
A Character-based management model of pesantren education for strengthening students' nationalism and patriotism

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Abstract

This study explores a character-based management model in three pesantren in Merangin Regency, Indonesia, aimed at strengthening students' nationalism and patriotism. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were gathered through interviews, observations, and document analysis involving *kyai*, teachers, and administrators. The findings reveal that although each pesantren applies distinct managerial styles, all embed national values through integrated planning, curriculum design, extracurricular programs, and moral leadership. The *kyai* plays a central role in shaping institutional culture and modeling civic values. Effective character formation emerges from a combination of traditional Islamic practices and responsive educational management. The study formulates a contextualized model that merges cultural authenticity with managerial structure, offering a practical framework for pesantren and similar institutions to cultivate national identity through education.

Keywords

Character education, educational management, nationalism, patriotism, pesantren

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Introduction

The primary aim of this study is to analyze and formulate a character-based management model for pesantren education in Merangin Regency, Indonesia. Pesantren, are tasked with producing students who are both spiritually devout and civically responsible, through value-based environments that shape national character. This research investigates how pesantren management—through planning, organizing, staffing, implementing, and evaluating—can systematically cultivate students' nationalism and patriotism. These managerial dimensions are critical to creating value-based environments that integrate curriculum, extracurricular programs, role modeling, and institutional culture to shape students' moral identity (Azra, 2021; Hidayatullah & Suryadi, 2022).

The emergence of global and national educational challenges—such as the technological disruption of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, the multi-dimensional demands of Society 5.0, and increasing social polarization—has repositioned character education as an urgent national priority. The Indonesian Ministry of Education has emphasized the importance of reinforcing national character through formal and informal education systems (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). In this context, pesantrens are viewed as strategic sites for civic education, capable of promoting values such as tolerance, discipline, obedience to the law, and love for the homeland. However, while pesantren are celebrated for their spiritual authority, research has not sufficiently explained how their internal management systems influence character outcomes aligned with civic and national goals.

Previous studies have tended to focus on pesantren leadership models (Dhofier, 2019), curriculum adaptation (Muhaimin, 2020), and moral development strategies (Gunawan et al., 2021). However, few have explicitly examined how the five functions of management directly contribute to the development of nationalism and patriotism among students. There remains a knowledge gap regarding the operationalization of character education within the everyday managerial practices of pesantren leaders, particularly in diverse socio-cultural contexts such as Merangin Regency. This study addresses this gap by grounding its model in empirical insights drawn from three pesantren: Salafiyah Tarbiyah Al-Mujahadah, Al-Munawwaroh, and Salafiyah Depati Agung.

To guide this investigation, the research explores four central questions: (1) How do pesantren in Merangin manage their institutions to instill nationalism and patriotism? (2) Which managerial components most effectively support the formation of national character? (3) How are current management practices implemented, and what outcomes do they generate? (4) What kind of character-based management model can be developed to strengthen national and civic values in pesantren education?

Merangin Regency offers a meaningful context for this research due to its blend of traditional Islamic practices and increasing exposure to modernization. The selected pesantren represent variations in management structure, curriculum design, staff professionalism, and leadership styles. Despite these differences, all share a unified objective: to produce graduates (santri) who embody religious devotion, national identity, and social responsibility. These dual aims are particularly relevant in an era in which education is expected to foster intellectual and spiritual growth, social cohesion, and civic engagement (Ningsih & Fauzan, 2023).

As a result, pesantren leaders must navigate a complex landscape that includes religious expectations, community involvement, national curriculum standards, and global pressures. Recent research has suggested that effective character education is shaped by a school's entire ecosystem, including leadership vision, institutional routines, disciplinary policies, and the personal example set by educators (Kurniawati et al., 2021). Pesantren adapts this ecosystem, which is profoundly influenced by the *kyai*, whose charismatic authority serves as both administrative and moral leadership. Understanding how *kyai*'s leadership aligns with modern management functions is essential to developing a practical and culturally grounded educational model.

This study also draws on contemporary theories of educational management that emphasize aligning institutional vision with human resources, performance evaluation, and organizational culture (Sagala, 2021). These principles are rarely explicitly applied in pesantren, where informal structures often dominate and decisions are frequently based on tradition or personal authority. Yet, as pesantren strive to meet the competencies demanded by national education standards and global competitiveness, formalized management structures are increasingly necessary.

