ANTHOR
Education and Learning Journal
https://anthor.org/index.php/anthor
Email. anthor.Jurnal@gmail.com
E-ISSN: 2963 –198X P-ISSN: 2963–2498 | Halaman: 1419 - 1429
Volume 5 Nomor 5 Tahun 2026

Cultural Adaptation: The Experience of Santri Finding Learning Comfort in Modern Islamic Boarding Schools

Manuscript Information

Muhammad Bagas Putra Pratama[1]
Afiqah Zafirah Andini[2]
Febiyola[3]
Yola Eka Putri[4]
Alrefi[5]
Anisa Siti Nurjanah[6]

Department Guidance and Counseling, Universitas Sriwijaya, Indonesia[1]
Department Guidance and Counseling, Universitas Sriwijaya, Indonesia[2]
Department Guidance and Counseling, Universitas Sriwijaya, Indonesia[3]
Department Guidance and Counseling, Universitas Sriwijaya, Indonesia[4]
Department Guidance and Counseling, Universitas Sriwijaya, Indonesia[5]
Department Guidance and Counseling, Universitas Sriwijaya, Indonesia[6]

owsientama@gmail.com[1]
afiqahzafirahandiniii@gmail.com[2]
fyolafebi@gmail.com[3]
yolaputri@fkip.unsri.ac.id[4]
alrefi@unsri.ac.id[5]
anisa.sitinurjanah@fkip.unsri.ac.id[6]

Abstrak

Pesantren modern sebagai lembaga pendidikan Islam menghadirkan lingkungan budaya baru yang berbeda dari kehidupan santri sebelumnya, sehingga proses adaptasi budaya menjadi tantangan tersendiri bagi santri baru. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami bagaimana pengalaman santri baru dalam menghadapi perubahan budaya, bagaimana strategi yang digunakan untuk beradaptasi, serta faktor-faktor yang mendukung terbentuknya kenyamanan belajar di lingkungan pesantren. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif. Informan penelitian terdiri atas tiga orang santri baru yang dipilih secara *purposive*. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam, sedangkan analisis data menggunakan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman yang meliputi tahap reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menemukan enam tema utama, yaitu kondisi emosional santri pada masa awal adaptasi, sumber hambatan utama yang dihadapi, strategi adaptasi dominan yang digunakan, sumber dukungan utama, status kekeluargaan yang dirasakan santri terhadap pengasuh dan sesama santri, serta penerimaan santri terhadap budaya pesantren. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa proses adaptasi budaya santri berlangsung secara bertahap, dari kondisi emosional yang tidak stabil menuju penerimaan penuh terhadap budaya pesantren, yang pada akhirnya membentuk kenyamanan belajar. Penelitian ini diharapkan secara praktis dapat membantu dan mendorong pengelola pesantren dalam merancang program pendampingan yang lebih responsif terhadap kebutuhan psikologis dan sosial santri baru. Serta, secara teoritis hasil penelitian ini dapat membuat pengembangan dan pemahaman dalam kacamata sosial budaya semakin komprehensif.

Kata Kunci:
Adaptasi Budaya, Santri Baru, Kenyamanan Belajar, Pesantren Modern, Studi Kualitatif.

Abstract

As Islamic educational institutions, modern pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) present a cultural environment distinct from the students' previous lives, making cultural adaptation a unique challenge for newcomers. This study aims to understand the experiences of new students in navigating cultural shifts, the adaptation strategies they employ, and the factors that foster a sense of comfort in the pesantren learning environment. A qualitative approach was adopted for this research. Three new students were selected as informants using purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The study identifies six key themes: students' emotional states during the initial adaptation period, major obstacles encountered, dominant adaptation strategies used, primary sources of support, the sense of family shared with caregivers and fellow students, and student acceptance of the pesantren culture. The findings reveal that the cultural adaptation process unfolds gradually shifting from emotional instability to full acceptance of the pesantren culture ultimately creating a comfortable learning environment. This research is expected to assist pesantren administrators in designing support programs that are more responsive to the psychological and social needs of new students. In practical terms, this study is expected to assist and encourage pesantren administrators in designing support programs that are more responsive to the psychological and social needs of new students. Theoretically, the findings are expected to foster a more comprehensive understanding and development of the subject from a sociocultural perspective.

Keyword:
Cultural Adaptation, Students (Santri), Learning Comfort, Modern Islamic Boarding School, Qualitative Study.

