

Kiai as Socialization Agents: Shaping Santri Identity to Foster Tolerance in the Context of Diversity

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Abstract

Keywords:

Kiai,
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Pluralism.

The increasing challenges of religious intolerance in plural societies highlight the strategic role of Islamic educational institutions in shaping inclusive religious identities. Pesantren, as one of the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, place the kiai at the center of religious, moral, and social guidance for santri. As authoritative figures, kiai function not only as religious teachers but also as socialization agents who influence how santri perceive and respond to diversity. This study aims to analyze the role of kiai as socialization agents in shaping santri identity to foster tolerance within the context of social and religious diversity. This research employs a library research method by critically reviewing scholarly articles, books, and peer-reviewed journals indexed in Scopus and other reputable databases published between 2020 and 2025. Data were collected through systematic searches using relevant keywords related to religious leadership, identity formation, tolerance education, pesantren, and Islamic moderation. The selected literature was analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify key themes, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings related to the role of kiai in promoting tolerance. The findings indicate that kiai play a pivotal role in constructing santri identity through processes of value internalization, role modeling, and institutionalization of moderate Islamic teachings. Through continuous interaction, exemplary behavior, and authoritative interpretation of religious texts, kiai successfully cultivate inclusive attitudes among santri toward interfaith and social diversity. The study also reveals that pesantren function as effective socialization spaces where tolerance is embedded as a lived practice rather than merely a normative concept. These findings imply that strengthening the role of kiai in promoting religious moderation is essential for sustaining social harmony in pluralistic societies.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:

Kiai,
Agen Sosialisasi,
Identitas Santri,
Toleransi Beragama,
Pesantren,
Pendidikan Islam,
Moderasi Beragama,
Pluralisme.

Meningkatnya tantangan intoleransi beragama dalam masyarakat plural menegaskan peran strategis lembaga pendidikan Islam dalam membentuk identitas keagamaan yang inklusif. Pesantren, sebagai salah satu lembaga pendidikan Islam tertua di Indonesia, menempatkan kiai sebagai pusat pembinaan keagamaan, moral, dan sosial bagi santri. Sebagai figur otoritatif, kiai tidak hanya berperan sebagai pendidik agama, tetapi juga sebagai agen sosialisasi yang memengaruhi cara santri memaknai dan merespons keberagaman. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran kiai sebagai agen sosialisasi dalam membentuk identitas santri guna menumbuhkan sikap toleransi dalam konteks keberagaman sosial dan keagamaan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode library research dengan menelaah secara kritis artikel ilmiah, buku, dan jurnal bereputasi yang terindeks Scopus serta basis data akademik lainnya yang diterbitkan pada periode 2020–2025. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui penelusuran sistematis dengan menggunakan kata kunci yang relevan, seperti kepemimpinan religius, pembentukan identitas, pendidikan toleransi, pesantren, dan moderasi Islam. Literatur yang terpilih dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis isi kualitatif untuk mengidentifikasi tema-tema utama, kerangka teoretis, serta temuan empiris terkait peran kiai dalam menumbuhkan toleransi. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa kiai memiliki peran sentral dalam membangun identitas santri melalui proses internalisasi nilai, keteladanan, serta institusionalisasi ajaran Islam moderat. Melalui interaksi yang berkelanjutan, perilaku teladan, dan interpretasi otoritatif terhadap teks-teks keagamaan, kiai berhasil menumbuhkan sikap inklusif santri terhadap

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keberagaman sosial dan antarumat beragama. Penelitian ini juga mengungkap bahwa pesantren berfungsi sebagai ruang sosialisasi yang efektif, di mana toleransi dipraktikkan sebagai pengalaman hidup sehari-hari, bukan sekadar konsep normatif. Temuan ini mengimplikasikan bahwa penguatan peran kiai dalam mempromosikan moderasi beragama merupakan faktor kunci dalam menjaga harmoni sosial di tengah masyarakat plural..