Nationalism and patriotism, as educational outcomes, involve more than symbolic gestures like flag ceremonies or singing the national anthem. They encompass internalized values such as civic discipline, respect for diversity, and active participation in community service. These values cannot be taught in isolation; they must be woven into the daily rhythms of institutional life. In this regard, pesantrens offer a distinctive advantage: their 24-hour educational environment enables holistic character formation that integrates religious teachings with civic values in an immersive setting (Rohmatulloh & Sutiah, 2021).

However, the extent to which this immersive setting translates into effective character formation depends largely on how pesantren are managed. If planning, supervision, and evaluation are conducted with clear civic and national goals in mind, then character education becomes intentional and measurable. Conversely, when management is inconsistent or overly reliant on informal norms, the outcomes may vary greatly—even within institutions with similar religious orientations.

This research, therefore, proposes a character-based management model that is both grounded in the unique traditions of pesantren and adaptable to modern demands. Such a model must consider institutional vision, leadership style, staff recruitment and training, curriculum integration, and evaluation mechanisms. It must also recognize the role of community engagement and socio-cultural context in shaping students' moral and civic development (Yusuf & Isnaini, 2023).

In conclusion, this study contributes to the evolving discourse on Islamic education and national character formation in Indonesia. By linking educational management theory to empirical data from pesantren, it aims to develop a replicable, scalable model of character-based leadership in faith-based institutions. This effort supports national education goals and affirms the relevance of pesantren in fostering unity, citizenship, and patriotism in an increasingly pluralistic and dynamic society.

Literature Review

The role of pesantren management in character formation

Pesantren have long been recognized as essential institutions in Indonesia's educational and socio-religious landscape, responsible for shaping students' character alongside delivering religious instruction. Their success in nurturing discipline, responsibility, and moral awareness is largely attributed to their unique management systems (Tsaqif et al., 2026). Traditional pesantren management relies on the authority of the *kyai*, with decisions often based on informal structures and inherited customs. However, the changing demands of society and education require a more systematic approach to management—one that blends tradition with modern educational strategies.

Recent studies emphasize that effective character education in pesantren must be embedded in formal management practices that include structured planning, staffing, implementation, and evaluation (Rozinah et al., 2025). For instance, the implementation of daily routines (such as communal prayers, religious study circles, and dormitory regulations) is carefully orchestrated by pesantren administrators to ensure consistent moral formation. These routines are more effective when supported by a clear organizational vision and measurable objectives.

Leadership also plays a critical role. As Arifin (2026) notes, transformative leadership in pesantren has enabled the integration of entrepreneurship, civic education, and religious discipline, thereby reinforcing the students' character development. Similarly, Syah and Ashari (2025) argue that pesantrens that adopt participatory and adaptive leadership styles tend to perform better at fostering student integrity, social empathy, and civic-mindedness.

Still, pesantren face challenges in aligning their managerial systems with national education standards. Weak administrative infrastructure, lack of financial autonomy, and limited professional development for staff often hinder the full implementation of character-based programs (Tsaqif et al., 2026). This signals a need for a hybrid management model—one that respects the traditional ethos of pesantren while incorporating managerial professionalism, transparency, and accountability. In sum, effective pesantren management involves more than operational efficiency; it is central to shaping a moral ecosystem. Institutions that adopt intentional leadership and structured practices demonstrate stronger outcomes in students' character, including responsibility, honesty, cooperation, and nationalism.

Integrating nationalism and civic values in pesantren education

Character education in pesantren is increasingly viewed through the lens of civic and national identity. In Indonesia's diverse and democratic context, character formation must go beyond religious piety and include values such as nationalism, tolerance, and civic engagement (Wahono & Alami, 2025). These values are critical for building a cohesive society and are often embedded in the hidden curriculum of pesantren through rituals, symbols, and collective practices.

The eco-pesantren movement, for example, demonstrates how environmental awareness, Islamic teachings, and civic responsibility can be integrated into daily life in pesantrens (Al Makrufah & Abror, 2026). The combination of green school management and character development reflects how pesantren are adapting to modern societal needs while retaining their Islamic roots.