Information Production:
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INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) education in Indonesia plays a historical and strategic role in shaping the character and morals of the nation's youth, as emphasized in studies on Islamic character education (Kurniyah et al., 2026). Generally, community life within the *pesantren* environment reflects a social order

e-ISSN: 2963 – 198X
p-ISSN: 2963 – 2498

characterized by self-reliance, discipline, and a foundation of Islamic values. This ecosystem comprises two primary subjects: the *santri* (students) and the *pondok pesantren* (the institution itself). Conceptually, a *santri* is an individual who pursues in-depth knowledge of Islam while residing within the educational institution (Dhofier, 2019). The *pondok pesantren* is an Islamic educational institution that is largely residential; it requires students to live on-site and engage in shared routines that extend beyond mere academic study unlike conventional schools (Roswanto et al., 2024). Research by Podungge et al. (2025) indicates that the daily lives of *santri* are filled with dense, structured routines. These range from waking up early for pre-dawn voluntary prayers and congregational prayers to attending religious text study sessions, classroom learning, Quran memorization, and environmental cleaning, as well as personal development activities such as public speaking (*muhadharah*), organizational training, and language skills practice, particularly in modern *pesantren*.

For many new students, entering a *pesantren* marks a transformative experience across various aspects of their lives. Students who previously lived with their families must adapt to independent living, adhere to stricter rules, follow a demanding schedule, interact with peers from diverse regions, and adjust to new habits such as congregational prayers, evening study sessions, and various other *pesantren*-specific activities. This situation often triggers "culture shock" an emotional reaction characterized by surprise, confusion, discomfort, and even difficulty comprehending a new culture that differs significantly from one's previous environment (Pratiwi, 2023). Roswanto et al. (2024) explains that new *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) undergo a process of adjustment to adapt to various aspects, such as the school's rules, communication styles, daily routines, and social relationships within their new environment.

Setiawan et al. (2019) state that the lives of *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) involve a socio-cultural adaptation process encompassing adjustments to language, rules, customs, and interpersonal relationships. Consequently, the phenomenon of cultural adaptation among new students relates not only to the ability to follow rules but also to an individual's capacity to establish a sense of comfort within the new social and academic environment. Cultural adaptation is a crucial process, as students must understand the values, norms, customs, and interaction patterns prevalent in the *pesantren*. This process determines how a student is accepted by the community and whether they can build social relationships that support their continued life at the boarding school.

As an Islamic educational institution, the *pesantren* naturally involves classroom-based teaching and learning activities. In an educational context, learning comfort is a factor that influences the success of the students' learning process. Learning comfort is understood not merely as a physical condition conducive to study but also encompasses feelings of safety, acceptance, and being valued, as well as maintaining positive social relationships with the surrounding environment (Azizah, 2021). A comfortable learning environment enables students to more easily embrace educational values, participate in *pesantren* activities, and develop their personal potential. Muhammad et al. (2022) explain that a modern *pesantren* culture prioritizing multicultural values can foster social harmony through tolerance, respect for diversity, and positive social relationships among the *pesantren* community.

However, the journey toward achieving learning comfort is not always smooth. Each student undergoes a unique adjustment process influenced by factors such as family background, place of origin, communication skills, and the level of social support received. While some students quickly grasp and adopt the *pesantren* culture, others require more time to adapt. Chusniyah et al. (2025) note that new students typically pass through several stages of adaptation: starting with a "culture shock" phase, moving through the adjustment process, and finally reaching a stage of growth and acceptance of their new environment. Obstacles such as language barriers, pressure from rules, communication difficulties, and differences in habits can affect the comfort of *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) while living at the *pesantren*.

The experiences of new *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) in seeking a sense of comfort while studying warrant further investigation. This is evident from the experiences of new students entering the modern *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) serving as the research site. Preliminary interviews revealed that some students faced difficulties in adapting ranging from discomfort due to peer treatment, communication barriers, and pressure from school rules, to a lingering sense of not yet fully belonging to the *pesantren* community. One interviewee recounted feeling uncomfortable during their initial time at the school due to unpleasant treatment by peers. In contrast, another interviewee experienced a more positive adaptation process, successfully adjusting by observing the habits of other students, adhering to rules, and receiving guidance and support from the *ustadz* and *ustadzah* (religious teachers).