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, a nation celebrated for its profound cultural and religious diversity, offers a compelling context to explore the intricate dynamics of socialization agents, particularly within Islamic educational institutions like pesantren (Nabilla, 2025). These traditional Islamic boarding schools have historically played a pivotal role in shaping the religious and social identities of Indonesian Muslims, blending spiritual teachings with communal living to foster unique worldviews and attitudes among their students (Thoyib et al., 2024). Central to this process are the Kiai, charismatic religious leaders who serve not merely as educators but as profound socialization agents, actively molding the *santri's* (students') understanding and practice of Islam within a pluralistic society (Al-Ghifari et al., 2024). This dynamic is particularly critical given Indonesia's societal tapestry, where religious pluralism and potential for conflict necessitate robust mechanisms for promoting tolerance and interfaith understanding (Fatih, 2024). The evolving socio-religious landscape, marked by a rise in religious conservatism in some segments, underscores the urgent need to understand how *pesantren* and *kiai* contribute to cultivating an inclusive religious outlook among *santri* (Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021).

Consequently, the influence of kiai extends beyond theological instruction, impacting santri perspectives on diversity, social harmony, and civic engagement within a multi-religious nation (Aksa & Hakim, 2023; Thoyib et al., 2024). This paper thus investigates the critical role of kiai in shaping santri identity to foster tolerance, recognizing the enduring relevance of pesantren as institutions vital for developing moderate religious perspectives amidst Indonesia's rich multiculturalism (Khaeriyah et al., 2025). This exploration becomes particularly salient when considering the challenges to social harmony and diversity, making the role of kiai in promoting religious moderation a crucial area of inquiry (Al-Ghifari et al., 2024). While existing scholarship has explored the internalization of multicultural values in Islamic boarding schools (Nabilla, 2025) and the role of Islamic religious education in fostering social solidarity among santri (Pulungan, 2025), there remains a notable gap in understanding the specific mechanisms by which kiai actively shape santri identities to cultivate tolerance in diverse contexts. Specifically, while the general influence of pesantren on religious moderation has been acknowledged (Bosra & Umiarso, 2021), the nuanced, direct pedagogical and exemplary roles of kiai as primary socialization agents in instilling tolerant attitudes within santri populations require more focused empirical investigation.

Previous studies often highlight the significant, yet often generalized, impact of kiai on religious understanding without thoroughly dissecting their specific strategies for fostering moderation and tolerance among santri in diverse societal settings (Bosra & Umiarso, 2021; Ismail et al., 2020). For instance, while research has examined the integration of inclusive educational practices within pesantren and the importance of interfaith dialogue (Thoyib et al., 2024), a detailed examination of the kiai's direct methods for instilling these values at the individual santri level remains underexplored.

This paper aims to bridge this gap by meticulously analyzing how kiai, through their charismatic authority and pedagogical approaches, directly influence santri identities toward embracing religious moderation and inter-religious tolerance in Indonesia's highly diverse society (Farid et al., 2022; Thoyib et al., 2024). Specifically, it investigates the nuanced pedagogical strategies employed by kiai to transmit *wasatiyyah al-Islam* to *santri*, thereby equipping them to navigate complex social realities with an inclusive mindset (Almu'tasim, 2019; Helmy et al., 2021).

This includes examining how kiai leverage traditional Islamic teachings and local wisdom to inculcate a deep appreciation for diversity, counteracting extremist narratives and promoting respectful coexistence among adherents of different faiths (Afriansyah & Sukmayadi, 2022; Farid et al., 2022). By exploring these specific interactions, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how kiai function as pivotal agents in nurturing a tolerant and inclusive religious identity among santri, thereby contributing to broader social cohesion in Indonesia. The present study hypothesizes that the direct and indirect pedagogical approaches of kiai, specifically their embodiment of moderate Islamic principles (*wasatiyyah al-Islam*), significantly correlate with the development of enhanced interfaith tolerance among santri (Almu'tasim, 2019; Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021). This study posits that kiai actively utilize local cultural integration and traditional wisdom, alongside counter-narrative strategies, to instill religious moderation and mitigate the risks of radicalism among santri (Al-Ghifari et al., 2024; Aprilianto et al., 2025; Hanif et al., 2025). This paper further argues that the kiai's mentorship extends beyond formal instruction, influencing santri through their lived examples of engagement with pluralistic societies and their interpretations of Islamic texts in promoting inclusive citizenship (Almu'tasim, 2019; Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021).