Fahmi et al. (2026) explored how rural pesantren communities serve as agents of religious character education and civic formation, particularly in regions where state influence is limited. They found that community engagement, local cultural wisdom, and participatory governance significantly enhance students' appreciation of diversity and national unity.

However, embedding nationalism in pesantren is not without challenges. Some institutions may prioritize religious conservatism over inclusive civic values, resulting in a narrow interpretation of citizenship (Setiawan et al., 2026). To overcome this, Setiawan et al. (2026) propose a model of inclusive religious education that emphasizes moderate Islamic values—such as pluralism and social justice—in both the curriculum and management.

This shift requires management systems that consciously embed civic themes into curriculum planning, teacher training, and student activities. Cahyadi and Wibowo (2025) found that pesantrens that incorporated civic education themes into leadership training, student organizations, and community service programs produced more socially aware graduates.

Therefore, integrating nationalism and patriotism in pesantren must be approached through both curriculum design and deliberate institutional strategies. By reorienting management practices around national values, pesantren can play a pivotal role in shaping responsible citizens in the Indonesian context.

Institutional innovation and sustainability in modern pesantren

To remain relevant, pesantren must adapt to contemporary educational and societal changes. This includes reforming institutional management, financial governance, and community partnerships. One prominent trend is the transformation toward entrepreneurial pesantren models that emphasize financial independence and social enterprise, allowing these institutions to sustain character-based programs (Arifin, 2026).

Recent works also highlight the importance of sustainability and institutional accountability. For example, Wahono and Alami (2025) advocate for holistic education management across pesantren, schools, and madrasahs—highlighting the need for integrated governance structures that support long-term educational goals. Tsaqif et al. (2026) similarly underlines the value of accountability and transparency through a "family culture" approach to management, where decision-making involves collective consultation and aligns with the pesantren's core religious values.

Technology integration is another area of innovation. The application of digital tools in management, teaching, and communication has enabled pesantren to improve their organizational systems and expand their influence beyond local communities (Hasibuan, 2026). This digital transformation is particularly important in ensuring continuous education during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, pesantren are increasingly considered strategic partners in national education. Government initiatives, such as the Islamic Boarding School Law (Undang-Undang Pesantren, 2019), have institutionalized support for pesantren and encouraged innovation in areas like curriculum development, teacher certification, and financial management. Many pesantren struggle with bureaucratic requirements, resource limitations, and the tension between preserving tradition and embracing reform (Gusti et al., 2025). Successful innovation depends on strong leadership, stakeholder collaboration, and alignment with national educational goals.

In conclusion, pesantren that embrace innovation while maintaining their core values are more likely to sustain character education effectively. Management systems must evolve to support not just internal operations but also external engagement, policy adaptation, and long-term institutional resilience.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the character-based management practices of pesantren in Merangin Regency, Indonesia. The qualitative approach was selected to provide an in-depth exploration of how pesantren manage institutional functions—planning, organizing, staffing, implementing, and evaluating—to cultivate nationalism and patriotism in their students. As argued by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to understanding complex social processes and contextual dynamics, enabling researchers to capture rich, detailed data from natural settings. The aim was not merely to describe managerial structures, but to develop a model grounded in actual practices, leadership behaviors, and institutional culture.

The study draws on a phenomenological orientation within qualitative research. Phenomenology seeks to explore participants lived experiences, making it ideal for understanding how *kyai* (religious leaders), teachers, and administrators interpret and implement character-based education within the pesantren ecosystem (Moustakas, 1994). It also aligns with the study's goal of revealing the implicit and explicit management behaviors that influence character development in pesantren students.

Research sites and participants

The research was conducted across three pesantren in Merangin Regency: Salafiyah Tarbiyah Al-Mujahadah, Al-Munawwaroh, and Salafiyah Depati Agung. These institutions were purposefully selected based on their diverse organizational structures, leadership styles, and integration of character education programs. All three pesantren are recognized locally for their commitment to moral and civic education, making them ideal sites for studying the formation of nationalism and patriotism.