These differing experiences demonstrate that cultural adaptation is not a uniform process for everyone; rather, it is a unique experience contingent upon how an individual interacts with their surrounding social environment. Muttaqin (2025) notes that *pesantren* currently face the challenge of maintaining their traditional

e-ISSN: 2963 – 198X
p-ISSN: 2963 – 2498

identity while simultaneously developing modern educational systems to meet student needs. As modern *pesantren* evolve, the institution's ability to balance traditional values with modern educational requirements is crucial for fostering a comfortable learning environment for students. Concurrently, Nurdi et al. (2026) explain that *pesantren* are adapting to the modern era through various innovations, such as curriculum development, the enhancement of digital literacy, the implementation of religious moderation, and the fostering of student self-reliance.

Research on new *santri* in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) has largely framed the transition as a problem of individual self-adjustment or homesickness, typically through qualitative case studies of how new students adjust to the boarding school's activities and routines (Hasanah, 2024), or through phenomenological accounts of first-year adjustment in which the problems students face are linked to their personal history of entering the *pesantren* (Sukmakarti & Taufik, 2023). These studies are valuable, but they treat adaptation mainly as a psychological or behavioral outcome and rarely situate it within the *pesantren* as a distinct cultural system with its own norms, authority structures, and everyday rituals (Dhofier, 1999). Although cross-cultural scholarship has long conceptualized entry into an unfamiliar setting as a process of acculturation and culture shock (Berry, 1997; Ward et al., 2001), and the *pesantren's* residential, tightly regulated routine resembles features of what Goffman (1961) described as a total institution, these lenses have seldom been combined to understand how new *santri* come to feel comfortable within a *pesantren's* cultural world. In addition, comfort itself, as a subjective, lived experience, is usually treated as a by-product of adjustment rather than as the central phenomenon explored from the *santri's* own perspective. To the best of the author's knowledge, based on a limited literature search, this gap remains underexplored. The novelty of the present qualitative study therefore lies in (a) positioning comfort as the core phenomenon rather than a secondary indicator of adjustment, (b) analyzing new *santri's* adaptation through a cultural lens that integrates acculturation theory with the *pesantren's* institutional culture, and (c) generating an emic, context-grounded account of which cultural elements new *santri* experience as comforting or unsettling during their early period in the *pesantren*.

Based on this background, the study titled "Cultural Adaptation: *Santri* Experiences in Finding Learning Comfort in Modern *Pesantren*" aims to understand how new students navigate cultural shifts, the strategies they employ to adapt, and the factors that facilitate a sense of comfort within the *pesantren* environment. This research is expected to provide deeper insight into the student adaptation process, grounded in the real-life experiences of those living and studying in modern *pesantren*.

METHODS

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of new *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) experiences regarding cultural adaptation and the process of finding comfort in learning within a modern *pesantren* environment. A qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on interpreting individual experiences, social interaction processes, adaptation challenges, and the strategies students employ to navigate changes in their cultural environment. According to Sugiyono (2013), qualitative research is used to understand naturally occurring social phenomena, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. To further refine the study, a phenomenological approach was adopted. As noted by Ratnaningtyas et al. (2022), the phenomenological approach can be understood as the study of a phenomenon or event as it is directly experienced, aiming to uncover the meaning and manifestations of a specific variable. Through this approach, the study is able to explore the students' subjective experiences regarding changes in habits, social relationships, acceptance of the *pesantren* culture, and the factors influencing their learning comfort.

Research Subjects

The subjects of this study were three new students (*santri*) at a modern Islamic boarding school who had been living in the boarding school environment for approximately three months. Informants were selected using purposive sampling a technique involving the selection of subjects based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives. This approach was chosen in accordance with Moleong (2016), who noted that while qualitative research does not employ random sampling, sample selection must be purposeful. The informants were selected because they possessed firsthand experience with the process of cultural adaptation as new students within the boarding school environment.

To protect their identities, the three informants were assigned the initials H, AB, and AWS. They each had distinct adaptation experiences, ranging from a student still facing challenges in adjusting to one who had successfully adapted to the boarding school environment.

e-ISSN: 2963 – 198X
p-ISSN: 2963 – 2498

Data collection technique

Data collection in this study was conducted using the interview method. Interviews were employed to gather in-depth information regarding the *santri* (Islamic boarding school students') experiences in navigating changes in culture, rules, customs, and social relationships, as well as the process of establishing a sense of comfort in their learning environment. This aligns with Sugiyono (2022), who notes that interviews serve as a data collection technique in qualitative research.

