there I share a little. I think that is more effective than lecturing directly." This vividly illustrates the phenomenon of *silent dakwah*: the participant transmits *pesantren* values through consistent behavioral modeling and responds to organic inquiry rather than initiating explicit instruction, a direct reproduction of the *kiai*'s own leadership pattern and tangible evidence of the pedagogical consciousness formed through *pesantren* education. Realistic understanding that character formation is a dynamic process requiring continuous reinforcement. Participants described a social contribution orientation focused on becoming useful people, with contributions more on practical social action than formal preaching. Value transmission strategy occurs through mechanisms similar to the *kiai* leadership pattern: more through modeling than verbalizing. Alumni do not always verbally communicate *pesantren* values but demonstrate through actions. Leadership pattern reproduction shows *pesantren* education success in developing pedagogical consciousness with a *silent dakwah* approach through concrete behavior demonstration, showing maturity in value dissemination strategy.

When identifying the most influential aspects of *kiai* leadership, participants emphasized emotional and wisdom dimensions. Effectiveness lies in combination: emotional intelligence through leading with heart, emotional regulation through emotional consistency, meaningful communication with touching advice, and cognitive stimulation, making people think. Long-term impact is the formation of a calm, wise personality, deliberative in decision-making.

Comprehensively, *Kiai* leadership provides substantive and sustained influence through four mechanisms: first, transformative learning integrating knowledge transfer and moral formation through exemplary leadership; second, long-term religious value internalization that endures and resists contemporary social change; third, value adaptation capacity in the midst of plurality without losing basic principles; fourth, value transmission to the next generation through modeling and informal *dakwah*. Character formed is holistic, encompassing cognitive dimensions of deep textual understanding, affective through value internalization, and psychomotor manifested in consistent social behavior, mutually integrated, forming a complete, consistent personality.

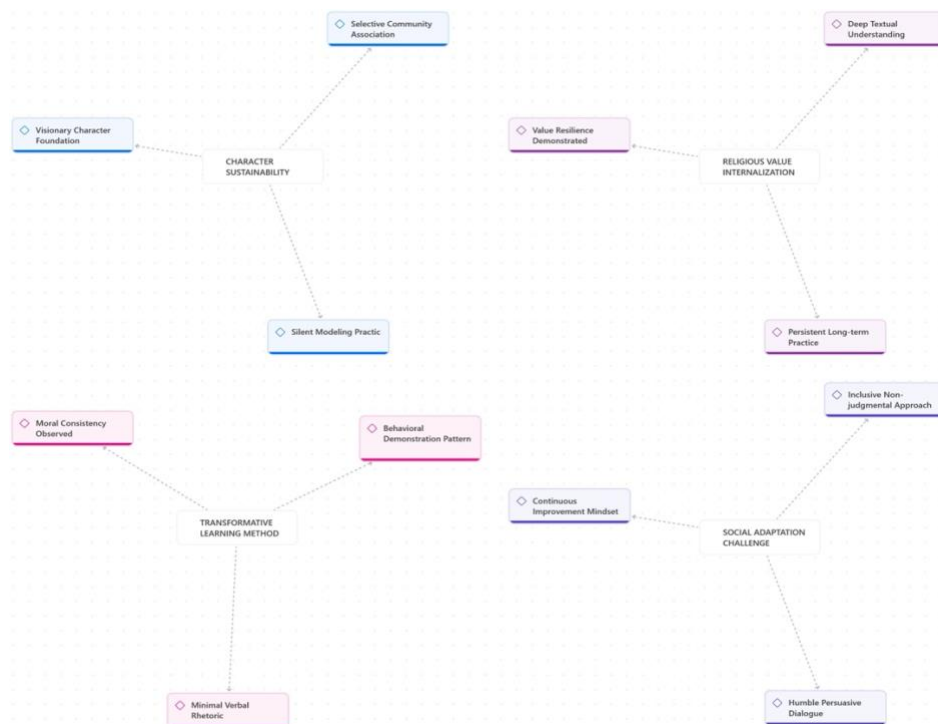


Figure 2. Visualization of Relationships Among the 4 Main Themes, Codes, and Sub-Themes in Character Formation Through *Kiai* Leadership

Figure 2 presents the comprehensive thematic mapping revealing four primary mechanisms through which kiai leadership influences character formation among pesantren alumni. The first mechanism, the Transformative Learning Method, encompasses the foundational pedagogical approach wherein kiai leadership prioritizes behavioral demonstration over excessive verbal rhetoric. Drawing from responses to questions exploring leadership decision-making and exemplary practice, this theme reveals that kiai effectiveness is measured not by charismatic verbalization but by consistency between articulated values and demonstrated actions, emphasizing moral integrity as the central evaluative criterion. The three codes within this theme (Minimal Verbal Rhetoric, Behavioral Demonstration Pattern, and Moral Consistency Observed) collectively represent how kiai leaders minimize abstract discourse while maximizing concrete behavioral exemplification in daily interactions.

