

**WE ARE THE SANTRI: SOCIAL IDENTITY AND IN-GROUP FAVORITISM IN
INDONESIAN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS (PESANTREN)**

Afina Na'imatul Kamalia¹, Ayesha Andara Titania², Barokfi Mumtaz³, Rina Priarni⁴

Author¹²³⁴ Universitas Darul Ulum Islamic Centre Sudirman GUPPI

Author¹ email : afinakamalia857@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the process of social identity formation among students and the inclination towards in-group favoritism within Islamic boarding schools. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation at the Nurul Qur'an Tahfidz Islamic Boarding School. The findings indicate that the values espoused by Islamic boarding schools, communal living, and religious traditions significantly contribute to the cultivation of a sense of belonging, group pride, and internal cohesion among students. This pronounced social identity encourages a propensity to assess one's own group more favorably than external groups. This study reinforces the notion that Islamic boarding schools serve not only as religious educational institutions but also as social environments that shape the character, group identity, and social interaction patterns of students

Keywords: *Social identity, in-group favoritism, Islamic boarding schools, group solidarity.*

A. Introduction

Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) represent some of the oldest Islamic educational establishments in Indonesia, playing a pivotal role in the formation of character, social identity, and moral values among the younger generation. These institutions serve not only as centers for religious education but also as social environments where students cultivate interaction, solidarity, and a robust sense of communal belonging. Research indicates that students are not merely individuals in pursuit of knowledge, rather, they are integral members of a religious community characterized by its distinct value systems and symbols (Azizah dkk. 2023). The lifestyles fostered within pesantren promote a pronounced sense of collective identity, wherein students identify themselves as part of a group that is delineated from the external society. This phenomenon frequently manifests in identity markers such as attire and language, which express pride in their collective identity (Sabiq 2022).

Consequently, this study intends to conduct a thorough analysis of the processes involved in social identity formation among students within the context of pesantren life, as well as the relationship

between this identity and inclinations toward in-group favoritism. Employing social identity theory (Tajfel dan Turner 2004), the research endeavors to elucidate the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that underpin students' pride in their group affiliation and their attitudes toward outgroups. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate how the values upheld within Islamic boarding schools, including brotherhood (ukhuwah), modesty (tawadhu'), and tolerance (tasamuh), can function as regulatory factors to mitigate the risk of social identity evolving into excessive exclusivism.

B. Literature Review

The concept of social identity was initially articulated by (Tajfel dan Turner 2004) in their formulation of Social Identity Theory. This theoretical framework elucidates that individuals construct their self-concepts through their affiliation with distinct social groups. Social identity manifests when an individual perceives themselves not only as an autonomous entity but also as a member of a social group that shares common values, norms, and symbols. In this context, group membership fosters a sense of belonging, pride, and differentiation from other groups (out-groups).

According to (Tajfel dan Turner 2004) three primary psychological processes underlie the formation of social identity: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. The process of categorization enables individuals to comprehend their position within the social structure, while identification results in the internalization of the values held by their group. Through social comparison, individuals subsequently evaluate their group as superior to other groups, thereby establishing the foundation for the emergence of in-group favoritism. In the context of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), this theory serves as a valuable framework for understanding how students perceive their membership within a religious community characterized by a unique system of Islamic values and symbols. This process of identification not only cultivates a sense of unity (ukhuwah Islamiyah) but also reinforces social distinctions between students and the broader community external to the pesantren (Assa'Idi 2021).

The identity of students in Indonesia is shaped through a formal educational process that internalizes traditional pesantren values such as ta'dzim (respect for teachers), togetherness, and simplicity (Ahmad Reza Maulana dkk. 2025). Students within traditional pesantren exhibit a high degree of solidarity; however, this can sometimes result in the establishment of stringent social boundaries concerning out-groups (Islam 2014). This phenomenon is consistent with the social identity theory

posited by (Brown 2020), which articulates that individuals tend to categorize themselves into specific groups to achieve a sense of belonging and social self-esteem. Such processes foster a propensity to evaluate one's own group more favorably relative to others, a phenomenon referred to as in-group favoritism (Fiedler dkk. 2018).

Numerous prior studies have emphasized the significance of the social dimension in the life of pesantren. For instance, (Burga dan Damopolii 2022) found that social support within Islamic boarding schools influences the development of a moderate religious identity among students. This finding underscores that Islamic boarding schools function not only as educational institutions but also as social arenas that shape students' religious orientations and perceptions of diversity. Additionally, (Sakir dan El Syam 2024) demonstrated that students from Islamic boarding schools continue to uphold their socio-religious identities through negotiations with unique social spaces and symbols within university environments, even subsequent to their departure from the boarding school setting. Furthermore, research conducted by (Masroer 2018) highlights the emergence of a tendency towards exclusivity among modern Islamic boarding school students, who perceive themselves as more "religious" than the general populace, thereby reinforcing the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups.