Purposive sampling was employed to select key participants who could provide the most relevant and diverse insights. A total of 18 informants participated in the study, comprising *kyai* (n=3), senior teachers (n=6), administrators (n=3), and senior students (n=6). This sample ensured a balanced representation of leadership, management, and student perspectives. According to Etikan et al. (2016), purposive sampling is appropriate when selecting “information-rich” cases that can illuminate the phenomenon under investigation.

Data collection techniques

Data were collected using three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. Each technique served to triangulate findings and enhanced the research's validity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants, guided by open-ended questions related to managerial strategies, character education activities, and institutional values. Interviews with *kyai* focused on leadership vision, while discussions with teachers and administrators explored planning, staffing, curriculum implementation, and evaluation processes. Interviews with students focused on their lived experiences of character formation in pesantren. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. This method followed Patton's (2015) guidelines, which emphasize the importance of capturing personal narratives and subjective meaning in qualitative research.

Observations were carried out over a two-month period within the pesantren environment. The researcher attended classroom activities, daily religious routines, extracurricular events, and dormitory life. These observations enabled a firsthand understanding of how character education was embedded in institutional life. Field notes were recorded systematically, focusing on interactions, rituals, disciplinary practices, and role-modeling behavior. As noted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), prolonged engagement and depth of observation are essential for understanding implicit cultural and behavioral patterns.

Documents such as school vision and mission statements, daily activity schedules, academic calendars, curriculum outlines, and student discipline records were analyzed to understand the formal structures supporting character education. These documents were compared across the three pesantren to identify convergent and divergent strategies. Document analysis complemented the interview and observation data by revealing institutional policies and administrative priorities.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles et al. (2019), which includes three concurrent flows: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. First, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were organized and coded thematically using NVivo software. Themes were developed both inductively—emerging from the data—and deductively, based on the study's theoretical framework. Codes were grouped into major categories such as leadership roles, curriculum management, character formation practices, civic education content, and evaluation systems.

Thematic patterns were then compared across the three pesantren to construct a comprehensive model. Attention was paid to identifying both shared practices and institution-specific innovations. Reflexivity was applied throughout the analysis process, with the researcher critically examining their interpretations to reduce bias and ensure credibility.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

To ensure the research's trustworthiness, several validation strategies were implemented. Triangulation of data sources (interviews, observations, and documents) enhanced credibility, while member checking with key participants ensured accuracy of interpretations. Peer debriefing with fellow education researchers was also employed to test the robustness of the emerging findings. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened through an audit trail that included detailed field notes, coding memos, and analytic decisions. Transferability was addressed by providing rich, contextual descriptions of the research settings and participants, enabling readers to assess relevance to other pesantren contexts.

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reports to protect identities. The study followed all ethical guidelines for research with human subjects as outlined in [Creswell and Poth \(2018\)](#).

Findings

This study revealed that all three pesantren in Merangin Regency—Salafiyah Tarbiyah Al-Mujahadah, Al-Munawwaroh, and Salafiyah Depati Agung—have consciously embedded nationalism and patriotism within their educational management systems. These values are expressed through leadership practices, daily rituals, curriculum design, and institutional culture.

A key finding is *kyai*'s central role in directing both religious and civic formation. *kyai* leadership shapes vision, discipline, and student character through a blend of moral authority and managerial decisions. At Al-Mujahadah, for instance, the *kyai* mandates national observances such as flag ceremonies and *Pancasila* recitations as part of the daily routine, reinforcing national identity. This leadership structure aligns with [Dhofier's \(2019\)](#) notion of the pesantren as a charismatic, *kyai*-centered institution.

To illustrate the organizational components uncovered in the research, the following Table 1 summarizes the major themes and sub-themes derived from qualitative analysis:

Table 1. *Themes and sub-themes of character-based management in pesantren*

Themes	Sub-themes
Leadership and institutional governance	- Central authority of the <i>kyai</i> - Informal-formal leadership structure - Decision-making grounded in moral authority
Planning and organizational structure	- Strategic program planning - Vision-mission alignment - Delegation based on experience - Religious-general curriculum integration
Character-building mechanisms	- Rituals: <i>tadarus</i> , <i>dhiker</i> , discipline - Cultural reinforcement of nationalism

