

## Internalizing Character: A Phenomenological Study of Discipline, Independence, and Simplicity among *Pesantren* Students in Mandailing Natal

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### ABSTRACT

*This study delves into the lived experiences of students in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Mandailing Natal to explore the internalization of discipline, independence, and simplicity. While pesantren are crucial for cultivating Islamic values, they face growing pressures from modernization and the erosion of local traditions. Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the interpretation of lived experiences to uncover deeper layers of meaning beyond descriptive accounts, this study seeks to understand not only what students experience but also how they make sense of those experiences within their cultural and spiritual contexts. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Beyond these credibility strategies, the interpretative process followed three interrelated steps characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenology and IPA: reduction, thematization, and reflective interpretation of meaning. The findings demonstrate that character formation is a process of continuous habituation and integration with local wisdom. Discipline is cultivated through structured daily routines, independence is fostered by self-reliance, and simplicity emerges from communal living and a unique senior-junior mentoring system. This study argues that the pesantren system, through its reliance on practical engagement and local cultural practices, provides a powerful counter-narrative to the depersonalizing effects of globalization, shaping students' moral and spiritual resilience. The results offer specific insights for educators and policymakers on strengthening a form of character education that is both culturally rooted and contextually relevant for Indonesian students.*

**Keywords:** *Islamic Character Values; Local Wisdom; Islamic Education; Islamic boarding school*

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## INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the penetration of digital culture have significantly reshaped the social and educational landscape, including in Indonesia<sup>1</sup>. The rapid flow of information, consumerist culture, and individualistic lifestyles shape younger generations with mindsets that often clash with traditional values<sup>2</sup>. In the realm of character education<sup>3</sup>, this situation poses serious challenges, as values such as discipline, independence<sup>4</sup>, and simplicity—long cultivated through local traditions and religious institutions—are increasingly eroded by global cultural currents<sup>5</sup>.

Pesantren, as one of the oldest Islamic institutions in Indonesia, have historically served as centers of moral formation through communal living, the tradition of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation)<sup>6</sup>, and senior-junior mentoring systems<sup>7</sup>. However, the success of pesantren in instilling values does not automatically guarantee their resilience once students return to a wider society dominated by consumerist and digital cultures<sup>8</sup>. This tension between value internalization within pesantren and external societal pressures positions pesantren-based character education as both a strategic and problematic issue<sup>9,10</sup>.

Previous studies have examined pesantren from various perspectives. Nasith highlighted

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<sup>1</sup> Vera Diana Yulita, St Nurhayati Ali, and Nurully Kesuma Nimgrum, "Reconstruction of Islamic Educational Thought : Challenges and Opportunities in the Modern Era," *International Journal of Health, Economics, and Social Sciences (IJHES)* 7, no. 2 (2025): 645–49, <https://doi.org/10.56338/ijhess.v7i2.7225>. see Karim, A., Faiz, A., Nur'Aini, N., & Rahman, F. Y. (2022). The policy of organization, the spirit of progressivism Islam, and its association with social welfare educators. *Tatar Pasundan: Jurnal Diklat Keagamaan*, 16(1), 69–75.

<sup>2</sup> Muh Bachtiar Aziz and Ahmad Nabil Amir, "Evaluating Value-Based Vocational Education Using Logic Model : A Qualitative Inquiry in Islamic Higher Education," *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education* 6, no. 3 (2025): 700–715, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31538/tijie.v6i3.1969>.

<sup>3</sup> Susanto. Bambang, "Pembentukan Karakter Masyarakat Melalui Nilai-Nilai Kearifan Lokal Tradisi Joleman Di Desa Somongari Kabupaten Purworejo," *Jurnal Sosialita* 13, no. 1 (2020): 64–78.

<sup>4</sup> Syukron Zahidi Arrahmi and Biya Ebi Praheto, "Cultivating Discipline and Independent Character Through the Implementation of the School Literacy Movement" 8, no. 2 (2024): 80–88, <https://doi.org/10.26740/eds.v8n2.p80-88>. see Fikriyah, Karim, A., Huda, M. K., & Sumiati, A. (2021). Spiritual leadership: The case of instilling values in students through the Kiai's program in the globalization era. *Journal of Leadership in Organizations*, 3(1), 16–30. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22146/jlo.63922>

<sup>5</sup> Syamsul Aripin Syamsul Aripin and Nana Meily Nurdiansyah, "Modernization of Education: A New Approach and Method in Learning Islamic Religious Education," *TADRIS: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 17, no. 1 (2022): 100–117, <https://doi.org/10.19105/tjpi.v17i1.5916>.

<sup>6</sup> Meriyati Meriyati, Siminto Siminto, and Abdul Wahid, "Analysis of the Effect of Islamic Character Education, Multicultural Learning, and Extracurricular Activities on the Character Building of Pesantren Students in Central Java," *West Science Social and Humanities Studies* 2, no. 06 (2024): 1069–79, <https://doi.org/10.58812/wsshs.v2i06.1017>.