The second mechanism, Religious Value Internalization, illuminates the distinctive pathway through which deep religious understanding transforms into enduring personal commitment resistant to contemporary social pressures. This theme, grounded in responses addressing textual learning and long-term value retention, demonstrates that successful internalization emerges through two complementary processes: profound engagement with classical religious texts combined with observable evidence of positive consequences resulting from value practice. The three codes (Deep Textual Understanding, Persistent Long-term Practice, and Value Resilience Demonstrated) indicate that alumni maintain internalized values not through external compliance mechanisms but through rational conviction grounded in witnessed authenticity. Alumni perceive that Kiai's consistent practice of religious teachings produces meaningful life outcomes, respected social standing, and authentic spiritual fulfillment, creating vicarious reinforcement that strengthens personal commitment to similar value internalization.

The third mechanism, Social Adaptation Challenge, addresses the complex dynamic wherein alumni navigate contemporary plural and dynamic social environments while maintaining foundational principles learned in *pesantren*. This theme, addressing alumni's lived experience in diverse social contexts, reveals what can be conceptualized as mature critical inclusivism. The capacity to recognize legitimate value plurality without compromising core principles. The three codes (Inclusive Non-judgmental Approach, Humble Persuasive Dialogue, and Continuous Improvement Mindset) collectively demonstrate sophisticated moral maturity. Alumni recognize that others maintain different value frameworks while maintaining their own principled boundaries, communicate positions through persuasive rather than coercive means, and demonstrate self-awareness regarding personal limitations that fosters openness to others' perspectives. This adaptive capacity represents neither ideological rigidity nor unprincipled relativism but rather ethically reflective equilibrium, balancing universal religious principles with contextual situational particularities.

The fourth mechanism, Character Sustainability, reveals how alumni maintain formed character across extended time periods and successfully transmit internalized values to subsequent generations. This theme addresses questions concerning long-term character maintenance and value transmission strategies, demonstrating that character formation is fundamentally dynamic rather than static, requiring continuous reinforcement through supportive social environments. The three codes (Selective Community Association, Silent Modeling Practice, and Visionary Character Foundation) collectively represent alumni awareness of systems supporting character sustainability. Alumni strategically maintain associations with communities sharing similar value commitments, demonstrate characteristics through consistent behavioral modeling rather than verbal instruction, and exhibit pedagogical consciousness wherein they replicate Kiai's modeling-based approach in their own value transmission to others. The phenomenon of silent *dakwah* represents a distinctive value transmission mechanism wherein alumni consciously employ indirect communication strategies emphasizing genuine action over explicit verbal teaching, mirroring leadership patterns experienced during their own *pesantren* education.

3.2. Discussion

These findings confirm that kiai leadership in *pesantren* demonstrates transformational leadership characteristics as conceptualized by Bass and Avolio, but extend existing theory by specifying how those characteristics are expressed in a non-Western, residential Islamic education context (De Nobile & Bilgin, 2022; Menon, 2024). While prior literature establishes that idealized influence, leaders as role models through word-action consistency, is central to transformational effectiveness (Barnová et al., 2022; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000), this study adds a more precise finding: in the *pesantren* context, kiai effectiveness is determined not by inspirational verbal communication but by the deliberate minimization of rhetoric and maximization of concrete behavioral demonstration in everyday life. This distinction moves beyond what Ahmad et al. (2021) identified, transformational leadership as a predictor of positive organizational culture, by specifying the micro-level mechanism through which that culture is built: sustained behavioral modeling that students observe and internalize, not as instruction, but as lived evidence of the values' worth. This is theoretically coherent with Social Learning Theory's core claim that observational learning, rather than verbal persuasion, is the primary driver of value formation (Rahayu et al., 2021; Rishan et al., 2024), and grounds kiai leadership as a contextually distinctive but theoretically explicable form of transformational influence.

What makes this finding particularly significant is that it is accessible through the depth of phenomenological engagement with a single participant's life narrative, a depth that prior quantitative studies of *pesantren* outcomes have not reached (Aisyah et al., 2022; Gott et al., 2022). The phenomenological design here does not merely confirm that role modeling matters in character formation (Carr, 2023; Kristjánsson, 2006; Sanderse, 2024); it reveals why alumni retain and apply values exemplified by kiai years after leaving *pesantren*, by tracing the interlocking mechanisms through which internalization becomes durable. Specifically, kiai's individualized consideration, guiding each student's character formation according to personal potential rather than uniform prescription (Menon, 2024; Parveen et al., 2022; Kilag et al., 2024; Liu & Huang, 2023), generates an affective investment in the learning relationship that amplifies the effect of behavioral modeling. The result, as this study shows, is value internalization reaching Kohlberg's highest stage of moral development: commitment to universal principles independent of external rewards or social sanctions (Pawlak et al., 2021). This connection between individualized kiai leadership and post-conventional moral internalization has not previously been articulated in the *pesantren* literature.