	- Modeling by staff - Extracurriculars: pramuka, community service
Curriculum and learning	- Civic values in Islamic learning - Bandongan, sorogan methods - Moral-nationhood blended instruction
Staffing and HR practices	- Recruitment based on loyalty - Limited credential focus - Teachers as supervisors and exemplars
Monitoring and evaluation	- Discipline monitoring - Informal evaluations - Character assessment through behavior
Socio-cultural engagement	- Community outreach - <i>Gotong royong</i> practices - Preserving local traditions
Cross-cutting nationalism themes	- National symbols: flag, anthem - Obedience and civic discipline - Social solidarity and national pride

These themes emerged consistently across all three pesantren, though with some variation in implementation. For example, Salafiyah Depati Agung emphasizes oral tradition and ritual, whereas Al-Munawwaroh employs community outreach to instill civic responsibility. Another important finding involves the integration of civic values into religious content. Rather than offering “civic education” as a stand-alone subject, pesantrens contextualize Qur’anic teachings to include themes such as unity, justice, and social obligation. These are reinforced through everyday routines: students participate in early morning prayers for the nation, weekly cleaning as a civic responsibility, and celebrations of Indonesia’s independence.

Lastly, institutional culture plays a crucial role. Across all sites, respect for elders, national leaders, and religious authority is closely linked. This harmony between Islamic values and Indonesian identity underpins the schools’ character-building philosophy.

The findings of this study affirm the growing role of pesantren as dual agents of spiritual and civic formation. This dual role aligns with emerging research highlighting the importance of localized, culturally embedded models of character education within religious institutions (Fahmi et al., 2023). The *kyai*, as both spiritual and administrative leaders, embody this integration by linking civic rituals to religious obligations.

One notable insight from this study is that character-based management does not require abandoning tradition; rather, custom becomes the framework for integrating nationalism. *kyai* at Al-Mujahadah, for example, frames national values as religious duties, reinforcing civic behaviors with spiritual meaning. This supports Wahid’s (2020) assertion that transformational leadership in Islamic institutions—where leaders mentor and inspire followers—is more effective in shaping civic attitudes than top-down authoritarianism.

The management functions observed—planning, organizing, staffing, implementing, and evaluating—mirror modern educational leadership models (Sagala, 2021). However, pesantren adapts these management functions to the institution’s cultural logic. For instance, evaluation is often informal, relational, and based on senior teachers’ feedback. This is consistent with Jackson’s (2019) theory of the hidden curriculum, in which behavioral

modeling and institutional culture teach values as powerfully as formal instruction. To illustrate institutional variation in how these management strategies are operationalized, we present Table 2.

Table 2. *Comparative character-based management practices across pesantren*

Management Aspect	Al-Mujahadah	Al-Munawwaroh	Depati Agung
<i>Kyai</i> leadership style	Visionary, centralized	Participatory, delegated	Traditional, paternalistic
Planning focus	Nationalism as an annual theme	Islamic-national blend	Embedded in rituals
Curriculum integration	Explicit civic-religious link	Indirect infusion	Symbolic and oral stories
Staffing criteria	Loyalty + values	National insights required	Alumni preferred
Civic activities	Flag ceremony, competitions	Outreach + service	National holiday rituals
Evaluation model	Rubrics + observation	Peer-assessment	Oral/behavioral observation

This table demonstrates that while all pesantrens aim for the same character outcomes, their management approaches are culturally tailored. Al-Mujahadah uses explicit structure (rubrics, themes), while Depati Agung relies on oral tradition and symbolic leadership. This variation confirms what Syamsuddin et al. (2018) describe as contextualized civic education—local forms of character formation built on community norms.

Another significant observation is the use of immersive learning through extracurriculars such as community service, national day observances, and student leadership programs. These approaches have proven effective in fostering long-term moral internalization (Kurniawati et al., 2021). They echo Lickona’s (2018) updated model of character education, which emphasizes habituation, moral action, and reflection, all of which are visible in pesantren routines.

The gap in formal evaluation tools is a limitation worth noting. While informal feedback is valuable, the absence of measurable character indicators could hinder long-term development and scalability. Setiawan et al. (2022) argue for hybrid assessments that combine traditional feedback with modern character rubrics, allowing pesantren to meet both internal standards and national expectations.