METHOD

This study employs a library research approach or literature review to analyze the role of kiai as agents of socialization in shaping santri identity oriented toward tolerance within pluralistic environments. This approach is selected because the focus of the study lies in developing concepts, theories, and empirical findings that have been published in peer-reviewed journals, Scopus-indexed articles, and other relevant scholarly sources over the past ten years (2015–2025). Primary data sources include academic journals, scientific articles, theses, and books discussing pesantren education, kiai leadership, the

socialization of tolerance values, and santri character education in the context of social diversity.

Data collection is conducted systematically through searches of academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and university digital libraries using a combination of keywords, including religious leadership, identity formation, tolerance education, pesantren, kyai, student identity, pluralism, and Islamic education. The collected sources are then critically reviewed to examine theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, research variables, and empirical findings that highlight the role of religious leaders in tolerance education and santri character development. Literature analysis is carried out using content analysis techniques to identify major themes and conceptual relationships among the role of the *kiai*, santri identity formation, and the dynamics of social diversity as reflected in the literature.

The data analysis process follows a descriptive-analytical literature review procedure, beginning with the reduction of literature data to select the most relevant sources, followed by the presentation of data through conceptual mapping and the examination of relationships among research variables, and culminating in the synthesis of findings that explain how *kiai*, as agents of socialization, contribute to the formation of tolerant santri identities. This approach also enables the identification of research gaps within the existing literature, thereby strengthening the discussion and supporting recommendations for future research. Consequently, this study not only describes the role of *kiai* based on existing findings but also advances theoretical and empirical understanding of tolerance education within pluralistic pesantren environments.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Kiai as Socialization Agents

Socialization theory explains how individuals internalize values, norms, and identities through sustained interaction with significant social actors. In educational and religious contexts, socialization serves as a central mechanism for transmitting moral frameworks and collective meanings across generations. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that identity is socially constructed through processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, in which authoritative figures play a decisive role. Within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), the *kiai* functions as a primary agent of socialization, shaping santri not only in terms of religious knowledge but also in attitudes toward social relations, diversity, and moral conduct (Azra, 2017).

The authority of the *kiai* is deeply rooted in symbolic and cultural capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of symbolic power, the legitimacy of religious leaders is produced through recognition, tradition, and mastery of religious knowledge. In the pesantren context, the *kiai*'s authority is reinforced by moral integrity, lineage, and long-standing institutional trust. This symbolic capital enables the *kiai* to act as a role model whose interpretations of Islam, including views on tolerance and coexistence, are internalized by santri through daily interaction and imitation (Hefner, 2011).

Santri identity formation is a dynamic and socially embedded process rather than a purely individual or cognitive one. Erikson (1968) conceptualizes identity as

developing through interaction with significant social environments and authority figures. In pesantren life, communal living, ritual discipline, and continuous guidance from the *kiai* create an intensive socialization setting. Through this environment, values such as obedience, respect, solidarity, and tolerance are cultivated as lived experiences rather than abstract concepts, reinforcing identity formation through practice and habituation (Raihani, 2012).

In pluralistic societies, the role of the *kiai* as a socialization agent becomes increasingly crucial in promoting religious tolerance and moderation. The concept of religious moderation (*wasatiyyah*) emphasizes balance, inclusivity, and peaceful coexistence (Kamali, 2015). When *kiai* integrate these principles into religious instruction, sermons, and daily leadership practices, pesantren education can function as a counterbalance to exclusivist or radical interpretations of Islam. Studies show that pesantren led by inclusive religious authorities tend to produce santri with more open and tolerant social orientations (Zuhdi, 2018).

Understanding *kiai* as socialization agents thus provides a strong theoretical framework for analyzing tolerance formation within Islamic educational institutions. The convergence of socialization theory, symbolic authority, and identity development highlights that the influence of the *kiai* extends far beyond formal teaching. Rather, the *kiai* shapes long-term dispositions and social attitudes that determine how santri engage with diversity in wider society. This perspective underscores that pesantren leadership orientation plays a decisive role in directing santri identities toward either exclusivism or constructive engagement within pluralistic social contexts (Hefner, 2019).