The interviews followed a semi-structured guide based on the U-Curve Theory (UCT) proposed by Black and Mendenhall (1991) regarding the process of cultural adaptation. Semi-structured interviews are a form of in-depth interview characterized by greater flexibility in execution (Sugiyono, 2022). The interview questions covered various aspects, ranging from initial expectations prior to entering the *pesantren* and experiences with the new culture to adaptation challenges, coping strategies, social support, the process of cultural acceptance, and the emergence of a sense of belonging to the *pesantren* environment.

The interview data were subsequently transcribed verbatim to capture a comprehensive picture of the informants' experiences prior to the data analysis process.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis in this study employs the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman. According to Miles and Huberman (1984, cited in Sugiyono, 2013:246), data analysis in qualitative research is conducted interactively and proceeds continuously until the data reaches a point of saturation. The activities involved in this analysis include data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

The stages of data analysis in this study are as follows: Pertama, Data Reduction. The data reduction stage was carried out by selecting, focusing on, simplifying, and categorizing the interview data obtained from informants. Interview data, initially in the form of lengthy conversations. Were selected based on information relevant to the research focus. Kedua, Data Display. Following the data reduction process, the data are presented in the form of a category matrix and narrative descriptions to facilitate a clearer understanding of the relationships between the findings. Ketiga, *Conclusion Drawing/Verification*. The final stage involves drawing conclusions based on the patterns and relationships between categories identified in the previous stage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hasil

Deskripsi data

The data analyzed consists of verbatim transcripts from semi-structured interviews with three new *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) H, AB, and AWS at a modern *pesantren*. The interviewer asked approximately 11 core questions based on the UCT theory proposed by Black and Mendenhall (1991), covering the informants' cultural adaptation experiences within the *pesantren* environment. Topics included initial expectations, new encounters, obstacles (confusion, discomfort, communication difficulties, disappointment), coping strategies, the role of social support, the adaptation process, sense of belonging, cultural acceptance, and the ability to blend into the *pesantren* environment.

The interviews were conducted in informal spoken Indonesian, featuring vocabulary characteristic of the South Sumatran/Palembang Malay dialect (e.g., *budak-budak*, *meletik*, *enyek-enyek*). In accordance with the agreement made at the start of the interviews, the informants' identities were kept confidential (referred to only by initials in some sections), although one informant (AWS) voluntarily stated his full name and class at the beginning of the session. All three informants were new students who had been living at the *pesantren* for approximately three months at the time of the interviews.

Overall, the three informants demonstrated distinct adaptation experiences. H tended to face ongoing social obstacles (bullying) and admitted to neither feeling settled nor having adapted yet. AB exhibited a smoother adaptation pattern, employing strategies of observation and the imitation of habits. Meanwhile, AWS occupied an ambivalent position: he was able to blend in socially but had not yet fully accepted the *pesantren* rules, which he perceived as strict.

Analisis Data Model Miles & Huberman

Analisis data mengikuti model interaktif Miles & Huberman yang terdiri atas tiga tahap utama setalah pengumpulan data yang berlangsung secara simultan: (1) reduksi data, (2) penyajian data (*data display*), dan (3) penarikan kesimpulan/verifikasi yang akan ditampilkan dibagian kesimpulan.

e-ISSN: 2963 – 198X
p-ISSN: 2963 – 2498

Data Reduction

Data reduction was carried out by sorting, focusing, and simplifying verbatim data, which was lengthy, repetitive, and replete with conversational fillers into units of meaning (units of analysis) aligned with the 11 interview question themes. Informant responses, originally in the form of non-standard spoken sentences, were simplified into core statements without altering their original meaning. The summarized data reduction for the three informants is presented below.