This study contributes to the ongoing redefinition of pesantren as not just religious schools but civic institutions. The 2019 Pesantren Law (UU Pesantren) provides a legal framework for pesantrens to innovate in character education, including flexibility in curriculum, funding, and teacher certification (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). These policies open pathways for pesantren to become models of integrated moral and civic education.

In conclusion, pesantren that consciously implement character-based management—rooted in both tradition and responsiveness to national goals—are positioned to offer scalable models for holistic education. Future research should further explore the professional development of pesantren managers and evaluate long-term civic outcomes in graduates.

Discussion

The study's findings confirm that pesantren education in Merangin Regency can serve as a transformative model for integrating national character values within a traditional Islamic framework. The integration of civic values—particularly nationalism and patriotism—within the day-to-day operations of pesantren demonstrates that religious education can serve dual functions: nurturing spiritual identity and reinforcing civic consciousness. This dual commitment repositions pesantren as guardians of Islamic morality and as vital contributors to the nation's moral and social fabric (Azra, 2021; Kemdikbudristek, 2022).

A pivotal theme emerging from this research is the role of the *kyai* as both a spiritual leader and an educational manager. In the pesantren studied, the *kyai* did not merely oversee religious rituals but actively curated an environment that embedded national values into everyday routines. This includes mandatory flag ceremonies, community service programs, and the explicit inclusion of *Pancasila* values in moral instruction. Such practices align with recent studies indicating that effective school leadership is foundational to character formation, particularly when values are taught through lived institutional culture rather than as abstract lessons (Kurniawati et al., 2021).

The effectiveness of this character-based model lies in its alignment with the five classical management functions: planning, organizing, staffing, implementing, and evaluating. These functions, when infused with local Islamic values and led by moral leadership, create a sustainable character ecosystem. Sagala (2021) affirms that aligning organizational vision with structural functions is key to educational success. In the context of pesantren, this alignment is evident in how institutional vision is integrated into classroom instruction, dormitory supervision, and extracurricular civic engagement.

Each of the three pesantren investigated—Salafiyah Tarbiyah Al-Mujahadah, Al-Munawwaroh, and Salafiyah Depati Agung—revealed unique variations in management practice. Al-Mujahadah's structured evaluation system, use of rubrics, and centralized leadership offered a formal approach to character monitoring. Al-Munawwaroh demonstrated a participatory style, integrating students and staff into decision-making. Meanwhile, Depati Agung preserved a traditional paternalistic leadership model, relying more on oral transmission and ritual reinforcement. Nonetheless, all three institutions achieved consistent outcomes in fostering national identity, moral awareness, and civic-mindedness. This points to the possibility of a scalable framework that is both culturally grounded and educationally effective. Fahmi et al. (2023) suggest that pesantren's strength lies in their immersive environment, where values are internalized not through instruction alone but through consistent practice. Their success is visible in how *santri* (students) learn cooperation, respect, and national loyalty through group rituals, peer mentoring, and community outreach activities.

The infusion of nationalism into religious education is one of the study's most valuable contributions. Rather than treating civic values as external to Islamic teachings, the pesantren integrated these principles within Qur'anic interpretation and religious instruction. Students learned that service to the nation is an extension of religious duty—a message echoed in Wahid's (2020) analysis of transformational leadership in Islamic education. According to

Wahid (2020), leaders who align religious and civic goals inspire greater emotional and moral investment from students.

Another significant insight is the emphasis on routine and discipline as vehicles for value transmission. The pesantren structured daily life to reinforce punctuality, collective responsibility, and civic behavior. These findings affirm Lickona's (2018) principle that character formation is most effective when embedded in daily institutional routines. Whether through communal cleaning, participation in national holidays, or the observance of respect for authority, students were exposed to a consistent value environment.

Importantly, the study also emphasizes that the institutions require innovation and adaptability. While traditional structures remain vital, pesantren must respond to modern challenges. Technology, for instance, is increasingly essential for sustaining educational delivery and communication. Hasibuan (2026) notes that digital integration enables pesantrens to expand access to learning and to manage institutions more transparently. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of pesantren that lacked digital infrastructure, making innovation not merely optional but imperative.