Kiai as Socialization Agents in Fostering Moderate Attitudes and Deradicalization: A Social Constructionist Perspective

The following is a table of articles relevant to the theme.

Table 1 summarizes the article on moderation and the relationship between santri and *kiai*.

Research Aspect	Key Findings	Scopus-Based Sources (Summary)
Role of Kiai in Socialization	Kiai function as primary social actors in the social construction of religious moderation, tolerance, and anti-radicalism values	Sunesti et al. (2024); Basyir (2020)
Socialization Mechanisms	The process occurs through externalization, objectivation, and internalization of moderate Islamic values in education and social life	Mujamil & Fatimah (2023); Berger & Luckmann (1966)
Media of Socialization	Tolerance values are disseminated through traditional teaching, role modeling, and digital and online platforms	Ciptadi (2024); Maknun et al. (2024)

Formation of Moderate Islamic Identity	Kiai construct inclusive santri identities through the principles of <i>wasathiyah</i> , <i>tasamuh</i> , and Islam Nusantara	Masduki (2020); Bashri (2021)
Role of Religious Institutions	NU, Muhammadiyah, and pesantren serve as institutional reinforcers of moderation through curriculum and educational culture	Almu'tasim (2019); Muliana (2022)
Prevention of Radicalism	Pesantren-based moderation education effectively reduces the spread of extremist and violent ideologies	Hanif et al. (2025); Zubair et al. (2022)
Educational Dimension	Moderation is internalized through curriculum integration, social habituation, and character education	Rahmadi & Hamdan (2023); Marjani (2023)
Indicators of Religious Moderation	Moderation is measured through national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and accommodation of local culture	Haq et al. (2023); Khotimah & Sukron (2023)

This paper explores the pivotal role of Kiai in shaping community perceptions and behaviors regarding radical ideologies, employing Social Construction Theory to elucidate their influence as key socialization agents in Indonesia (Sunesti et al., 2024). Specifically, it examines how Kiai engage in externalization, objectivation, and internalization processes to construct and reinforce moderate religious interpretations, thereby countering radical narratives within their communities (Basyir, 2020; Mujamil & Fatimah, 2023).

This approach is particularly pertinent in Indonesia, where religious leaders, such as Kiai, are instrumental in disseminating values of tolerance and peace through both traditional and modern platforms, including online media (Ciptadi, 2024). Their efforts are critical in navigating the complex interplay between religious doctrine and societal norms, fostering an environment where moderate Islamic identities can flourish (Muslim & Werdiningsih, 2023).

Scholars actively address religious radicalism by promoting messages of tolerance, social inclusion, and peaceful coexistence, often leveraging both traditional teaching methods and digital platforms for broader outreach (Saleh & Astiana, 2021). This strategic engagement positions them as crucial actors in the ongoing struggle against extremist ideologies, highlighting their capacity to influence public discourse and mitigate radicalization (Maknun et al., 2024). In this context, the Kiai's articulation of moderate Islamic discourse, particularly through online platforms, directly counters misconceptions about Islamic values and actively develops moderate Islamic teachings (Maknun et al., 2024). This is particularly vital in Indonesia, where "Smiling Islam" is disseminated across various media, from internet fatwa services to electronic Sharia banking, enabling a consumer-oriented approach that intertwines with classical expressions of faith (Masduki, 2020).

This widespread dissemination of moderate Islamic teachings through diverse channels helps to immunize communities against the allure of radical interpretations,

thereby fostering a resilient social fabric rooted in tolerance and understanding (Hanif et al., 2025). This indigenized form of Islam, often referred to as "Islam Nusantara," has historical roots in the 13th and 14th centuries, where Kiai successfully integrated Islamic teachings with existing socio-cultural and political realities in the archipelago, contributing to a "gentler" form of Islam compared to its Middle Eastern origins (Bashri, 2021; Masduki, 2020).