<sup>7</sup> Erawadi Erawadi and Fadlan Masykura Setiadi, "Exploring Religious Harmony Through Daliha Na Tolu: Local Wisdom in Peacebuilding in Indonesia," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 12, no. 3 (2024): 1379–1408, <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v12i3.1398>.

<sup>8</sup> Erawadi and Setiadi, "Exploring Religious Harmony Through Daliha Na Tolu: Local Wisdom in Peacebuilding in Indonesia." See Erik, E., Djalal, F., Hapidin, H., & Karim, A. (2024). Developoing leadership behavior through natural school. *Journal of Law and Sustainable Development*, 12(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.55908/sdgs.v12i1.2758> desenvolvendo

<sup>9</sup> Rahmadi Rahmadi and Hamdan Hamdan, "Religious Moderation in the Context of Islamic Education: A Multidisciplinary Perspective and Its Application in Islamic Educational Institutions in Indonesia," *Khazanah: Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Humaniora* 21, no. 1 (2023): 59–82, <https://doi.org/10.18592/khazanah.v21i1.8487>.

<sup>10</sup> Junaedi Junaedi et al., "Enhancing Transformative Competencies through the Internalization of Religious Moderation: A Vision for Islamic Boarding School's Educational Framework in 2030," *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan* 16, no. 2 (2024): 2692–2704, <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v16i2.5367>.

the role of the *Panca Jiwa* (Five Principles) in shaping character<sup>11</sup>, Ratmani et al. emphasized the role of lived experience; Hadirman focused on local rituals in strengthening Islamic education<sup>12</sup>. while Burhan underscored parental collaboration in instilling values from early childhood<sup>13</sup>. While valuable, these studies tend to remain normative or descriptive, thus rarely addressing the subjective dimension and lived experiences of students and caregivers<sup>14</sup>—particularly in regions such as Mandailing Natal, where local wisdom continues to strongly mediate the pesantren system.

This research seeks to bridge that gap. Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), it investigates how discipline, independence, and simplicity are internalized in the everyday lives of pesantren students in Mandailing Natal; how these values interact with local wisdom; and how both students and caregivers confront the pressures of globalization. In doing so, this study contributes not only to the discourse on character education in pesantren but also offers sharper theoretical insights into the interplay between local habitus, Islamic values, and global dynamics.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological design, specifically adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to explore the lived experiences of students, caregivers, and parents in the process of internalizing discipline, independence, and simplicity within Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Mandailing Natal Regency<sup>15</sup>. Hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen because the study sought not merely to describe daily practices of discipline, independence, and simplicity, but to interpret the meanings participants attach to those practices within the broader context of globalization and local wisdom. IPA, with its idiographic and interpretive orientation, was particularly suited because it allows a close exploration of individual experiences while also identifying convergent and divergent themes across cases.

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<sup>11</sup> Ali Nasith, "The Role of Kyai's Charismatic Leadership in Mitigating Religious Intolerance and Radicalism in Pesantren," *International Journal of Social Science and Religion (IJSSR)* 5, no. 2 (2024): 203–30, <https://doi.org/10.53639/ijssr.v5i2.238>. see Salam, A. Dz, S., Kulkarni, S., Karim, A., Muhammadun, & Jalaludin. (2024). The Managerial Roles of Leaders Pesantren-Based Rehabilitation Institutions in Overcoming Juvenile Delinquency. *Al-Tanzim: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 08(03), 717–731. <https://doi.org/DOI:http://doi.org/10.33650/al-tanzim.v8i3.8309>

<sup>12</sup> Ali Ramatni, Tenggo Husnul Fata, and Surajiyo Surajiyo, "Management of Character Learning Based on Islamic Education: A Literature Review," *JPPi (Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Indonesia)* 11, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.29210/020254778>. see Karim, A. (2016). Pembaharuan pendidikan Islam multikulturalis. *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam -Ta'lim*, 14(1), 19–35.

<sup>13</sup> Hadirman, Musafar, and Ardianto, "Portrait of muna language wisdom and inheritance of values in katoba rituals in overseas muna communities," *International Journal of Education, Culture and Society* 2, no. 1 (2024): 53–74, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.58578/IJECS.v2i1.2803>. see Karim, A., & Afnan, D. (2020). Kiai interpersonal managerial: Henry Mintzberg perspective. *Journal of Leadership in Organizations*, 2(2), 75–90. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22146/jlo.56290>

<sup>14</sup> Burhan Nudin, "Islamic Education in Early Childhood: Cooperation between Parents and School To Build Character in Disruption Era," *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.20885/millah.vol20.iss1.art1>.

<sup>15</sup> Isaac Tuffour, "A Critical Overview of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: A Contemporary Qualitative Research Approach," *Journal of Healthcare Communications* 02, no. 04 (2017): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.4172/2472-1654.100093>.

Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which emphasizes bracketing, IPA acknowledges the double hermeneutic process—participants interpret their experiences while the researcher interprets those interpretations—making it the most fitting lens for analyzing pesantren life where values are continuously negotiated.

