

Differentiation And Positioning Of Islamic Boarding School: Internalization Of Special Values As A Unique Selling Proposition (Usp)

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) differentiate themselves and strengthen their positioning through the internalization of distinctive values as a Unique Selling Proposition (USP) to enhance institutional competitiveness. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving school leaders, teachers, and students. The findings reveal that differentiation is achieved through the integration of core values such as spirituality, discipline, and integrity into the organizational culture, which function as USPs that shape institutional identity and foster public trust. Additionally, transformational leadership plays a significant role in promoting effective knowledge management, engagement strategies, and confidence-building among residents, thereby cultivating a competitive yet supportive environment. The study underscores the importance of strategically embedding distinctive values into institutional management as a sustainable competitive advantage, providing guidance for Islamic boarding schools to maintain their relevance and strengthen their positioning in the face of increasingly dynamic educational challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

Differentiation and positioning of Islamic boarding schools based on distinctive values has become a strategic issue amidst increasingly fierce competition among educational institutions. Theoretically, the concept of a Unique Selling Proposition (USP) emphasizes that competitive advantage must stem from unique, authentic values internalized within the

organizational system (Zumairoh et al., 2021). However, in practice, many Islamic boarding schools have not been able to systematically articulate these distinctive values within their institutional strategies. Several recent studies have shown that educational institutions with strong differentiation tend to excel in garnering public trust, while Islamic boarding schools are often generally perceived as lacking a clear positioning. This situation indicates a gap between the potential value proposition and the ability to manage it strategically (Amin et al., 2025). Thus, there is a gap between the theory of value-based differentiation and its implementation in the field that requires in-depth study.

Empirically, Islamic boarding schools possess a wealth of distinctive values that have significant potential to become competitive advantages. Values such as spirituality, independence, discipline, and integrity constitute a unique identity not shared by other educational institutions (Khofsah, 2025; Rahman, 2026; Shoha, 2026). However, in reality, these values are often not optimally managed to build the institution's image and positioning. Many Islamic boarding schools excel in internal practices, but lack widespread recognition due to weak communication and value branding strategies. Furthermore, increasing competition with modern educational institutions demands that Islamic boarding schools be more adaptive in managing their identity (Ghofar et al., 2025; Ilyasa, 2025). This suggests that the primary issue is not the availability of values, but rather the process of internalizing and articulating values as USPs that can strengthen the institution's competitiveness.

Previous research has shown that differentiation and transformational leadership play a crucial role in enhancing the competitiveness of educational institutions (Dedi Eko, Riyadi H, 2025). Several studies in the past five years have revealed that clear differentiation can increase public trust, while transformational leadership contributes to building an adaptive and innovative organizational culture (Hefniy & Alwahedi, 2025; Holidi, 2025; Manshur, 2026). However, most of this research focuses on the managerial and marketing aspects of education without integrating distinctive values as the core of differentiation strategies. Furthermore, studies specifically highlighting the internalization of distinctive values as USPs in the context of Islamic boarding schools are still very limited. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by combining the perspectives of values, leadership, and positioning within a comprehensive analytical framework.

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to integrate the distinctive values of Islamic boarding schools as USPs within the framework of differentiation and positioning of educational institutions. This approach views values not only as cultural identities but also as structured and sustainable competitive strategies (Anwar & My, 2024). Unlike previous studies, which tended to be partial, this study examines how values are internalized through transformational leadership and implemented in institutional management practices. Thus, this study offers a new perspective that places values at the core of positioning strategies, thereby

addressing the increasingly complex and competitive challenges of modern education.

This study aims to examine how the distinctive values of Islamic boarding schools can be internalized as USP in building institutional differentiation and positioning. The research questions posed include: how the process of internalizing distinctive values within the organizational culture of Islamic boarding schools occurs, the role of transformational leadership in managing these values, and its implications for institutional competitiveness. Based on preliminary studies, it is assumed that strongly internalized values will shape an authentic and sustainable organizational identity. Therefore, the main argument of this study is that internalizing distinctive values through transformational leadership can create a unique, adaptive, and competitive positioning for Islamic boarding schools in the face of educational competition.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen because the research focuses on an in-depth understanding of the internalization process of distinctive values as a Unique Selling Proposition (USP) in the real-life context of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). Case studies allow researchers to explore phenomena holistically, particularly regarding differentiation and positioning practices established through leadership and organizational culture. Furthermore, this approach is relevant for exploring meanings, experiences, and social dynamics that cannot be measured quantitatively.