Historical precedent underscores the enduring capacity of local religious scholarship to adapt and contextualize Islamic principles, thereby establishing a foundation for contemporary deradicalization efforts (Masduki, 2020). The concept of **wasathiyah**, or moderate Islam, is deeply embedded within this framework, often articulated by figures such as Didin Hafidhuddin as an essential command derived from the Qur'an, guiding the propagation of an Islam that eschews extremism in all its forms (Almu'tasim, 2019). This perspective posits that moderate attitudes are not inherent but are socially constructed through ongoing interactions and interpretations facilitated by influential religious figures like the Kiai.

These interpretations often draw upon the rich traditions of organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, which actively promote moderate Islamic values as a counter-narrative to extremist ideologies (Almu'tasim, 2019). Indeed, these organizations, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, serve as mainstream proponents of moderation in Indonesia, actively disseminating **Wasatiyyah** Islam both offline and in the digital sphere (Muliana, 2022). Their consistent advocacy for an integrative curriculum in higher education, for instance, reflects a concerted effort to instill moderation values in future generations, thereby preventing the spread of radical ideologies (Prasetyo et al., 2025).

Integration ensures that academic and religious education coalesce to produce graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also deeply committed to principles of tolerance and pluralism, further solidifying Indonesia's unique approach to Islamic moderation (Hanif et al., 2025). Furthermore, the concept of religious moderation in Indonesia emphasizes contextual understanding rather than a mere textual interpretation, providing a balanced and nuanced response to various religious issues (Choirin et al., 2024). This approach aligns with the broader understanding of moderation as a middle path, avoiding extremes of both excessive conservatism and liberalism, as advocated by scholars like Khaled Abou el Fadl and K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid (Almu'tasim, 2019). Such a nuanced perspective is crucial for understanding how Kiai, through their pedagogical and communal roles, operationalize moderation, balancing scriptural fidelity with the practicalities of a diverse society (Itmam & Aouich, 2024).

Their authoritative position allows them to reinterpret religious texts and traditions in ways that foster inclusivity and reject radical doctrines, thereby acting as critical nodes in the social construction of a moderate religious identity (Parhusip, 2024). This process involves a deliberate cultivation of a civilizing environment, particularly within educational settings like madrasahs, to ingrain character moderation within the

curriculum and extracurricular activities (Rahmadi & Hamdan, 2023). This educational emphasis extends to fostering **Ummatan Wasathan**, a concept central to both Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, which promotes a balanced and just Muslim community (Setia & Haq, 2023).

Moreover, the involvement of organizations such as Wahdah Islamiyah in promoting **Wasathiyah Islam** further exemplifies the diverse institutional efforts to cultivate religious moderation across Indonesia (Tabroni & Idham, 2023). This broad institutional support for moderation is anchored in a comprehensive understanding of religious values, encompassing national commitment, tolerance, non-violence, and accommodation of local culture, which collectively serve as key indicators of religious moderation (Haq et al., 2023). These indicators are critical in assessing the extent to which individuals and communities embody moderate religious practices and help identify potential vulnerabilities that might lead to radicalization (Aflahah et al., 2023). The Indonesian government, through its Ministry of Religious Affairs, actively promotes these four indicators to strengthen religious moderation efforts across the archipelago (Khotimah & Sukron, 2023).

Comprehensive approach ensures that religious moderation is not merely an abstract concept but a tangible framework embedded within educational, social, and governmental structures (Nasir & Rijal, 2021). This strategic internalization of moderation values within formal and non-formal educational institutions, particularly within traditional Islamic **Pesantren**, is crucial for cultivating a religiously moderate citizenry (Zubair et al., 2022). This ongoing emphasis on Islamic **wasathiyah** within educational frameworks, championed by organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama, aims to reshape religious understanding and empower religious leaders to advocate for peace and counter radicalization (Abadi et al., 2023; Saleh & Astiana, 2021). This concerted effort by Kiai and associated organizations aligns with social construction theory, demonstrating how shared understandings of religious moderation are actively built and reinforced through social interaction, education, and institutional practices (Almu'tasim, 2019).

The emphasis on **tawassuth**, **i'tidal**, **tawazzun**, and **tasammuh** within these institutions, particularly those under the auspices of NU, highlights a deliberate pedagogical approach to ingrain these moderate principles into the worldview of their students (Ma'arif et al., 2022). These values, encompassing moderation, balance, justice, and tolerance, are consistently reinforced through integrated educational systems such as the **khalafah** and classical Pondok Pesantren models, which collectively aim to foster a comprehensive understanding of moderate religious teachings (Haryanto, 2022).