The fieldwork was conducted in three pesantren in Mandailing Natal Regency purposively selected to capture institutional diversity. The first pesantren represents a *salafiyah* tradition emphasizing simplicity and discipline, the second integrates formal schooling with pesantren life, and the third has adopted hybrid approaches influenced by modern curricula. These variations enabled a comparative understanding of how different institutional orientations shape value internalization while remaining grounded in local Mandailing traditions such as *gotong royong* and senior–junior mentoring.

Participants were recruited through purposive and criterion-based sampling. The final sample consisted of 15 students (*santri*) who had lived in pesantren for at least three years, 6 caregivers (*ustadz/kyai*) with more than ten years of teaching or leadership experience, and 5 parents whose children were actively enrolled. This composition reflects the three major stakeholders in character education: students as recipients, caregivers as facilitators, and parents as external evaluators. The sample size aligns with IPA conventions that privilege depth over breadth, ensuring sufficient immersion into participants’ subjective accounts while maintaining analytical rigor<sup>16</sup>.

The data collection methods—in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis—were strictly aligned with the principles of IPA. Interviews were designed as a flexible, phenomenological dialogue where the researcher encouraged participants to narrate their experiences. Questions such as "Tell me about your daily life at the *pesantren* and how it has shaped your character?" were used to uncover hidden meanings and emotions. Participant observation was conducted to capture unspoken experiences, such as non-verbal interactions, daily routines, and communal rituals. This observation served as an essential contextual source that enriched the interpretation of the interviews. Document analysis (e.g., *pesantren* regulations and student handbooks) was used as a supporting source to understand the institutional framework that shapes these practices.

Table 1. Data Sources and Instruments

Data Source	Participants	Instruments Used	Focus of Data Collected
Students (Santri)	12	Semi-structured interviews, participant observation	Lived experiences of discipline, independence, and simplicity in daily pesantren life
Caregivers (Kyai/Ustadz)	6	Semi-structured interviews, document analysis	Pedagogical approaches, interpretation of <i>Panca Jiwa</i> and local wisdom

<sup>16</sup> Fitria Desy Dwi Kisardi Putri and Honest Umami Kalstum, “The Principal’s Leadership Role in Implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Elementary School,” *Jurnal Ilmiah Sekolah Dasar* 6, no. 4 (2022): 680–88, <https://doi.org/10.23887/jisd.v6i4.55897>.

Data Source	Participants	Instruments Used	Focus of Data Collected
Parents	6	Semi-structured interviews	Perceptions of value transfer from pesantren to home/community
Documents & Field Context	—	Archival records, field notes	Rules, traditions, historical-cultural practices supporting character education

Data analysis followed the procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA):

1. Immersion: Repeated close reading and listening to interview transcripts and audio recordings to retain the individuality of each participant's account.
2. Initial noting: Exploratory comments were recorded, focusing on descriptive (content), linguistic (use of language), and conceptual (deeper meaning) aspects.
3. Emergent themes: Notes were transformed into concise phrases that captured psychological and cultural significance.
4. Connecting themes: Emergent themes were clustered into higher-order categories (e.g., "discipline as obedience vs. self-control").
5. Cross-case analysis: Patterns were compared across students, caregivers, and parents to identify shared and divergent understandings of character values.
6. Interpretation: Findings were situated within the broader tension of local wisdom and globalization, ensuring that analysis went beyond description to meaning-making.

Throughout this process, reflexivity was maintained through a researcher's journal, acknowledging positionality as an outsider-insider interpreter of pesantren life<sup>17</sup>.

The researcher acted as a participant-observer and interpretive facilitator, engaging in pesantren routines where appropriate to build trust while remaining reflexively aware of personal biases. This role was crucial for accessing the tacit cultural meanings of everyday practices and for ensuring that interpretations were co-constructed with, rather than imposed upon, participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee and from pesantren leaders. Informed consent was secured from all adult participants and from parents of underage students. Pseudonyms were used, and sensitive data were anonymized. Particular attention was given to cultural and religious sensitivities, including gender-appropriate interviewing, adherence to dress codes, and participation in communal activities with permission. The ethical stance extended beyond procedural compliance to cultural embeddedness, ensuring respect for pesantren norms.