The research was conducted at the achievement-based Adzikra Islamic boarding school in Situbondo, East Java. This location was chosen because of its unique characteristics in integrating Islamic values with academic and non-academic achievements. Furthermore, this Islamic boarding school is considered representative in developing institutional differentiation through distinctive values that serve as identity and attraction for the community. The location selection was also based on data accessibility and the relevance of the context to the research focus.

Data sources in this study consisted of informants and documents. The primary informant included the Islamic boarding school leadership as strategic policymakers. Supporting informants included teachers, educational staff, and students directly involved in implementing distinctive values. In addition, data was also obtained from documents such as curricula, flagship programs, achievement reports, published media, and supporting texts such as books, manuscripts, and online news relevant to the Islamic boarding school's positioning.

Data collection was conducted using several techniques. First, a desk review of literature, institutional documents, and other written sources to understand value construction and positioning strategies. Second, participant observation to directly observe the practice of internalizing values in daily activities. Third, in-depth interviews using semi-structured

guidelines to explore the experiences and perspectives of informants. Fourth, the use of supporting instruments such as field notes and interview recordings to increase data accuracy.

Data analysis was conducted in stages, starting with data condensation (data reduction) to simplify the information obtained. Next, the data was presented in the form of data displays such as matrices or thematic narratives. The final stage was data verification to draw valid and credible conclusions. The analytical methods used included content analysis to identify key themes, discourse analysis to understand the construction of meaning in communication, and interpretative analysis to interpret phenomena in depth according to the research context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Crystallization of the Curriculum Based on the Yellow Book Manuscript as a Core Identity

Based on the results of a documentation study of the curriculum documents, syllabi, and archives of the Islamic boarding school library, it was found that the crystallization of the curriculum based on yellow book manuscripts is the main pillar that forms the core identity of this institution. The Semester Learning Plan (RPS) document shows a very systematic mapping of classical books, starting from the elementary level (ula), intermediate (wustha), to advanced (ulya). The documentation includes a list of mandatory literature covering various disciplines ranging from Nahwu-Shorof (grammar), Fiqh (jurisprudence), to Tasawuf (spiritual-ethics). Researchers found that this curriculum archive is not just a reading list, but includes the sorogan and bandongan methodologies as standard operating procedures in the transfer of knowledge. This documentation is authentic evidence that the Islamic boarding school consciously positions the turots text as the highest source of authority in maintaining the purity of religious teachings. This emphasizes that the differentiation of Islamic boarding schools lies in their in-depth mastery of original texts, a distinction not available in general educational institutions. This creates a unique selling point in the eyes of a society seeking authenticity in the traditional Islamic system of transmission amidst the tide of educational modernization.

According to KH. Ahmed (the Islamic boarding school's caretaker), "We don't want students to be merely tech-savvy, but they must possess a clear chain of transmission through mastery of authoritative texts." Echoing this sentiment, Ustadz Mansur (Head of Curriculum) added that this curriculum was designed to address public doubts about the authenticity of religious teachings in the digital age. Researchers interpret this as the Islamic boarding school consciously positioning itself as "guardians of tradition" to build trust among its students' guardians amidst the tide of modernization.

To clarify the data structure found in the curriculum documents, the following is a summary of the typology of yellow book manuscripts which

are used as the main instruments in building the core identity of Islamic boarding schools

Table 1. Value-Based Documentation and Identity Roles in Pesantren Programs

Data Categories	Documents Found	Focus on Value Content	Role in Identity
Turots Literacy	Ulya Class Learning Syllabus	Depth of classical texts and scientific annads	Intellectual Differentiation
Learning Methodology	Sorogan/Bandongan Academic Guide	Teacher student emotional closeness and thoroughness	Process Excellence
Internalization of Character	Code of Ethics for Santri (Book of Adabul 'Alim)	Ethics, humility, and spiritual discipline	Moral Positioning
Competency Evaluation	Syafahi's Imtihan Assessment Sheet	Ability to read and interpret bare text	Proof of Quality (USP)

The researcher's interpretation of the documentation of table 1 indicates that the Islamic boarding school has successfully formalized tradition into a modern management system without losing its spiritual substance. A restatement of this data is that the yellow book curriculum serves as a "certificate of authenticity" for the institution. The existence of a very detailed curriculum document detailing the levels of book reading demonstrates a strong commitment to turots-based academic quality. The researcher sees this documentation as a strategic communication tool for building public trust.