C. Research Method

This research is a qualitative study using a case study method. The case study method is applied to understand the social meanings, the process of forming student identities, and the tendency for in-group favoritism in the pesantren environment. This approach allows the researcher to explore the subjective experiences of the students and interpret social dynamics in the context of pesantren life (Assa'Idi 2021).

This research was conducted at the Nurul Qur'an tahfidz boarding school in Dusun Genurid RT12/RW01, Kawengen Village, Ungaran Timur District, Semarang Regency, Central Java Province, which has characteristics of both traditional and modern educational systems. The pesantren was purposively selected because its students come from diverse social backgrounds and regions, allowing for a rich analysis of social identity dynamics.

Data were collected through three main techniques: observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted to directly understand the social life of students in the pesantren, including learning activities, interactions among students, and social behaviors representing in-group favoritism. This observation was carried out informally so that the researcher

could capture the symbolic meanings that emerge in the daily lives of the students. In-depth interviews were conducted with students and teachers to explore experiences, perceptions, and meanings related to their group identity. The interview questions were open-ended to allow informants to express their views freely. Documentation was used to complement field data, including photos of activities, students' daily notes, and relevant pesantren archives.

Data analysis was applied with (Rochgiyanti dkk. 2023) three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification continuously throughout the research process. This analytical approach helps the researcher understand emerging social patterns, such as the process of forming student identities, forms of group solidarity, and manifestations of in-group favoritism. The results of the analysis were then interpreted using the Social Identity Theory framework (Turner dkk. 1979) to achieve a profound conceptual understanding.

D. Discussion

This research aims to understand the construction of students' social identity and the dynamics of in-group favoritism at the Nurul Qur'an Pesantren Kawengen using the Social Identity Theory (SIT) framework by (Tajfel dan Turner 2004). SIT explains that group identity is formed through three processes: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. These three processes are relevant in the lives of the students because the pesantren is an environment that structurally, culturally, and ritually forms social groups with certain symbolic boundaries.

Research findings indicate that social categorization occurs naturally through spatial proximity (rooms), similar activities (tahfidz, madrasah diniyah, organizations), and differences in educational status (junior high school, senior high school, university students). This aligns with previous research such as (Rohman dan Muhtamiroh 2022) which concluded that room allocations, routine activities, and informal hierarchy structures are central to the formation of social groups in pesantren. However, unlike some studies that emphasize tensions between rooms or cohorts, this research found that the boundaries of groups are not rigid and instead function as invisible boundaries that facilitate comfortable interactions.

From the social identification perspective, students show a strong sense of belonging to certain groups such as the tahfidz group, room, and cohort. This sense of belonging is manifested in the routine of murojaah, mutual reminders, and the presence of group leaders who maintain the rhythm of discipline (Firmansyah dkk. 2024). These research findings are in line with the SIT concept that individuals

perceive themselves as an integral part of the group, so the behaviors and values of the group become a guideline for personal identity. Research by (Burga dan Damopolii 2022) states that the social identification of students is often formed through friendship networks and religious activities. However, this research also shows that social identification among students does not lead to group exclusivity. Instead, there exists a dominant superordinate identity as “santri Nurul Qur'an,” which functions to reduce potential conflicts and unify various smaller groups.

In terms of social comparison, students moderately compare discipline, room orderliness, memorization achievements, and cohesion among groups. According to SIT, this process is a natural phase in social identity structure because groups require comparison to maintain a positive image. In this research, the comparison is motivational rather than competitive, serving as a drive to enhance discipline and not as a tool to assert group superiority. These findings are not entirely consistent with previous research such as (Nawas dkk. 2024), which found that competition between rooms often leads to minor conflicts. Conversely, this research shows that the culture of the Nurul Qur'an pesantren encourages constructive evaluation among groups.

One important and relatively different finding from previous research is the presence of symbolic hierarchy based on education levels. 1) University students are viewed as more disciplined and often given greater responsibilities in pesantren activities. 2) Senior high school students are considered more mature in managing duties and cleanliness. 3) Junior high school students are positioned as a group that needs to imitate the discipline of their seniors. This hierarchy does not emerge as a form of domination but rather as a structure of maturity that is culturally accepted. This research shows that students interpret this hierarchy as a mechanism.

E. Conclusion

This research shows that identity as a santri (Islamic boarding school student) has a strong influence on the formation of group solidarity and the tendency to prioritize fellow Islamic boarding school members. This identity is not only built through religious values and Islamic boarding school traditions, but also through shared life experiences, rules, and the guidance system in place within the Islamic boarding school environment.

In-group favoritism emerges as an expression of group pride, a sense of belonging, and the need to maintain internal harmony. At the same time, relationships with external groups can remain positive

as long as core Islamic boarding school values such as morality, tolerance, and social concern serve as guidelines for interactions. Thus, Islamic boarding schools function not only as institutions of religious education but also as spaces for the formation of social identity, influencing how students understand themselves, their group, and the broader social environment. These findings confirm that student identity and group dynamics within Islamic boarding schools play a crucial role in shaping attitudes, social behavior, and interpersonal relationships.