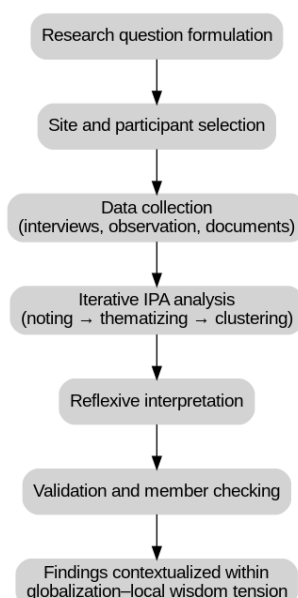
The credibility of findings was strengthened through multiple strategies. Triangulation was applied by combining interviews, observations, and document analysis to ensure that insights were not drawn from a single perspective. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants, allowing them to confirm, refine, or challenge the

<sup>17</sup> Rini Sugiarti et al., "The Influence of Parenting on Building Character in Adolescents," *Heliyon* 8, no. 5 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09349>. see Karim, A., Mardhotillah, N. F., & Samadi, M. I. (2019). Ethical leadership transforms into ethnic: Exploring new leader's style of Indonesia. *Journal of Leadership in Organizations*, 1(2), 146–157. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22146/jlo.44625>



researcher's understanding. Peer debriefing sessions with academic colleagues familiar with IPA were used to test the coherence and consistency of emerging themes. In addition, thick description was employed to provide sufficient contextual detail, enabling readers to assess the transferability of findings to other pesantren or similar educational contexts.

Beyond these credibility strategies, the interpretative process followed three interrelated steps characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenology and IPA: reduction, thematization, and reflective interpretation of meaning. *Reduction* involved carefully bracketing taken-for-granted assumptions to focus on participants' lived accounts while repeatedly re-reading transcripts and observation notes. *Thematization* then clustered significant statements into emergent themes that captured both the descriptive and conceptual essence of the experiences. Finally, *reflective interpretation of meaning* situated these themes within broader cultural and global contexts, allowing the researcher to move from surface accounts of daily routines toward deeper insights into how discipline, independence, and simplicity are internalized, contested, or redefined in relation to modernization pressures.



**Figure 1. Research Flow in IPA-based Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

**Table 2. Research Design Overview**

Component	Description
Research Design	Hermeneutic Phenomenology using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
Research Site	Three pesantren in Mandailing Natal Regency, selected for strong integration with local wisdom
Participants	15 students ( $\geq 3$ years in pesantren), 6 caregivers (ustadz/kyai), 5 parents

Component	Description
Sampling Technique	Purposive and criterion-based, ensuring rich and relevant lived experiences
Data Collection	Semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, document analysis
Data Analysis	IPA procedures: iterative reading, emergent themes, clustering, double hermeneutic interpretation
Validation Strategies	Source and method triangulation, reflexive journaling, peer debriefing
Research Ethics	Informed consent, parental consent for minors, confidentiality, cultural and religious sensitivity

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### RESULT

The internalization of discipline, independence, and simplicity in *pesantren* students in Mandailing Natal is not a simple top-down process but a complex, lived experience shaped by the continuous interplay between religious habituation, institutional routines, and local wisdom. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study reveals how these values are embodied, negotiated, and at times contested within the unique cultural and social ecosystem of the *pesantren*. The analysis of in-depth interviews, participant observations, and documents revealed three central, interconnected themes: (1) The Lived Habitus of Character: From Routine to Internalized Value; (2) The Mandailing Context: Local Wisdom as a Catalyst for Internalization; and (3) The Central Contradiction: Sustaining Values Beyond the *Pesantren* Gate.

#### The Lived Habitus of Character: From Routine to Internalized Value

The findings reveal that character formation within the *pesantren* is not an abstract concept but a process of forging a **habitus**—a set of ingrained practices that become second nature to students. This process is not uniform; instead, it's a deeply differentiated and non-homogeneous experience for each individual.

##### 1. The Psychology of Discipline: From Obligation to Internalized Need

Interviews with students show a clear transition in their relationship with discipline. For instance, Fadil, a 16-year-old student, shared, *"It was so hard at first. We had to wake up at 3 a.m. for Tahajjud prayers... it felt like a forced march."* However, he later noted, *"After a year, my body just wakes up naturally. Now, if I miss my morning prayers when I'm home, my day feels wrong."* This narrative demonstrates a shift from external obligation to an internal, existential need. The data suggests that this psychological adaptation is not uniform. While some students may internalize the routine quickly, Fadil's story shows it can take a year or more. This finding indicates that even with a standardized routine, not all students achieve the same level of internalization.

## 2. Non-Homogeneous Impact of Self-Reliance

Field observations and interviews with caregivers, such as Ustaz Budi, highlighted a deliberate strategy of withholding modern conveniences like washing machines to foster independence. According to Ustaz Budi, the goal is to "*force them to rely on themselves*." The impact of this strategy, however, varies based on the students' backgrounds. For those from less privileged backgrounds who are already accustomed to self-sufficiency, the practice reinforces existing skills. In contrast, for students from more affluent backgrounds used to convenience, this "experiential lesson" presents a much greater challenge. This finding underscores how a single institutional strategy can have different effects, either reinforcing a pre-existing habitus or forcing the development of a completely new one.

## 3. Diverse Manifestations of Character Traits

The ultimate goal of fostering self-discipline and resilience does not produce a single, uniform type of individual. Fadil's story, for example, shows his discipline manifesting as a new, natural rhythm of prayer. Meanwhile, observations revealed that other students might express the same value through different actions, such as exceptional personal organization or improved time management for their studies. This confirms that while the disciplinary routines serve as a foundation, the behavioral expression of these values is unique and diverse for each individual. The teaching strategy doesn't create a singular character type but instead nurtures a wide range of resilient and self-reliant individuals.