In other words, this documentation clearly states that Islamic boarding schools possess a competitive advantage in the form of a curriculum that has been tested for centuries yet is managed administratively within a contemporary educational structure. This makes it easier for readers to understand that the success of Islamic boarding schools in positioning themselves is inseparable from their ability to document abstract values into a measurable and planned curriculum. The internalization of these distinctive values ultimately transforms into an intellectual and authentic Unique Selling Proposition (USP), distinguishing this Islamic boarding school from other competing Islamic educational institutions that may focus more on general curricula or technology.

The data above shows that the yellow book curriculum is not merely supplementary material, but rather a primary instrument in building the bargaining position of Islamic boarding schools. A "Tradition as Modern Strength" model is emerging, where Islamic boarding schools utilize the authenticity of ancient texts to address future challenges, creating a Unique Selling Proposition (USP) of an intellectual-spiritual nature.

Internalization of Independence Values (Entrepreneurship) Based on Islamic Boarding School Philanthropy

The internalization of the value of independence at this Islamic boarding school is not limited to classroom discourse but is systematically

documented in the institution's strategic development plan. A review of the annual report and the Islamic boarding school's charter reveals that the pillars of entrepreneurship have been integrated into the curriculum through the "Santri Mandiri Filantropis" program. Documentation in the form of a training syllabus demonstrates the inclusion of zakat, infaq, and sedekah (ZIS) management materials combined with practices in managing the school's productive business units. This demonstrates that the Islamic boarding school strives to position itself not simply as a consumer institution dependent on government assistance, but rather as one with financial sovereignty. Photographs of daily operational activities demonstrate the students' active involvement in cash flow management and product distribution to the surrounding community. Furthermore, archives of memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with local economic networks confirm that the internalization of this value of independence is carried out professionally to build the Islamic boarding school's Unique Selling Proposition (USP) as an entrepreneurial incubation center imbued with Islamic values of generosity, producing graduates capable of providing broad economic benefits to the community.

Documentation data regarding the structure and implementation of the philanthropy-based independence program can be seen in the table below. This data summarizes the crucial points the researchers discovered during their observation of Islamic boarding school administrative documents

Table 2. Distinctive Values and Unique Selling Propositions (USP) of Pesantren Program Components

Program Components	Description of Distinctive Value Proof (USP) Documentation	Unique Value (USP)
Curriculum	Syllabus of the Santri-Preneur Module & the Book of Fathul Mu'in (Muamalah Chapter)	Integration of classic texts with modern business practices
Business Unit	Cooperative Establishment Certificate & Minimarket Profit and Loss Report	Measurable and legal financial independence
Philanthropy Mechanism	Decree of the Laziswaf Pesantren Management & Scholarship Distribution Cash Book	Use of business profits to subsidize poor students
Graduate Output	Alumni Business Portfolio Database and Competency Certificates	Graduates who have a giving mentality (hands up)

The table 2 above illustrates how formal Islamic boarding school documents reflect a strong integration between business aspects and spiritual values. Administratively, each business unit is not solely profit-oriented but also explicitly includes "social funds" in the distribution of remaining business profits. This documentation demonstrates a well-organized structure for managing philanthropic capital into sustainable, productive capital.

The researcher's interpretation of the documentation data indicates that the Islamic boarding school has successfully transformed its identity from a mere religious educational institution to an institution for community economic empowerment. The researcher observes that the value of independence internalized through curriculum and administrative documentation aims to create collective independence. A restatement of this finding is that the Islamic boarding school uses the principle of philanthropy as the primary fuel for entrepreneurship; students are taught to manage businesses with the ultimate goal of giving alms and helping others. This data confirms that the Islamic boarding school's bargaining position in the public eye is very strong because it has a concrete educational model for addressing poverty issues. Administratively, every instruction from the caretaker contained in the Islamic boarding school's organizational decree emphasizes that "doing business is part of economic jihad." This reinforces the interpretation that the internalization of this value is carried out structurally, formally, and sustainably, so that the value of independence is truly embedded as an organizational culture that distinguishes this institution from traditional Islamic boarding schools in general.

