



Integrating Islamic Boarding School Ecosystems and Islamic Religious Education in Shaping the Religious Character of Generation Z: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

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The rapid development of Generation Z in the digital era poses significant challenges to the internalisation of religious values, thereby necessitating a holistic and adaptive model of Islamic education. This study aims to examine the role and contribution of the religious ecosystem of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in shaping the religious character of Generation Z. Employing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this study analyses 40 peer-reviewed articles published between 2017 and 2025 and retrieved from Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and DOAJ. Data were analysed through a structured process of article selection, thematic categorisation, and comparative synthesis. The findings reveal that the religious ecosystem of Islamic boarding schools, when integrated with PAI, plays a strategic role in internalising values of faith, piety, and moral conduct through role modelling, religious habituation, and the cultivation of a sustainable religious culture. These findings highlight the capacity of pesantren to foster holistic religious character formation that addresses both spiritual and psychological dimensions of Generation Z. The study implies that Islamic boarding schools remain a relevant and effective model of religious character education capable of responding to the moral and psychological challenges faced by contemporary youth in the digital era.

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INTRODUCTION

The formation of religious character among Generation Z has become a critical issue in contemporary society, particularly in the context of rapid digitalisation and global cultural transformation. Generation Z is growing up in an environment characterised by unrestricted access to information, shifting moral references, and increasing exposure to secular values, which often

challenge traditional religious norms. As a result, the internalisation of religious values such as faith, piety, and moral responsibility faces significant obstacles. Various studies indicate that conventional religious education models are increasingly inadequate in responding to these complex social dynamics (Putri Zulaikha & Bashori, 2025). In this context, Islamic education is required to move beyond cognitive transmission toward holistic character formation that integrates spiritual, moral, and social dimensions. Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), with their comprehensive religious ecosystem, offer a potential solution by embedding religious values into daily life practices. Therefore, examining the role of *pesantren*-based religious ecosystems is crucial for understanding how Islamic education can remain socially relevant and effective in shaping the religious character of Generation Z in contemporary society.

Despite the central role of religion in Indonesian society, there is growing concern regarding the weakening of religious character among younger generations, particularly Generation Z. Social problems such as moral relativism, declining religious commitment, identity confusion, and the dominance of digital lifestyles increasingly affect adolescents' religious awareness and behaviour (Liana, 2024). Formal education institutions often prioritise academic achievement while relegating character and spiritual education to a secondary position. Islamic Religious Education (PAI), although compulsory, is frequently implemented as a subject-oriented discipline rather than a transformative educational process (Kirana & Haq, 2022). Consequently, religious values are often learned theoretically without being deeply internalised. This situation creates a gap between religious knowledge and daily behaviour, leading to superficial religiosity among students. The absence of a supportive educational environment further exacerbates this problem, as value internalisation requires continuous reinforcement through social interaction, habituation, and role modelling. These challenges highlight the urgent need for an educational model capable of addressing the moral and psychological complexities faced by Generation Z in a rapidly changing social environment.

Empirical observations indicate that Generation Z demonstrates ambivalent attitudes toward religion, oscillating between strong religious expression and pragmatic secular behaviour. On the one hand, digital platforms facilitate access to religious content; on the other, they expose young people to conflicting ideologies and moral narratives (Putri Zulaikha & Bashori, 2025). In many formal schools, religious education remains detached from students' lived experiences, making it less effective in shaping character. In contrast, *pesantren* present a distinct educational environment where religious values are integrated into everyday life through structured worship, communal living, and close interaction with religious authorities. Studies show that *pesantren* students tend

to exhibit stronger religious discipline, social responsibility, and moral awareness compared to their peers in non-boarding institutions (Bahri, 2018; Widodo, 2024). However, not all pesantren have fully adapted to the psychological characteristics and digital habits of Generation Z. This field reality suggests the importance of examining pesantren as a religious ecosystem rather than merely an educational institution, particularly in relation to Islamic Religious Education and contemporary youth development.

Previous studies have extensively examined the role of pesantren in character formation, highlighting their effectiveness in fostering religious discipline, moral values, and social responsibility (Afifah, 2025; Amri, 2025; Ratnasari et al., 2025). Research by Ersat et al. (2024) and Farisi (2025) emphasises the importance of religious culture, kiai leadership, and habituation practices in shaping students' religiosity. Similarly, Safei and Himayaturrohman (2023) demonstrate that pesantren-based environments provide a supportive context for sustainable moral development. These studies confirm that pesantren function as holistic educational institutions that integrate cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions. However, much of the existing literature focuses on traditional pesantren models and does not explicitly address the unique psychological and social characteristics of Generation Z. As a result, the relevance of pesantren-based education in responding to contemporary youth challenges remains underexplored, particularly from a systematic and integrative analytical perspective.