## The Mandailing Context: Local Wisdom as a Catalyst for Internalization

The findings show that the internalization of discipline, independence, and simplicity in Mandailing Natal pesantren is not generic but deeply mediated by local cultural traditions. Practices such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and senior-junior mentoring provide powerful vehicles for value transmission, though their impact is not uniform across students.

### 1. Differentiated Engagement with Local Wisdom

Aisyah, a female student, described how *gotong royong* resonated with her previous village life: "*Back in my village, we have gotong royong for community events. Here, we have it every Friday when we clean the mosque together. It's the same feeling, but here it's about our brotherhood and sisterhood as santri. We learn that nobody is better than anyone else.*" Field observations confirmed weekly collective activities, such as mosque cleaning and communal cooking, that reinforced cooperation among students.

For students like Aisyah, the pesantren practice felt like a continuation of familiar traditions. For others from urban or non-Mandailing backgrounds, it was less intuitive and initially perceived as a burden before becoming meaningful over time. This demonstrates that students' prior cultural familiarity shapes how readily pesantren practices are internalized. Local wisdom serves as a cultural bridge, but its function differs across students: either reinforcing pre-existing dispositions or introducing entirely new social learning.



## 2. Non-Homogeneous Outcomes of the Senior-Junior Mentoring System

Interviews revealed varied student experiences with the mentoring system. Some highlighted strong, supportive bonds with seniors, while others mentioned difficulties: *“My senior always reminded me gently. I felt like he really cared, not like a teacher giving orders.”* (Student interview, male, age 17). *“Sometimes seniors just boss you around. It doesn’t feel like mentoring, more like extra work.”* (Student interview, male, age 15).

The mentoring system was effective when seniors provided empathetic guidance but less impactful—or even counterproductive—when relationships were tense. Outcomes therefore varied significantly depending on the quality of interpersonal dynamics. The mentoring structure institutionalizes responsibility, but character internalization depends on relational quality. This indicates that institutional strategies must be evaluated not only for design but also for lived implementation.

## 3. Varying Receptivity to Experiential Authority

In focus group discussions, students reflected differently on the value of experiential authority: *“I follow seniors because they’ve been through it. They know better from experience.”* (Student, female, age 16). *“I don’t just accept what seniors say. I think first—sometimes I disagree if it doesn’t make sense.”* (Student, male, age 15)

Students with a hierarchical mindset more readily accepted informal peer authority, while others with independent dispositions were less responsive to experiential guidance without critical reflection. This variation shows that personal learning styles and personality traits mediate how students engage with pesantren authority systems. Experiential authority is not universally effective but contingent on individual receptivity.

## The Central Contradiction: Sustaining Values Beyond the *Pesantren* Gate

The most significant finding of this study concerns the tension between values internalized in the pesantren and the pressures students face when they return home. While pesantren practices successfully instill discipline and religiosity, the resilience of these values in everyday life outside the pesantren is varied and often fragile.

### 1. Variable Fragility of Internalized Value

Parents frequently voiced concern about whether pesantren values would endure after their children returned home. One father, Pak Ahmad, expressed: *“My son is so disciplined here. He prays on time and reads the Qur’an. But when he’s home, with his phone and his friends... it all seems to disappear. The outside world is so fast and distracting.”*

This parental perspective reflects a perception of fragility in students’ internalized values. However, interviews with students revealed differentiated outcomes: some described an enduring sense of discipline that continued outside pesantren, while others admitted to struggling when confronted with peer influence and digital distractions. The degree of value resilience is not uniform. For some students, pesantren routines evolve into an existential need, while for others they remain context-dependent and fade outside the structured environment.

2. Non-Homogeneous External Ecosystems

Field notes and interviews with students highlighted different home contexts. A student from a religiously observant family explained: *“At home, my parents also wake us early for Subuh, so it feels the same as pesantren.”* (Student, male, age 16). In contrast, another student reported: *“When I’m home, nobody reminds me. My friends call me at night, and I end up missing Fajr.”* (Student, male, age 15).

These accounts show that the transition from pesantren to home is shaped by the presence—or absence—of supportive religious practices and parental supervision. The “outside world” is not a uniform threat but a set of varied family and social ecosystems. Students from structured families experience smoother continuity, while those from less disciplined environments face a sharper clash of values.

3. Divergent Personal Coping and Adaptation Strategies

Student interviews revealed different ways of negotiating the tension between pesantren values and external influences: *“I use my phone only after prayers and studies. That way I don’t forget my duties.”* (Student, female, age 17). *“For me, pesantren rules are for pesantren. At home, I just want to be free with my friends.”* (Student, male, age 16)

These contrasting voices illustrate that students exercise personal agency in adapting to life outside pesantren. Some selectively integrate pesantren values with modern life, others adhere rigidly, while a portion disengages from them altogether. Coping strategies are diverse and unpredictable. The endurance of pesantren character values depends not only on institutional training but also on students’ individual choices and adaptive capacities.