Based on all the documentation data and the table visualization above, a consistent pattern emerges that can be identified as the "Sustainable Productive Philanthropy Cycle." This pattern indicates that the internalization of the value of independence does not proceed linearly, but rather forms a mutually reinforcing circle between aspects of religious idealism and economic reality. The first pattern is the input of values through classical literature that underpins business ethics. The second pattern is internalization through an organizational structure that provides space for students to directly practice managing assets. The third pattern is the distribution of benefits, where business results are returned to social interests through philanthropic instruments. This phenomenon demonstrates a unique pattern in which the independence of Islamic boarding schools is not individualistic-capitalist, but rather collectivistic-altruistic. This pattern becomes a competitive advantage for Islamic boarding schools because it successfully synergizes ritual piety with financial piety. Thus, this data pattern proves that the positioning of Islamic boarding schools as centers of community independence is built through the integration of professional management and noble philanthropic intentions, which ultimately becomes a primary attraction for the wider community in choosing socio-economically relevant Islamic educational institutions.

Branding Discipline Through Spiritual "Riyadhah" Parenting

The branding of discipline at this Islamic boarding school is not built through coercive formalistic instruments, but rather through systematic documentation of the spiritual riyadhah (religious practice). Operationally, riyadhah is defined as consistent spiritual training to develop strong

character through acts of worship. The documentation found, such as the Student Pocket Book, the Daily Discipline Agenda, and the Spiritual Code of Conduct, demonstrates that the Islamic boarding school positions itself as an institution that prioritizes inner awareness over mere outward obedience. These documents are not merely administrative records, but rather a blueprint for the Islamic boarding school's positioning strategy to create an exclusive image as a center for the formation of noble character. Through photo archives of collective tahajud activities and daily mutaba'ah (self-evaluation) journals, it is clear that discipline is internalized as a spiritual need of the students. This becomes a unique value or Unique Selling Proposition (USP) that distinguishes this institution from other educational institutions that tend to use physical sanctions or material fines to enforce rules.

Ustadzah Fatma (the dormitory supervisor) explained, "We build discipline with a heartfelt approach; if a student breaks the rules, the punishment is reading the Quran or dhikr, not violence." A student's guardian, Ibu Siti, confirmed this by stating that her child's character changes were very noticeable in terms of calmness and politeness after boarding. Researchers interpret this spiritual parenting style as a positioning strategy to persuasively attract a segment of parents who desire moral improvement.

The researcher's interpretation of the documentation data reveals that the Islamic boarding school has successfully transformed itself from a mechanistic discipline to an organic-spiritual one. Documents such as the Student Agreement Charter demonstrate an inner contract between the students and the institution, where discipline is seen as part of the journey toward God (wushul). Restating the data, it can be understood that branding discipline through spiritual riyadhah is an authentic marketing communication strategy because it is based on well-documented daily practices. The Islamic boarding school does not simply "sell" the promise of behavioral change, but demonstrates evidence of the process through records of the students' holistic development. The researcher observes that this restructuring of discipline into a form of spiritual practice gives the students a greater sense of moral responsibility. In other words, these documents serve as authentic evidence that this Islamic boarding school positions discipline not as a burden, but as a lifestyle for a religious and orderly student.

The pattern that emerges from the entire documentation data is "Discipline Based on Transcendental Awareness." This pattern shows a consistent flow starting from the establishment of spiritual standards in a pocket book, routine implementation recorded in a daily journal, and finally the final evaluation in the form of a moral award certificate. A trend is formed where the stronger the practice of riyadhah carried out, the lower the level of disciplinary violations recorded in the student violation book. This illustrates the pattern of a negative relationship between the intensity of spiritual cultivation and the frequency of indisciplinary actions. Strategically, this pattern forms a unique identity for Islamic boarding

schools in the public eye; Islamic boarding schools are known as places where obedience is born voluntarily through an inner approach. This data pattern confirms that the internalization of distinctive values through riyadhah has succeeded in becoming a strong USP, because it produces tangible results in the form of calm, orderly, and religious student behavior, all of which are validly documented and accountable to the wider community.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the crystallization of a curriculum based on the yellow book and the value of independence is not merely local content, but rather a substantial differentiation strategy. When compared to Michael Porter's strategic management literature, this Islamic boarding school implements a differentiation strategy by creating something perceived as unique by the entire education industry (Andarini, 2025). This aligns with previous research stating that Islamic educational institutions that are able to maintain the authenticity of their traditions amidst modernization tend to have stronger resilience. This alignment proves that deeply internalized distinctive values (tuots) function as a barrier to entry for other competitors, because the authentic sanad of knowledge and atmosphere of spirituality cannot be easily imitated (inimitable) (Arianti et al., 2026).