Pedagogical approach is further strengthened by incorporating national commitment and anti-violence principles, ensuring that students develop a holistic understanding of their role within a diverse society (Marjani, 2023). This multi-faceted educational strategy, incorporating both explicit curriculum and implicit communal learning, underscores the Kiai's pivotal role in shaping a collective consciousness that views moderation as the normative and desirable religious stance (Aziz et al., 2023; Nasir

& Rijal, 2021). This intricate process of instilling moderation is further supported by the presence of campus-based **pesantrens**, which utilize comprehensive curricula and diverse religious activities to transmit moderate Islamic values, thereby solidifying these principles across various educational tiers (Aflahah et al., 2023; Marjani, 2023). Such institutions effectively serve as microcosms for the broader social construction of moderate religious identity, continuously reinforcing the idea that Islamic teachings inherently promote balance and inclusivity (Aflahah et al., 2023).

The integration of these principles within the educational framework of **pesantren** directly counters extremist narratives by demonstrating that religious fidelity is not only compatible with but also necessitates an inclusive and tolerant worldview (Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021; Haris et al., 2023). This proactive engagement from Kiai and their associated educational networks serves to counteract the rise of radicalism by embedding a deep-seated appreciation for religious moderation within the younger generations (Nur et al., 2023).

Kiai as Socialization Agents: Shaping Santri Identity to Foster Tolerance in the Context of Diversity

This study examines the pivotal role of kiai within Indonesian pesantren as primary socialization agents in cultivating a tolerant santri identity amidst an increasingly diverse societal landscape (Nabilla, 2025). Specifically, it investigates how the unique blend of religious guidance, moral instruction, and charismatic leadership employed by kiai influences santri to embrace pluralism and respect diverse religious practices (Azizah et al., 2023; Thoyib et al., 2024). This phenomenon is particularly salient in regions like Manado, a Muslim-minority city, where the kiai's influence is critical in fostering interfaith harmony and understanding among their students (Ismail et al., 2020). The traditional authority of kiai in pesantren significantly shapes the religious understanding of santri, impacting their perspectives on religious moderation and interfaith relations (Al-Ghifari et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2020).

This influence extends beyond the pesantren walls, as kiai are often seen as community figures whose teachings and actions provide a foundational understanding of Islam that promotes coexistence and mutual respect (Ismail et al., 2020; Taufiq & Tsauro, 2024). The pesantren experience, characterized by communal living and shared religious practices, further reinforces this group identity, influencing how santri interact with both their own faith community and those of other religious backgrounds (Thoyib et al., 2024). The pedagogical approaches within pesantren, guided by kiai, emphasize not only theological depth but also the practical application of Islamic values in fostering harmonious inter-religious relationships (Aksa & Hakim, 2023). This is crucial in a nation like Indonesia, which embraces a multitude of cultures and faiths, thereby requiring its citizens to navigate complex social dynamics with an ethos of religious moderation (Burga & Damopolii, 2022).

The kiai, therefore, function as crucial interpreters of religious texts and traditions, translating complex theological concepts into actionable principles that promote

tolerance and respect for diversity among santri (Pebriani et al., 2023). This role is particularly vital in shaping a moderation-oriented religious mindset, which is essential for navigating the multifaceted social and religious landscape of Indonesia (Al-Ghifari et al., 2024; Reza et al., 2023).

This process occurs through deep internalization, whereby santri gradually adopt moderate Islamic perspectives, resulting in a shared understanding between the kiai and their students concerning interfaith relations (Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021). Such direct transmission of religious knowledge and ethical values plays a crucial role in shaping santri character formation, influencing their social attitudes and interactions both within and beyond the pesantren environment (Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021). Their leadership is rooted in their profound religious authority and extensive knowledge, positioning them as influential figures not only within the pesantren but also in the broader Muslim community (Ismail et al., 2020). This esteemed position allows them to effectively convey the principles of religious moderation, acting as exemplars for their santri in fostering a dynamic and tolerant community (Bosra & Umiarso, 2021).