Tabel 1 Data Redution

Question Theme	H	AB	AWS
1. Initial enthusiasm/expectations before entering	Feeling enthusiastic and curious, imagining an "exciting" Islamic boarding school where the students are kind and easy to talk to.	Enthusiastic, curious ("wow, how is it there"); there are still lots of friends and not being bullied at the beginning.	It didn't meet expectations; I had pictured a large, grand lodge, but the reality was different. I was happy when I first arrived, but after spending some time there, I began to feel uncomfortable.
2. An impressive or admirable new feature	Often invited to go for walks/out with other students (eg playing football).	Achieving success at the *pesantren* sparked the motivation to excel further.	Started being diligent about performing prayers and reciting the Quran (shifting from infrequent to regular practice); made new friends.
3. Feelings of discomfort or confusion after some time	Experienced bullying and verbal abuse; initially thought the *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) were good people, but reality turned out not to be so pleasant; felt confused by the routine of night prayers (*tahajud*, etc.).	I was frustrated and still adjusting at first (during the first three months), but now I'm used to it.	Bored; consider the regulations too strict.
4. Difficulty communicating with peers or instructors	There were difficulties; attempts to engage in conversation were met with mockery, and communication failed to connect.	There were no difficulties, as everyone used Indonesian, even though they came from different regions.	When I first started, I didn't quite understand the teacher's explanations during lessons.
5. Disappointment with habits or routines	Felt distressed/disappointed: belittled by seniors ("you're a new student, don't step out of line"), and had their locker frequently broken into.	Never felt disappointed with the *pesantren* routine.	While not explicitly expressing disappointment viewing the rules as reasonable given the boarding school setting there is a sense that the strict regulations could potentially lead to regret.
6. Coping strategies	Staying out of necessity ("just forcing it"); admitting to not feeling settled yet.	Follow other people's habits (e.g. join in tahajjud when you see others doing it) instead of complaining.	Taking it easy ("just going with the flow and enjoying it").
7. The role of social support (friends/religious teachers)	Rates the support as immense (10/10), yet admits to often feeling alone.	Support is felt from the religious teachers, not from peers.	Recognizing the immense support, the *ustaz* and friends played a role in explaining the rules.
8. Adaptation process	Admits to not having adapted yet; spends most days alone.	In stages: confused at first → observing and asking everyone → becoming accustomed; describing oneself as a "connected bridge."	Learning the rules from the *ustaz* and peers, so that gradually one can blend in.
9. The feeling of being "family" at the Islamic boarding school.	I don't feel like part of the family yet; I still position myself as a new *santri* because I still get subjected to verbal taunts.	I don't feel like family yet, but I already feel comfortable.	Not yet feeling like part of the family; positioning oneself as the "newcomer."
10. Acceptance of *pesantren* culture and practices.	Able to adopt worship habits (*Tahajud, Dhuha*, etc.).	Able to adapt to the customs and culture of the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school).	Not entirely; they can accept the routine of worship but object to some of the rules.

e-ISSN: 2963 – 198X
p-ISSN: 2963 – 2498

11. Ability to mingle/engage in activities.	Tends to be solitary and engages in many activities or goes out alone; admits to not yet being able to fully cope. Reports harassment by peers (pranks, locker broken into, clothes disarrayed, items missing, locker spat on).	Describing its capability as "already connected" (able to successfully cross the "bridge" of adaptation).	Able to mingle, initiate play, and befriend many people, even outside of formal study groups; closest with Ustaz H and comfortable interacting with *Ustazah* E, though interactions with other teachers are less frequent.

Data Display

Based on the reduction results, the data are presented in the form of a category matrix to facilitate the comparison of patterns across informants for each dimension of cultural adaptation.

Tabel 2 Data Display

Theme	H	AB	AWS
Current emotional state	Not yet settled in; feeling lonely.	Comfortable; accustomed to it.	Comfortable with the activities but takes issue with the rules.
Primary source of obstacles	Social bullying (harassment, mockery, tampering with belongings).	Discrepancy in habits during the initial period of stay.	Initial expectations were not met; rules are strict.
Dominant coping strategy	Enduring out of necessity (passive survival).	Observing and imitating others' habits (active adaptation).	Going with the flow/accepting the situation (accommodation).
Primary source of support	Presence of exciting, enjoyable activities and support from the *pesantren* social environment.	Religious teachers/mentors (not peers).	Religious instructors (Ustaz/Ustazah) and peers.
Perceived family status	Not yet; still views oneself as a new student.	Not yet, but already feeling comfortable.	Not yet, as the individual still views themselves as a "newcomer."
Acceptance of the *pesantren* culture	Has accepted the religious practice aspects (*Tahajjud*, *Dhuha* prayers).	Fully accepting of the situation.	Some have accepted the situation, including the religious activities even though they still resist certain rules.

Pembahasan

This study explores the experiences of *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) in adapting to the culture of a modern *pesantren* and eventually finding comfort in their studies. The analysis identified six key themes: (1) current emotional state, (2) primary sources of obstacles, (3) dominant adaptation strategies, (4) main sources of support, (5) perceived sense of family, and (6) acceptance of the *pesantren* culture. These six themes are discussed sequentially and linked to findings from previous research to strengthen the interpretation of the results.