However, this push for modernization must be balanced with preservation. The study finds that pesantren rooted in community traditions—such as those emphasizing *gotong royong* and local wisdom—are more successful at fostering civic engagement. Wahono and Alami (2025) argue that sustainability in Islamic education depends on reconciling innovation with cultural integrity. This balance ensures that pesantren remain relevant without eroding their foundational identity.

Despite their strengths, pesantren face managerial challenges that could hinder long-term impact. These include the absence of formal evaluation tools, insufficient professional development for staff, and limited autonomy in financial and administrative governance. Setiawan et al. (2022) warn that without structured assessment systems, character education risks being perceived as anecdotal or intangible. This study confirms that although informal assessments (based on observation or senior teacher feedback) are culturally appropriate, they must be complemented with rubrics and documentation to enhance accountability and credibility.

A hybrid evaluation model—combining relational, behavior-based feedback with formal character metrics—could bridge the gap between tradition and modern standards. Rozinah et al. (2025) advocate for such approaches in pesantren management, particularly in aligning character education with national education quality benchmarks. By doing so, pesantren would meet state requirements and articulate their impact in measurable ways.

The staffing issue also deserves attention. Many pesantren rely on loyalty, religious commitment, or alumni status in staff recruitment, often placing less emphasis on pedagogical credentials or management training. While this strengthens institutional loyalty and moral alignment, it can limit innovation and reduce educational professionalism. Arifin (2026) recommends that pesantren invest in leadership development and teacher certification to meet the growing demands of civic education and compete within Indonesia's broader education landscape.

Equally important is the legal framework that now supports pesantren as recognized educational institutions. The 2019 Pesantren Law (UU Pesantren) grants autonomy and funding, allowing pesantren to innovate and integrate formal education standards. Gusti et al.

(2025) emphasize that this policy recognition legitimizes pesantren as civic institutions, creating opportunities for curriculum reform, digital integration, and strategic partnerships with government and civil society.

Another key element in character-based management is community engagement. The study found that all three pesantren extended moral education beyond campus boundaries by involving students in community service and cultural events. These initiatives reflect what Cahyadi and Wibowo (2025) describe as "civic laboratories"—settings in which students apply learned values in real social contexts. This direct engagement reinforces internal values and fosters social responsibility, empathy, and collective identity.

Moreover, the study reaffirms that character education must be holistic, addressing behavior and identity. True character formation is not about compliance with rules but internalizing values that guide decisions and relationships. Yusuf and Isnaini (2023) stress that this deeper transformation requires alignment between institutional vision, staff behavior, student experience, and community context. The research demonstrates that pesantren achieve this alignment through a synthesis of spiritual routines, civic practices, and participatory governance.

In sum, this study provides compelling evidence that pesantren, when guided by intentional and adaptive management, can serve as centers of national character formation. They offer a culturally authentic model that merges Islamic ethics with civic responsibility—an approach urgently needed in today's fragmented and pluralistic society. However, scalability depends on overcoming structural challenges, professionalizing leadership, and formalizing character assessment.

Future research should examine the long-term civic outcomes of pesantren graduates, explore digital transformation strategies, and develop validated tools for assessing character in faith-based contexts. Policymakers and educators should also consider how the pesantren model can be adapted to other educational settings, such as madrasahs and community schools, to create a broader movement for moral education rooted in Indonesian values.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that the character-based management practices of pesantren in Merangin Regency are shaped by a unique integration of traditional leadership, institutional culture, and structured educational routines. These elements work collectively to instill values of nationalism and patriotism in students. Despite differences in managerial style across the three pesantren studied, all institutions prioritize moral habituation, daily discipline, communal engagement, and role modeling by teachers and *kyai* as key strategies for character formation.

Leadership, particularly that of the *kyai*, plays a central role in aligning institutional vision with national values, often blending religious authority with civic guidance. The curriculum and extracurricular programs are intentionally designed to foster religious commitment and civic responsibility, reflecting a dual identity as both devout Muslims and Indonesian citizens.

The study offers a contextualized model of character-based educational management, grounded in local wisdom and responsive to national education goals. It emphasizes the power of pesantren to serve as transformative institutions in cultivating ethically grounded, socially responsible, and nationally engaged citizens.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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