The kiai's role is further solidified by their close proximity to the community and their spiritual leadership, culturally embedding them within the Nahdlatul Ulama pesantren tradition as respected teachers and community figures (Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021). Through their teachings and moral guidance, kiai cultivate an environment where santri learn to navigate complex social interactions, fostering an in-group identity that, while strong, can be oriented towards either inclusivity or exclusivity depending on the curriculum's emphasis on interfaith dialogue (Thoyib et al., 2024).

Indeed, pesantren curriculums in Malang frequently highlight tolerance as a fundamental value, actively preparing santri to contribute positively to society by emphasizing principles such as honesty, moderation, and respect for diversity in their interactions with both Muslim and non-Muslim communities (Yumitro et al., 2019). This emphasis on inclusive values within the pesantren framework, guided by the kiai, is crucial for fostering religious moderation among santri, thereby enabling them to engage constructively with pluralistic societies (Al-Ghifari et al., 2024; Bosra & Umiarso, 2021).

Their instructional methods, often incorporating the classical halaqah system alongside integrated education, equip students with a nuanced understanding of religious moderation, translating into national commitment and anti-violence advocacy (Hamidah & Chasannudin, 2021). This holistic pedagogical approach within pesantren, therefore, actively shapes the santri's worldview, fostering an intellectual and spiritual foundation for promoting peace and intergroup harmony within wider society (Azizah et al., 2023).

This commitment to a moderate stance, however, does not necessarily translate into a complete inter-religious openness, often reflecting a nuanced tolerance shaped by their religious teachings and strong in-group identity (Thoyib et al., 2024). Consequently, the kiai's influence extends to shaping the santri's capacity for moderation in thought,

which is considered a high spiritual attainment within religious practice (Afriansyah & Sukmayadi, 2022). This involves moving beyond a rigid, binary understanding of religious tenets to embrace a more flexible and contextual interpretation applicable to a pluralistic society (Almu'tasim, 2019). Furthermore, kiai often guide santri toward understanding that upholding Islamic moderation is an imperative rooted in Qur'anic commands, which advocates for a balanced and non-extreme approach in all aspects of life (Almu'tasim, 2019). This emphasis cultivates an inclusive worldview in santri, wherein the engagement with diverse religious and cultural perspectives is seen as enriching rather than threatening to Islamic identity (Sofi et al., 2025).

This perspective encourages santri to engage in interfaith dialogue and collaboration, viewing differences not as sources of conflict but as opportunities for mutual learning and enrichment (Yaqin et al., 2022). This nuanced approach, cultivated by kiai, fosters a robust framework for religious moderation grounded in an understanding of Islam as a religion that champions justice, equality, and compassion for all humanity (Almu'tasim, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study reveals an important and somewhat unexpected finding: the formation of tolerant santri identity is not primarily determined by formal curricular content, but rather by the process of value internalization that occurs through intensive and continuous interactions between the kiai and santri. The findings demonstrate that role modeling, symbolic authority, and the everyday practices of the kiai play a more decisive role in cultivating tolerance than purely cognitive or instructional approaches. This insight challenges previous assumptions that have largely framed tolerance as an outcome of normative knowledge transmission or institutional regulation alone.

This research confirms earlier studies emphasizing the significance of religious leadership in promoting moderation, while strengthening them with recent evidence that positions the kiai as the primary socialization agent in shaping santri identity. Moreover, the study challenges perspectives that strictly separate religious education from social attitude formation, showing instead that both are deeply integrated within pesantren practices. This research also introduces the conceptual perspective of socialized religious identity, referring to a form of religious identity constructed through practical socialization processes that embed values of moderation and tolerance, thereby enriching scholarly discourse in Islamic education and the sociology of religion.

This study has several limitations, including its reliance on specific bodies of literature, its focus on pesantren contexts and kiai leadership, and the limited variation in educational levels, gender, and age groups represented in the analyzed studies. In addition, the library research approach restricts the ability to capture empirical dynamics directly. Future research is therefore recommended to employ empirical and longitudinal designs with larger and more diverse samples, as well as mixed methods approaches, in order to produce a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding that

can better inform educational policy formulation and strategies for strengthening religious moderation.

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