Current Emotional State

At the outset of *pesantren* life, new *santri's* emotional states are complex and uneven. Some feel comfortable and adapt with relative ease, while others struggle with anxiety, homesickness, and psychological strain before their emotions gradually settle over time. This pattern corresponds to the culture shock model described by Roswanto et al. (2024), which distinguishes four phases: a). optimism, b). culture shock, c). recovery, and d). adjustment. In the second phase, the sharp contrast between home life and pesantren life triggers anxiety and inner distress. In some santri, this appears as disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, and difficulty concentrating on their studies.

Anggraeni et al. (2026) reinforce the view that this early instability is substantial. They found that new santri's difficulties in adapting stem chiefly from homesickness, stress, and anxiety, with consequences for learning motivation and mental health. These conditions, however, are not permanent. Fitriyah and Sari (2026) found that caregivers' family-oriented approach fosters santri's obedience and calm not merely out of formal obligation, but because moral and spiritual awareness takes root. As a result, santri's emotions gradually improve, becoming steadier and more positive.

Primary Sources of Obstacles

The main obstacles *santri* face in adapting to the culture of a modern *pesantren* arise from differences in environment, strict rules, and social dynamics among peers, including bullying. Roswanto et al. (2024) emphasize that culture shock among new *santri* encompasses differences in language, food, climate, rules, and

e-ISSN: 2963 – 198X
p-ISSN: 2963 – 2498

habits relative to their places of origin. Anggraeni et al. (2026) extend this by grouping *santri's* challenges into three domains: adaptation problems (difficulty adjusting to dormitory life), academic problems (limited Arabic proficiency and low learning motivation), and behavioral problems (*su'ul adab*), which are shaped by emotional instability and peer environments.

Beyond personal struggles, peer relationships are themselves a source of stress. Jamil et al. (2025) show that practices such as *ghasab* (using another person's belongings without permission) and calling others by inappropriate nicknames are often regarded as normal by *santri*, even though they can create discomfort and erode self-confidence. Lestari and Kowi (2024) report a similar picture: bullying in boarding institutions, *pesantren* included, produces short-term effects such as fear, anxiety, and declining academic performance, as well as long-term effects such as low self-esteem and impaired social relationships. Technology and social media add a further, newer challenge to cultural adaptation, as Fitriyah and Sari (2026) note that digitalization influences *santri's* thinking patterns and their level of compliance with school regulations.

Dominant Coping Strategy

The most prominent adaptive strategy is gradual self-adjustment spanning personal, social, environmental, and spiritual dimensions. *Santri* pursue it through several means: enduring the situation out of necessity, imitating the habits of others, and learning to accept circumstances calmly. Roswanto et al. (2024) classify this adjustment into four forms: adjustment to oneself (*habl min al-nafs*), to others (*habl min al-nas*), to the environment (*habl min al-alam*), and to God (*habl min Allah*). Together, these four aspects provide a structured framework that helps *santri* navigate the period of cultural transition.

Alongside self-directed adjustment, habituation emerges as an effective strategy widely applied in modern *pesantren*. Fachrudin and Nurina (2025) show that consistently performing obligatory and voluntary worship, such as congregational prayer, Dhuha prayer, and voluntary fasting, builds disciplined character while speeding *santri's* adaptation to the rhythm of *pesantren* life. From a behavioral perspective, Jamil et al. (2025) add that positive reinforcement, role modeling, critical thinking training, and a conducive learning environment help *santri* internalize good habits and correct mistaken understandings of deviant behavior.

Primary Source of Support

Social support is the principal external factor that helps *santri* move through the adaptation process. Ibrahim et al. (2021) demonstrate that social support has a positive and significant effect on *santri's* resilience, contributing 23.3%. In other words, the greater the social support, the higher *santri's* resilience in facing the pressures of *pesantren* life. This support generally comes from peers, family, and *ustaz* and *ustazah*, who play an important role in building solidarity and a sense of belonging.

These findings are consistent with Tunggadewi and Indriana (2017), who identified a significant positive relationship between social support and santri's learning motivation: most santri who received high support from parents, teachers, and friends also reported high learning motivation. Beyond peer support, collective guidance and mentoring are also crucial. Anggraeni et al. (2026) stress that adapting new santri requires multidisciplinary support covering psychological, social, and cultural aspects, so that integration into the pesantren environment can proceed faster and more fully.