Research on Islamic Religious Education (PAI) also demonstrates its positive influence on moral development and religious awareness when supported by conducive learning environments (Miftakhuddin, 2020). Nonetheless, most PAI studies are conducted within formal school settings and rarely examine its integration within the pesantren ecosystem. Meanwhile, studies in Islamic psychology explore religiosity, spiritual well-being, and adolescent character development, often emphasising individual psychological factors (Fitrianti et al., 2025; Fatar, 2024). Although these studies contribute valuable insights, they tend to overlook the role of religious educational environments in shaping character holistically. Consequently, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the integration of pesantren religious ecosystems and Islamic Religious Education from the perspective of contemporary Islamic psychology. Addressing this gap is essential, as character formation is not solely an individual process but is significantly influenced by environmental, cultural, and spiritual contexts.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach that synthesises the concepts of religious ecosystem, Islamic Religious Education, and contemporary Islamic psychology in analysing the formation of Generation Z's

religious character. Unlike previous studies that examine pesantren or PAI in isolation, this research positions them as interconnected components within a holistic educational system. By employing a Systematic Literature Review, this study provides a comprehensive synthesis of recent scholarly findings, identifying patterns, strengths, and limitations across diverse contexts. Furthermore, the study situates pesantren within the broader discourse of youth psychology and digital-era challenges, thereby extending the relevance of traditional Islamic educational institutions to contemporary societal needs. This integrative perspective represents a state-of-the-art contribution to Islamic education research, particularly in understanding how religious ecosystems can respond adaptively to the moral and psychological demands of Generation Z.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study addresses the central research problem: how do the religious ecosystem of Islamic boarding schools and Islamic Religious Education contribute to shaping the religious character of Generation Z from the perspective of contemporary Islamic psychology? This study argues that pesantren, when supported by an integrated implementation of PAI, function as a holistic and adaptive educational environment capable of internalising religious values effectively. Through role modelling, habituation, and sustained religious culture, pesantren provide a contextual framework that aligns with the psychological and spiritual needs of Generation Z. By synthesising existing literature, this research seeks to offer both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of Islamic education models that are responsive to the challenges of the digital era while maintaining strong religious foundations.

RESEACH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. The selection of a qualitative design is based on the objective of the study, which seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of concepts, patterns, and meanings derived from previous scholarly works concerning the relationship between the religious ecosystem of Islamic boarding schools and Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in shaping the religious character of Generation Z. The SLR approach is considered appropriate as it enables a structured, transparent, and replicable process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesising existing research findings, thereby providing a comprehensive and evidence-based conceptual framework.

In the context of a Systematic Literature Review, this study does not involve a specific geographical research location. Instead, the research setting is situated within digital academic databases that serve as repositories of peer-reviewed scholarly publications. The data sources include Google Scholar,

Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and DOAJ. These databases were selected due to their credibility, academic reputation, and extensive coverage of interdisciplinary studies, particularly in the fields of Islamic education, pesantren studies, religious character education, and Generation Z research.

Data collection was conducted through a structured and systematic literature search using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Relevant articles were identified using a combination of keywords such as Islamic boarding school, Islamic religious education, religious character, Generation Z, and Islamic psychology. The literature search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2017 and 2025 and available in full-text format. Only studies that demonstrated direct relevance to the research focus were included to ensure the validity and reliability of the data corpus.

Data analysis was carried out through several sequential stages. First, selected articles were screened and reviewed to identify their research objectives, methodological approaches, research contexts, and key findings related to the formation of religious character. Subsequently, the extracted data were categorised into major thematic clusters. A comparative and integrative synthesis was then employed to identify recurring patterns, dominant themes, and research gaps within the existing literature. The results of this synthesis formed the basis for drawing comprehensive conclusions aligned with the objectives of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religious Ecosystem of Pesantren in the Perspective of Islamic Education

The religious ecosystem of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) constitutes a distinctive educational environment that systematically integrates Islamic values into all aspects of students' daily lives, including formal instruction, non-formal learning, habitual worship, and social interaction. This integrative model aligns closely with the Islamic education paradigm, which places moral cultivation and spiritual development at the core of educational objectives (Khotimah et al., 2024; Supriyanto & Amrin, 2022). Pesantren operate not merely as institutions of learning but as holistic ecosystems in which religious knowledge is continuously translated into lived practice.

Core elements of the pesantren ecosystem such as the kiai, santri, diniyah curriculum, worship culture, moral exemplification, and communal life function in an interconnected manner. The kiai serves as a central figure who embodies religious authority, spiritual guidance, and moral leadership, while the diniyah curriculum provides foundational Islamic knowledge reinforced through daily religious practices. Social interactions among santri further strengthen value internalisation through social learning processes, ensuring that religiosity is not

only cognitively understood but also collectively embodied. This comprehensive approach reflects the integral nature of Islamic education, which simultaneously addresses cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions (Nahruji & Syafrudin, 2025).

In the context of Generation Z, who are highly adaptive to digital technologies yet vulnerable to value disruption, the pesantren ecosystem remains relevant as a character-building environment. Research indicates that pesantren function as a balancing space between modern psychological development and Islamic values through strong religious culture and meaningful social relationships (Hermawansyah, 2025). Consequently, pesantren are not only custodians of Islamic educational traditions but also adaptive models of religious character education in the digital era.