Table 3. Revised Analytical Table: The Process of Character Internalization in Pesantren

Aspect of Character	In-Depth Internalization Process (Beyond the Superficial)	Analytical Basis in Local Wisdom & Theory
Discipline	More than just following a schedule, this is the internal transformation from external obligation to a personal disposition. The strict schedule serves as a tool to train the body and mind until discipline becomes "second nature" (Al-Ghazālī). The educative sanctions are a corrective mechanism focused on building a conscious awareness of the importance of order, not merely as a form of punishment.	Lived Habitus (Bourdieu): The pesantren environment is a "field" where discipline is continuously reinforced, creating a disposition that is difficult to undo. This aligns with Al-Ghazālī's philosophy of <i>riyāḍah</i> (spiritual exercise) that forges <i>akhlāq</i> (ethics) into an inseparable part of the self.
Independence	More than just performing daily	The Principle of Austerity: In

Aspect of Character	In-Depth Internalization Process (Beyond the Superficial)	Analytical Basis in Local Wisdom & Theory
Simplicity	tasks, this is the development of resilience and personal responsibility. Practices like cooking and hand-washing without modern facilities are deliberately designed to force students out of their comfort zones and build self-reliance in the face of difficulty. This shifts the perception from "hardship" to a "valuable lesson."	Mandailing, the value of simplicity is part of a cultural ethos that prizes sufficiency and resilience. Pesantren practices contextualize this value, transforming it into a pedagogical tool that incubates self-reliance and endurance.
	More than just minimal clothing or food, this is the formation of a mentality of gratitude and contentment ( <i>qanā'ah</i> ) with what one has. Simple living in the pesantren teaches students to distinguish between needs and wants, instilling an anti-consumerist mindset that stands in opposition to the forces of globalization.	Mandailing Cultural Ethos: The local culture values simplicity and a lack of excess, a principle known as <i>sitoa-toa</i> . The pesantren takes this principle and internalizes it through daily practices, making it a form of cultural defense mechanism against materialism.
Mutual Cooperation	More than just cleaning activities, this is the formation of social bonds and a sense of belonging. These activities build social capital (Bourdieu) among students, fostering empathy and the understanding that collective success is more important than individual gain. This embodies the concept of <i>ukhuwah</i> (brotherhood) in tangible action.	Gotong Royong: The collective culture in Mandailing villages is the foundation. The pesantren provides a new context—the student community—where this tradition is rekindled, strengthening communal identity and solidarity. This is a cultural transfer from a local to a spiritual context.
Social Responsibility	More than just mentoring juniors, this is the development of authority based on experience and empathy. The senior-junior system creates a lived hierarchy, where the mentor's	The Principle of Tut Wuri Handayani: While not explicitly mentioned in the text, this practice aligns with the Indonesian educational principle that emphasizes guiding from behind. The

Aspect of Character	In-Depth Internalization Process (Beyond the Superficial)	Analytical Basis in Local Wisdom & Theory
	role is not about giving orders but about providing emotional support and sharing in a common struggle.	authority here comes not from status but from experience and empathy, which is at the heart of local wisdom for guiding the young.

This study offers a nuanced, data-driven understanding of character formation in *pesantren* by moving beyond generic descriptions to provide a deep, interpretive analysis of lived experiences. The novelty of this research lies in its hermeneutic focus on the interplay of local wisdom and lived routines, its specific grounding in the unique context of Mandailing Natal, and its unflinching examination of the challenges in sustaining values against global pressures. The findings demonstrate that *pesantren* education is a powerful counter-narrative to the depersonalizing effects of globalization, but its effectiveness is contingent on creating supportive environments that bridge the gap between tradition and modernity.

DISCUSSION

The internalization of Islamic character values in *pesantren* life is a holistic and existential process, deeply shaped by the unique interplay between lived habituation and the local cultural context of Mandailing Natal. This study, through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, argues that character formation is not merely the outcome of following rules but a continuous negotiation between internalized moral frameworks and external social realities. This discussion will elaborate on the key findings, situate them within theoretical debates, and critically analyze the central tension between *pesantren* values and globalization, which represents the core contribution of this research.

Character Formation as the Result of a Synergy Between Habitus (Bourdieu) and Akhlāq (Al-Ghazālī)

The finding that character is forged through a lived habitus—that is, lived and repeated routines—is a core analytical contribution. This process transcends the simplistic notion of behavioral conditioning. It is a philosophical fusion between a classic Islamic perspective and a contemporary sociological theory. From Al-Ghazālī’s viewpoint, the formation of *akhlāq* (ethics) is a spiritual and psychological journey. He argued that moral virtues are not innate but must be consciously cultivated through diligent practice (*riyāḍah*). The daily routines at the *pesantren*, such as waking before dawn for the Tahajjud prayer, can be understood as this *riyāḍah*. Initially, these actions feel forced and uncomfortable, as described by Fadil. However, over time, the consistent repetition transforms an external action into an internal disposition. This is the process of an inner "struggle" that eventually reaches a point where, as Fadil describes, the absence of the routine creates a sense of "incompleteness"—a sign that the value has become an integral part of the self.