The psychological and pedagogical conditions enabling this level of internalization operate through three reinforcing mechanisms. First, *pesantren* learning is immersive and continuous, encompassing all aspects of student life beyond formal classrooms (Baharun et al., 2020; Muttaqin et al., 2024), creating the consistent supportive environment that Watts et al. (2021) and Jayawickreme et al. (2021) identify as a prerequisite for effective character formation, where values are practiced, not merely stated (Serliyani & Siregar, 2023; Shiddiq et al., 2024). Second, value internalization in *pesantren* integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions simultaneously through the *tarbiyah-ta'dib-tazkiyah* framework (Gaffar et al., 2021). Alumni do not simply understand values intellectually but experience emotional commitment to them and enact them in consistent daily behavior. This tripartite integration produces deeper and more enduring internalization than approaches that address only one dimension (Rohaeti et al., 2021; Warsah et al., 2024). Third, the vicarious reinforcement mechanism students observing that kiai's consistent practice of religious values produces meaningful lives, respected social standing, and authentic spiritual peace strengthens motivation to internalize those same values (Rishan et al., 2024; Rahayu et al., 2021). Together, these three mechanisms explain what Hanafi et al.'s (2021) identified as the significant influence of kiai transformational leadership on value internalization, and offer a theoretically grounded account of the process underlying that influence.

The ability of *pesantren* alumni to navigate plural and dynamic social contexts without compromising core principles represents a theoretically distinct contribution that prior studies have not systematically conceptualized. Where existing literature has documented that *pesantren* does not produce ideological rigidity (Bahri, 2024; Karim et al., 2023; Roqib, 2021), this study moves beyond description to name and explain the underlying capacity: mature critical inclusivism, constituted by four specific elements recognition of value plurality, non-judgmental stance toward difference, awareness of personal imperfection, and persuasive rather than coercive engagement with others. These elements collectively instantiate what Asif et al. (2020) C (Al-Harbi, 2021; Alwadai & Alhaj, 2023), not through explicit instruction in global citizenship, but through the character formation process itself.

The sustainability of *pesantren*-formed character across time and social contexts extends contemporary character formation theory in a significant way. These findings align with the theoretical position that character is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process requiring continuous environmental reinforcement (Chheang et al., 2024; Jayawickreme et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2021), but go further by identifying the specific strategies alumni employ to construct and sustain that reinforcing environment for themselves. The metacognitive awareness that alumni demonstrate about their own character formation process (Retnasari et al., 2021; Safitri, 2024) knowing what shaped them and consciously working to maintain it is itself a product of *pesantren* education and a mechanism of sustainability that the existing literature has not previously linked to kiai leadership.

Most significantly, value transmission to the next generation occurs through a mechanism that mirrors the kiai leadership pattern alumni experienced: silent *dakwah* through behavioral demonstration rather than verbal instruction (Dian et al., 2024; Hanafi et al., 2021; Trinova et al., 2022). Prior studies have identified this pattern as a product of *pesantren* education, but have not explained the mechanism. This study reveals that alumni's preference for behavioral modeling over explicit teaching is not incidental imitation but a consciously chosen strategy one grounded in their own firsthand experience of its effectiveness. This constitutes what Ahn (2019) and Henderson (2024) c (Jubba et al., 2021; Muttaqin et al., 2024) demonstrates that *pesantren* character formation produces not only personally integrated graduates but socially generative ones, who perpetuate the formation culture beyond the institutional boundary.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that *kiai* leadership in *pesantren* constitutes a contextually distinctive form of transformational leadership in which idealized influence through consistent behavioral modeling rather than verbal inspiration serves as the primary mechanism of character formation, producing long-term religious value internalization, mature adaptation capacity in plural social contexts, and intergenerational value transmission through the practice of silent *dakwah*; theoretically, this enriches transformational leadership literature by

demonstrating that leadership effectiveness is contextually mediated, that the idealized influence dimension outweighs inspirational motivation in intensive residential Islamic education settings, and that the integration of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions through the *tarbiyah-ta'dib-tazkiyah* framework and the concept of mature critical inclusivism offer new analytical constructs for understanding holistic character formation beyond the *pesantren* context; practically, *pesantren* managers should prioritize developing kiai's moral leadership capacity and preserving the conditions of close, continuous kiai-student contact that enable individualized character guidance, while national education policy should adapt the proven principles of role modeling and holistic learning into teacher training programs and character education curricula across formal educational institutions.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/ or publication of this article.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/ or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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