Bibliography

- Ahmad Reza Maulana, Salsabila Wulandari, Rezza Mifachu Rizqi, Tajriyah Tajriyah, Arlino Pratama, dan Mochammad Faisal Mulyawan. 2025. "Penguatan Karakter Santri sebagai Strategi Menghadapi Tantangan Globalisasi di Pesantren Darussalam Blokagung." *Khatulistiwa: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Sosial Humaniora* 5 (2): 940–50. <https://doi.org/10.55606/khatulistiwa.v5i2.6359>.
- Assa'Idi, Sa'dullah. 2021. "The Growth of Pesantren in Indonesia as the Islamic Venue and Social Class Status of Santri." *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research* 21 (93). <https://doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2021.93.21>.
- Azizah, Hari Nur, Nicky Estu Putu Muchtar, dan Fredrick Tiagita Putra. 2023. "PESANTREN AS A PILLAR OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION DEVELOPMENT IN INDONESIA." *Academicus: Journal of Teaching and Learning* 2 (1): 9–15. <https://doi.org/10.59373/academicus.v2i1.19>.
- Brown, Rupert. 2020. "The Social Identity Approach: Appraising the Tajfellian Legacy." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59 (1): 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12349>.
- Burga, Muhammad Alqadri, dan Muljono Damopolii. 2022. "Reinforcing Religious Moderation through Local Culture-Based Pesantren." *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 8 (2): 145–62. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jpi.v8i2.19879>.
- Fiedler, Susann, Dshamilja Marie Hellmann, Angela Rachael Dorrough, dan Andreas Glöckner. 2018. "Cross-National in-Group Favoritism in Prosocial Behavior: Evidence from Latin and North America." *Judgment and Decision Making* 13 (1): 42–60. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1930297500008810>.
- Firmansyah, Irja Putra Pratama, dan Munir. 2024. "Symbolic Meanings in the Social Interaction of Santri in the Pesantren Environment." *Al-Hayat: Journal of Islamic Education* 8 (3): 1086–102. <https://doi.org/10.35723/ajie.v8i3.698>.
- Islam, Gazi. 2014. "Social Identity Theory." Dalam *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, disunting oleh Thomas Teo. Springer New York. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7_289.

- Masroer, Masroer. 2018. "Religious Inclusivism In Indonesia: Study of Pesantren An-Nida and Edi Mancoro, Salatiga, Central Java." *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 19 (1): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v19i1.1485>.
- Nawas, Abu, I Gusti Ngurah Darmawan, dan Nina Maadad. 2024. "Single-Sex 'Pesantren' Schools: Unravelling Girls' and Boys' Peer Connections and Their Impacts on Wellbeing and Learning Outcomes." *International Journal of Educational Research* 125: 102339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2024.102339>.
- Rochgiyanti, Rochgiyanti, Fathurrahman Fathurrahman, Mulyani Safitri, Rhoma Dwi Aria Yuliantri, dan Akhmad Priyanka Tegar Pangabdi. 2023. "Online Learning Design to Implement Student Communication Skills." *Edumaspul: Jurnal Pendidikan* 7 (1): 1285–90. <https://doi.org/10.33487/edumaspul.v7i1.6017>.
- Rohman, Abdul, dan Siti Muhtamiroh. 2022. "Shaping the Santri's Inclusive Attitudes through Learning in Pesantren: A Case Study of Pesantren Al-Anwar Sarang Rembang Indonesia." *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 12 (2): 367. <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2022-0058>.
- Sabiq, Ahmad. 2022. "PERAN PESANTREN DALAM MEMBANGUN MORALITAS BANGSA MENUJU INDONESIA EMAS 2045." *Wawasan: Jurnal Kediklatan Balai Diklat Keagamaan Jakarta* 3 (1): 16–30. <https://doi.org/10.53800/wawasan.v3i1.118>.
- Sakir, Moh., dan Robingun Suyud El Syam. 2024. "Pendidikan Kepesantrenan: Negosiasi Ruang Kaum Santri dalam Mempertahankan Identitas Sosial Keagamaan di Universitas Sains Al-Qur'an Wonosobo." *EDUKASIA: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran* 5 (1): 337–48. <https://doi.org/10.62775/edukasia.v5i1.760>.
- Tajfel, Henri, dan John C. Turner. 2004. "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior." Dalam *Political Psychology*, 0 ed., disunting oleh John T. Jost dan Jim Sidanius. Psychology Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505984-16>.
- Turner, J. C., R. J. Brown, dan H. Tajfel. 1979. "Social Comparison and Group Interest in Ingroup Favouritism." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 9 (2): 187–204. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420090207>.