Perceived Family Status

One important finding of this study is that, although a sense of kinship has not yet fully formed among *santri* peers, they still feel supported by caregivers and *ustaz*/*ustazah* in the *pesantren*. Fitriyah and Sari (2026) found that *ustazah* and *pesantren* staff essentially function as "real parents" in *santri's* daily lives. Their family-oriented approach, which emphasizes exemplary conduct (*uswah hasanah*), humane communication, and affection, produces obedience that goes beyond formality because it grows out of *santri's* own moral and spiritual awareness.

This familial dynamic is also visible in *santri's* relationship with the *kiai*, the central figure of the *pesantren*. Nisa et al. (2025) explain that the *kiai* is not only an educator but also a moral and spiritual guide who builds emotional closeness through daily example (*uswah*), thereby cultivating deep respect and loyalty. The value of brotherhood (*ukhuwah islamiyah*) among santri, and between *santri*, teachers, and the *kiai*, further strengthens this familial atmosphere. According to Sa'diyah et al. (2023), it reflects the *pesantren's* core cultural values concerning etiquette toward the *kiai* and the personal development of *santri*.

Acceptance of *Pesantren* Culture

In adapting to *pesantren* culture, *santri* show some initial resistance to certain rules, yet they increasingly accept the culture and values of the *pesantren*, including *Tahajud* and *Dhuha* prayers, *halaqah*, and other practices. This accords with the adjustment phase in the model of Roswanto et al. (2024), the period when

e-ISSN: 2963 – 198X
p-ISSN: 2963 – 2498

santri become accustomed to the new environment and culture, so that feelings of strangeness slowly give way to attachment and comfort.

Such acceptance can also be understood as the internalization of cultural values comprising ideas, activities, and artifacts, as described by Sa'diyah et al. (2023). These values include reverence for the *kiai*, simplicity, sincerity, and *ukhuwah Islamiyah*. In the same vein, Nisa et al. (2025) conclude that *pesantren* culture serves as a means of forming religious and cultural identity, internalized through intensive socialization such as religious study sessions, *tahlilan*, and dormitory life, so that the culture is no longer felt as a burden but as an integral part of *santri's* way of life.

The acceptance of *pesantren* culture is further supported by the effectiveness of worship habituation programs in shaping disciplined character. Fachrudin and Nurina (2025) found that 85% of *santri* felt congregational worship helped them manage their time better, with a mean Likert-scale score of 4.3 out of 5. Taken together, these findings suggest that once *santri* pass the challenging early stage and receive adequate social support within a familial atmosphere, they are ultimately able to accept, and even internalize, *pesantren* culture as a new part of their identity, allowing a comfortable learning experience in the modern *pesantren* to be fully realized.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data presented above, several conclusions can be drawn as follows: (1) The cultural adaptation of new students (*santri*) in modern *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) does not follow a uniform path but rather forms three distinct patterns: (a) a pattern of persistent obstacles (H), characterized by social bullying and a lack of comfort; (b) a pattern of progressive adaptation (AB), characterized by a transition from confusion to familiarity through observation and imitation; and (c) a pattern of ambivalent adaptation (AWS), characterized by successful social integration alongside resistance to certain institutional regulations. (2) Bullying by fellow students (including verbal abuse and interference with personal belongings) emerged as the most prominent obstacle to adaptation for one informant, directly contributing to feelings of not yet feeling at home or part of the *pesantren* "family." (3) Support from *ustaz/ustazah* (religious teachers/mentors) was consistently identified by all three informants as a crucial facilitating factor, even for the informant facing social challenges from peers. This indicates that vertical relationships (student–mentor) serve as an anchor for adaptation when horizontal relationships (among students) are not fully supportive. (4) Coping strategies varied from passive (enduring the situation out of necessity) to active (observing and imitating habits, asking questions of anyone), appearing to correlate with the level of comfort reported by each informant. (5) None of the three informants yet felt like a full part of the *pesantren* "family" despite having resided there for approximately three months; this suggests that internalizing a sense of belonging generally requires more time than simply accepting religious routines. (6) Acceptance of the *pesantren*'s religious culture (such as *Tahajud* and *Dhuha* prayers, and Quranic recitation) occurred relatively quickly and was more readily embraced than acceptance of administrative regulations and codes of conduct; for one informant (AWS), these regulations remained a source of dissatisfaction even after the social and religious aspects had been accepted.

Practical Recommendations

For Pesantren Administrators

First, pesantren should treat the first weeks as a structured transition rather than leaving adaptation to chance. Roswanto et al. (2024) describe a culture shock phase in which anxiety, sleep disturbance, and appetite loss can emerge, so a phased orientation program is advisable. Such a program would introduce rules, routines, language, and food gradually, and caregivers or counselors would monitor new santri more closely during this window. Anggraeni et al. (2026) stress that adapting new santri needs psychological, social, and cultural support together, which suggests that a guidance and counseling unit should work alongside caregivers, not separately from them.