Islamic Religious Education and the Formation of Generation Z's Religious Character

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a crucial role in shaping the religious character of Generation Z, particularly in response to rapid technological development and moral challenges. PAI contributes to the internalisation of values such as discipline, honesty, respect, and social responsibility, which are essential for ethical development in contemporary society (Sarinah et al., 2025). The integration of technology into PAI enhances student engagement and contextual understanding, making religious teachings more relevant for digital-native learners (Arif et al., 2023).

Empirical studies demonstrate that participatory and contextual PAI learning positively influences students' religiosity and moral development. However, challenges persist, including limited adaptive pedagogical methods, insufficient digital competence among educators, and weak integration between religious values and students' digital realities. At the same time, technological advancements provide opportunities for innovation through digital media and contemporary Islamic psychological approaches to strengthen religious character formation.

PAI facilitates the internalisation of faith (iman) and piety (taqwa) through contextual learning that connects religious teachings with social realities and digital culture (Setiawan, 2025). The cultivation of noble character (akhlakul karimah) is further reinforced through teacher exemplification and habituation practices, such as congregational prayer and collective religious activities, which embed religious values in students' daily lives (Ramadhani & Musyarapah, 2024). Additionally, PAI promotes spiritual awareness and self-reflection through reflective practices and Islamic psychological approaches, fostering inner consciousness, self-regulation, and spiritually oriented life goals (Astuti et

al., 2024).

Synthesis of Literature on the Role of Pesantren Ecosystem and PAI from the Perspective of Contemporary Islamic Psychology

The pesantren ecosystem, enriched by Islamic Religious Education, nurtures individuals who possess both religious resilience and psychological balance, enabling them to contribute positively to society. From the perspective of contemporary Islamic psychology, pesantren-based education integrates spiritual, emotional, and cognitive dimensions essential for the holistic development of Generation Z.

Table 1. Literature on the Role of the Pesantren Ecosystem and Islamic Religious Education from the Perspective of Contemporary Islamic Psychology		
Author(s)	Title	Key Findings
Akbar Nur Aziz et al. (2025)	<i>Panca Jiwa Pondok and Contemporary Psychology: A Comparative Review for Contextual Islamic Psychology</i>	The study demonstrates that pesantren values align with contemporary psychological theories, enhancing the relevance of Islamic psychology through the integration of Islamic education, local wisdom, and modern psychological concepts for Generation Z's spiritual and mental development.
Ilmi (2023)	<i>The Role of Boarding Schools in Forming the Character of Students (Case Study of IMBS Miftahul Ulum Pekajangan)</i>	Focuses on the role of pesantren in character formation, emphasising sincerity and independence among students, though it does not explicitly address the integration of PAI and contemporary Islamic psychology.
Mardiah Astuti et al. (2023)	<i>Optimising the Role of Islamic Boarding Schools in Islamic Religious Education</i>	Highlights pesantren as centres of Islamic learning that integrate religious values, traditions, and culture, contributing significantly to students' moral and character development.
Mibtadin (2023)	<i>Pesantren, Islamic Studies, and Ecological Discourse: An Eco-Pesantren Study in Central Java</i>	Demonstrates that pesantren-based education can integrate environmental awareness into curricula, fostering ecological consciousness and social responsibility among Generation Z.

The synthesis of these studies confirms that the pesantren ecosystem plays a significant role in shaping the religious character of Generation Z through Islamic Religious Education. By integrating religious learning, value habituation, moral exemplification, and meaningful social interaction, pesantren foster religiosity, independence, social responsibility, and psychological resilience. The lived religious values embedded in daily pesantren life not only strengthen spiritual dimensions but also contribute to psychological balance and moral maturity among Generation Z amid contemporary challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that a religious ecosystem of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), when integrated with Islamic Religious Education (PAI), plays a strategic role in shaping the religious character of Generation Z in a holistic manner. The synthesis of the literature reveals that religious culture, moral exemplification by kiai and educators, habitual worship practices, and educative social interactions function synergistically to internalise values of faith (iman), piety (taqwa), and noble character (akhlaq). Beyond the transmission of religious knowledge, PAI within the pesantren context serves as a medium for cultivating spiritual awareness, psychological balance, and social responsibility among Generation Z. These findings highlight the key insight that religious character formation is most effective when Islamic education operates within an integrative and lived religious environment that is adaptive to the moral and psychological challenges of the digital era.

From a scholarly perspective, this study contributes to the literature by integrating the concepts of the pesantren ecosystem, Islamic Religious Education, and contemporary Islamic psychology into a unified analytical framework. This integrative perspective extends existing research that often examines these dimensions in isolation, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of religious character education for Generation Z. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data through a Systematic Literature Review, which does not allow for direct empirical verification of effectiveness. Future research is therefore encouraged to employ quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approaches to empirically examine the impact of pesantren-based religious ecosystems and PAI on Generation Z's religious character. Further studies may also explore the role of Islamic digital media, family involvement, and comparative analyses between pesantren and non-pesantren educational institutions to identify the most adaptive and sustainable models of religious character education in the digital age.

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