The *pesantren*'s reliance on daily routines and structured living embodies this philosophy, transforming abstract ethical principles into tangible, embodied experiences. This also resonates

with contemporary habitus theory, demonstrating that the social structure of the *pesantren*—its rules, routines, and physical spaces—is internalized by students as a personal disposition. Bourdieu's theory provides the sociological framework for understanding how the *pesantren* institution creates the conditions for this process. *Habitus* is a system of internalized dispositions that orients a person's thoughts, perceptions, and actions. In the *pesantren* context, the social structure (the rules, strict schedules, communal living) is the "field" in which this *habitus* is formed. By participating in *pesantren* life, students subconsciously internalize norms, not just as rules, but as part of their "feel" for how the world works. They build ethical and spiritual capital that is valued within the *pesantren*'s "field."

**Self-Critique:** While this synergy between Al-Ghazālī and Bourdieu is powerful, it also reveals a fundamental vulnerability in the model. The success of this *habitus* is heavily dependent on the homogeneity and control of the environment. The *pesantren*, by eliminating distractions and providing consistent reinforcement, succeeds in shaping a strong disposition. The critical question that arises, however, is whether this *habitus* is flexible and resilient enough to operate outside the vastly different "field" of the outside world, where the valued "capital" is individualism, consumerism, and technological speed. The reliance on a controlled environment may ironically produce individuals who are not well-trained in navigating the pluralism of values and temptations of a broader society. Instead of viewing the *pesantren*'s reliance on a controlled environment as a weakness, this research positions it as a fundamental strength. The success of the "moral hothouse" model shows its effectiveness under ideal conditions. The challenge, therefore, is not a failure of the model but a need to expand the "field" where this *habitus* can operate. The theoretical solution is to adapt Bourdieu's concept by having the *pesantren* not only build *habitus* but also foster transferable "capital." This means the curriculum should be supplemented with skills relevant to the outside world, such as ethical digital literacy, sharia-based entrepreneurship, and media literacy.

### **Leveraging Local Wisdom as a Cultural Bridge**

The study confirms that local wisdom, like *gotong royong*, is not merely a backdrop but an interpretive foundation that strengthens value internalization. Students familiar with these traditions possess cultural capital (Bourdieu) that makes abstract concepts like *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) more relatable. Aisyah's experience demonstrates how the *pesantren* successfully connects universal Islamic values with familiar cultural practices. The tension between the *pesantren*'s intent (to foster self-reliance) and the students' initial experience (feeling burdened) can be resolved by enhancing student participation. Instead of simply enforcing practices, the *pesantren* can adopt a *participatory action research* (PAR) model where students are involved in designing solutions to daily challenges. For example, students can be asked to help manage resources or develop sustainable internal systems. This approach strengthens student agency, making them active subjects in their own character formation and preparing them to adapt outside



the pesantren<sup>1819</sup>.

### **Bridging the Central Contradiction: From Isolation to Integration**

The most potent and novel finding of this study is the central contradiction: the effectiveness of character formation within the *pesantren* environment vs. its fragility when confronted with the external world. The parents' accounts, particularly Pak Ahmad's, reveal a critical disconnect. Values like discipline and simplicity, which are reinforced by a cohesive institutional *habitus*, lose their moorings in a society where external pressures of consumerism and digital culture are dominant<sup>20</sup>. This is not a failure of the *pesantren*'s educational model but a powerful illustration that character is context-dependent. The *pesantren* functions as a "moral hothouse" that successfully cultivates values but lacks a mechanism to inoculate them against a fundamentally different societal ecosystem. The contradiction between success within the pesantren and fragility in the outside world is the study's most important finding. In Bourdieu's terms, this can be explained as the inability of the pesantren *habitus* to compete in the social "market" of modern society. The *habitus* built on communal, spiritual, and disciplined values does not possess enough "capital" to withstand external forces driven by individualism, consumerism, and the speed of information. The pesantren succeeds in building a "moral hothouse" that protects values but fails to build a "bridge" connecting that hothouse to the outside world.

The findings suggest that the depersonalizing effects of globalization—which promote individualism and commodification—directly undermine the communal and relational foundations of *pesantren* character education. This calls into question the long-term efficacy of any character education program that does not account for the radical differences between institutional and societal contexts. In summary, this research advances the field by providing a rich, empirically-grounded, and analytically rigorous account of character internalization in *pesantren*<sup>21</sup>. The novelty of this study is multifold: (1) it goes beyond descriptive accounts to provide a hermeneutic interpretation of the lived *habitus* of character, showing the subjective process of value-making; (2) it elevates local wisdom from a peripheral factor to a foundational element of internalization; and (3) most importantly, it presents a critical analysis of the central contradiction between a supportive institutional environment and a challenging global context. The study's conclusions are not normative but constructive: they argue that for character education to be sustainable, it must be supported by a broader ecosystem that bridges the gap between *pesantren* values and the realities of modern life.