Second, the family-oriented approach that santri already value should be formalized and sustained. Fitriyah and Sari (2026) found that caregivers who model exemplary conduct, communicate humanely, and show affection produce obedience rooted in moral and spiritual awareness rather than formal obligation. Pesantren can support this by training ustaz, ustazah, and caregivers in empathic communication and by keeping caregiver-to-santri ratios manageable enough for real closeness. Because Nisa et al. (2025) show that the kiai's daily example builds respect and loyalty, leadership visibility in dormitory and communal life also matters.

Third, since the sense of kinship among peers was weaker than the support from caregivers, pesantren should deliberately strengthen peer bonds. Ibrahim et al. (2021) found that social support significantly

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p-ISSN: 2963 – 2498

increases santri's resilience, and peers are one of its main sources. Practical options include a senior-to-junior mentoring (buddy) system, group activities that mix cohorts, and the ukhuwah islamiyah values described by Sa'diyah et al. (2023) being turned into concrete shared routines rather than remaining abstract ideals.

Fourth, bullying prevention needs to move beyond rules. Jamil et al. (2025) show that practices such as ghasab and derogatory nicknames are often seen as normal, and Lestari and Kowi (2024) document their short- and long-term harm. Pesantren can therefore run norm-clarification sessions that name these behaviors as harmful, provide safe and trusted reporting channels, and reinforce positive behavior through role modeling, as Jamil et al. (2025) suggest.

Fifth, worship habituation should be continued but explained and supported. Fachrudin and Nurina (2025) found that consistent congregational worship helped most santri manage time and build discipline. Introducing these routines gradually, and explaining their purpose, may reduce the initial resistance to rules observed in this study.

Finally, digital life deserves a clear and consistent policy. Fitriyah and Sari (2026) note that digitalization shapes santri's thinking and compliance, so pesantren may benefit from transparent guidelines on device and social media use, paired with digital literacy guidance, instead of relying on prohibition alone.

For Future Researchers

First, future studies should examine comfort as the central phenomenon and not only as a by-product of adjustment. Because this study is qualitative and based on a limited number of participants, subsequent work could use a mixed-methods design, pairing in-depth interviews with a validated comfort or well-being measure, so that the themes identified here can be tested and quantified. Ibrahim et al. (2021) and Tunggadewi and Indriana (2017) already show that quantitative links with social support exist, which gives a basis for such testing.

Second, longitudinal designs are needed. The phases described by Roswanto et al. (2024) imply change over time, yet single-point interviews can only capture a snapshot. Following the same santri from arrival through the first year would show when culture shock peaks, when recovery begins, and which supports matter at each stage.

Third, comparison across contexts would improve transferability. Researchers could compare modern and traditional pesantren, male and female santri, and santri from different regional or cultural backgrounds, since differences in language, food, and customs are central to culture shock (Roswanto et al., 2024). Sukmakarti and Taufik (2023) already point to differences between male and female santri in adjustment, which makes gender-sensitive analysis especially worthwhile.

Fourth, the perspectives of other stakeholders should be included. Caregivers, ustaz, kiai, and parents can reveal how comfort is cultivated from the institution's side, and triangulating their accounts with santri's would strengthen credibility.

Fifth, intervention research is a logical next step. Researchers could design and test programs built on the study's themes, such as orientation, peer mentoring, or anti-bullying programs, and evaluate their effect on santri's comfort and retention.

Last, I would suggest examining under-explored factors that this study touched on only briefly, notably digital media use (Fitriyah & Sari, 2026) and the role of the kiai and pesantren values in shaping identity (Nisa et al., 2025; Sa'diyah et al., 2023).

Overall, these findings confirm that the cultural adaptation of new students in modern *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) is a multidimensional process influenced by the interaction between individual factors (initial expectations, personality, coping strategies), social factors (relationships with fellow students and with *ustaz/ustazah*), and institutional factors (the strictness of school regulations).

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the lecturers for their assistance, guidance, and support throughout the research process. We also extend our appreciation to the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) for granting us permission and access to conduct this research. Furthermore, we would like to thank all parties involved, particularly the research team members whose names are listed as authors of this article, for their active participation and full contributions to the successful completion of this study.

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