The impact of these findings leads to the strengthening of Islamic boarding schools' positioning as centers of moral and intellectual excellence. By integrating entrepreneurial values into the curriculum structure, these Islamic boarding schools not only produce theologically proficient graduates but also economically independent ones. Theoretically, this supports the Resource-Based View (RBV) concept, which emphasizes that competitive advantage stems from valuable, rare, and difficult-to-replace internal resources (Robbaniyah et al., 2021). These findings confirm that the success of Islamic boarding schools' positioning depends heavily on the extent to which "intangible" values, such as blessings and spiritual discipline, are converted into measurable and competitive educational performance indicators in the public eye (Habib Anwar Al Anshori, 2022).

The functional implication of this research is the creation of a stable and independent educational ecosystem. Functionally, the internalization of these distinctive values provides satisfaction for stakeholders (parents) seeking educational alternatives outside the secular system (Najiburrahman et al., 2025). However, dysfunctionally, there is a risk of exclusivism if excessive differentiation is not balanced with openness to global technological innovation (Nurbawani, 2021). It is crucial for Islamic boarding schools to ensure that their unique position as guardians of tradition does not become lagging behind the dynamics of the times, so that their USP remains relevant to the current job market and social needs.

The causal relationship (correlation) in these findings is rooted in an underlying structure that connects prophetic traditions with the pragmatic

needs of society. The structure underlying the success of this positioning is trust built through consistency between the claimed identity and the reality of student behavior in the field (Zawawi, 2024). A positive correlation was found between the depth of internalization of spiritual values and the loyalty of student guardians; the more deeply these distinctive values permeate the Islamic boarding school's organizational culture, the higher the effectiveness of word-of-mouth marketing. This indicates that the value structure is not merely an accessory, but rather a key driver for the institution's sustainability (Apriani & Widdah, 2023).

This discussion concludes that internalizing distinctive values as a USP is an effort to "sell" identity without losing integrity (Veronika et al., 2024). The main difference between these findings and previous research lies in the use of spiritual riyadhah as a branding instrument that is more effective than conventional digital campaigns. The broad implication is that Islamic boarding schools must continue to conduct periodic value audits to maintain their core identity (Zardary, 2026). Through the right positioning strategy, Islamic boarding schools not only survive as traditional institutions but also transform into modern educational institutions with a strong, distinctive character, making them the primary choice amidst the saturation of uniform formal education models (Wathoni, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The main lesson learned from this research is that the competitive strength of an Islamic boarding school lies not in its ability to blindly imitate Western or modern educational models, but rather in its courage to crystallize traditional spiritual identity into economic and social values. A key lesson learned is that the internalization of distinctive values (such as the tuhots curriculum and riyadhah discipline) is an intangible asset that, if managed professionally, will transform into a powerful Unique Selling Proposition (USP). This teaches that authenticity is key to the sustainability of Islamic educational institutions in an increasingly saturated education market. This paper makes a significant contribution to the literature on Islamic educational management, particularly in updating the perspective on positioning strategy. While positioning has often been viewed solely from an external marketing perspective (visual branding), this study offers a new variable in the form of "Internalization of Transcendental Values" as an organic marketing instrument. Methodologically, this paper successfully bridges Porterian strategic management theory with the prophetic values of Islamic boarding schools, resulting in a new framework in which tradition is no longer viewed as an obstacle but rather as the main engine of differentiation of educational products that are difficult to imitate (inimitable). This research is recognized as having limitations in scope because it focuses only on one specific Islamic boarding school (pesantren) with specific geographic characteristics and a specific organizational background. Furthermore, the perspective taken is still limited to the managerial side and does not fully explore variations in perception based on gender (male vs. female students) and the age ranges in which these

values are internalized.

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