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<sup>18</sup> Felix Ostertag, "Integrating OCBE Literature and Norm Activation Theory: A Moderated Mediation on Proenvironmental Behavior of Employees," *Sustainability (Switzerland)* 15, no. 9 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15097605>.

<sup>19</sup> Rian Nurizka et al., "Internalization of School Culture to Foster Awareness of Pancasila Values in Elementary School Students," *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 8, no. 10 (2020): 4818–25, <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.081053>.

<sup>20</sup> Iqbal Mustakim et al., "The Internalization of Religious Cultural Values in Shaping the Spiritual Intelligence of Students At Sd Alam Palembang," *Jurnal Cakrawala Pendas* 10, no. 3 (2024): 596–661, <https://doi.org/10.31949/jcp.v10i3.10098>.

<sup>21</sup> Jane Holden et al., "Navigating Athlete Development in Elite Sport: Understanding the Barriers to the Provision of Performance Lifestyle Service in England," *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 77, no. April 2024 (2025): 102779, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102779>.

The most substantial self-critique here is that this problem is not merely an individual failure, but a structural failure of the educational model itself. The pesantren, with its reliance on isolation and control, effectively avoids direct confrontation with the challenges of modernity. By filtering the environment, it creates a disposition that is unprepared to negotiate or adapt to a pluralism of values. This model ironically places students at a disadvantage when they return to a society that demands adaptability and resilience, not just obedience. For this reason, the sustainability of pesantren character education requires a paradigm shift from a "model of isolation" to one of "integration." This means the pesantren must start teaching its students not only what to believe but also how to manage those values in the face of inevitable challenges. This problem cannot be solved by simply strengthening values but by building a "bridge" connecting the pesantren to the wider society.

1. Applying educational ecology theory, which posits that character education is an ecosystem involving family, school, and community. Pesantren must proactively partner with families, alumni, and local communities to create a "supportive ecosystem" that reinforces its values after students leave.
2. Practical Solutions:
  - a. Post-Pesantren Programs: Develop mentoring programs for alumni to help them navigate the challenges of the outside world.
  - b. Project-Based Learning: Integrate social or entrepreneurial projects that require students to interact with the local community, allowing them to practice their values in a more complex context.
  - c. Healthy Digital Curriculum: Teach students how to use technology responsibly, transforming it from a "distraction" into a tool for positive outreach.

By adopting these approaches, the pesantren can shift from a model that merely protects values to one that prepares students to be resilient agents of change in a rapidly evolving world. The research's strength lies in its constructive solutions, positioning it as a scientific contribution that not only critiques but also offers a clear way forward.

## CONCLUSION

This study advances the understanding of character formation in the pesantren by moving beyond a simple descriptive model to reveal a profound, nuanced process of embodied meaning-making. By applying a hermeneutic phenomenological lens to the lived experiences of students in Mandailing Natal, the research makes three critical contributions. First, the findings demonstrate that character is not passively received but is existentially forged through a "lived habitus." This process, as evidenced by Fadil's narrative, shows that students actively re-author their own narratives, transforming initial experiences of external coercion ("a forced march") into a sense of internal, self-regulated necessity. This shift from obligation to an existential need is the core evidence of a profound hermeneutic journey—a continuous process of reinterpreting and assigning meaning to daily routines until they become an inseparable part of the self. Second, the study re-conceptualizes the role of local wisdom, elevating it from a mere backdrop to a

foundational interpretive lens. The findings on *gotong royong* and the senior-junior mentoring system illustrate how Mandailing traditions provide a culturally legible framework that makes abstract Islamic principles tangible and meaningful. This shows a critical synergy where local culture strengthens, rather than weakens, the internalization of values. However, a deeper analysis reveals a hermeneutic gap between institutional intent (e.g., fostering resilience through austerity) and the students' initial lived experience of deprivation.

The subsequent re-interpretation of this struggle through peer support and personal negotiation is a crucial step in bridging this gap and internalizing the desired virtue. Finally, the research exposes a central contradiction that represents its most potent and novel finding: the effectiveness of character formation within the pesantren's supportive environment versus its fragility in a globalized world. This is not an indictment of the pesantren's model, but a critical insight into the context-dependency of character. The *habitus* cultivated within this "moral incubator" is powerful but can be vulnerable when confronted with a fundamentally different societal ecosystem. The study argues that for this form of education to be sustainable, its supporting ecosystem must extend beyond the school walls. The idiographic nature of this research is a limitation in terms of statistical generalizability, but it is also its greatest strength, offering a deep, transferable understanding of the phenomenon. Future longitudinal studies tracking alumni and comparative research in different cultural contexts are needed to build on these findings. Ultimately, this study posits that the pesantren offers a powerful counter-narrative to the depersonalizing effects of globalization by providing a model of education where character is cultivated through meaningful, culturally-grounded, and lived experience.

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