

Students' Life Experiences and the Meaning of Conformity Behind the Boarding School Doors

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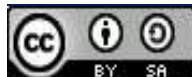
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ABSTRACT

Pesantren, as traditional Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, create unique environments where Santri (students) navigate complex social dynamics and behavioral expectations. Understanding conformity in these settings is crucial for developing educational approaches that balance religious character formation with individual well-being. This research examines the life experiences of Santri and the meaning of conformity in the Pesantren environment of Lembaga Tinggi Pesantren Luhur Malang (LTPLM). Involving nine Santri with a minimum stay of two years, this study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach through in-depth interviews and participatory observation. The results showed that conformity includes adherence to rules, acceptance of Pesantren values, and cultural adaptation, which support the strengthening of religious identity and the learning of social values. The findings also revealed challenges such as social pressure to conform and the potential for negative behavior due to the culture of seniority. This study concludes that conformity in Pesantren serves as a profound learning process for Santri character building. The implication of this research is the need for adaptive educational policies to minimize the negative impacts of conformity while supporting the development of socially and spiritually balanced Santri.

KEYWORDS conformity, life experience, Pesantren, Santri



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INTRODUCTION

When an individual becomes a student, it does not mean that he cannot gain religious knowledge in Pesantren (Sodikin et al., 2022). Lembaga Tinggi Pesantren Luhur Malang (LTPLM), also referred to as Ma'had Ali Islamiyah, exists as a place where students can continue to pursue *thalabul 'ilmi* in Pesantren. LTPLM integrates Pesantren education with high-level formal education, allowing students to live as both students and santri. In this context, **conformity** emerges as a significant phenomenon, where santri are expected to conform to the rules and culture of the Pesantren, while still performing their academic roles at the university. However, the influence of this conformity can be a double-edged sword — both supporting positive character formation and posing challenges, such as excessive social pressure and potential negative behaviors (Khusumadewi, 2021; Latif, 2021; Nafisah, Ismail, & Saleh, 2022; Ahmad & Samsul, 2023; Isbah, 2020; Kosim, 2023; Assa'idi, 2021).

David G. Myers in *Social Psychology* (2010) adds that conformity is often influenced by factors such as group size, group cohesion, and social pressure generated by group norms.

Pesantren as an Islamic educational institution has characteristics that encourage the formation of strict norms and rules. In the context of *Pesantren*, conformity is more often associated with compliance to applicable rules, including religious, social, and academic ones. This relates to the integration of religious and cultural values taught in *Pesantren* as well as social processes that influence *Santri* to conform to group norms.

In the study of social psychology, a person's life experiences play an important role in shaping their behavior and attitudes toward social norms. George Herbert Mead, in the theory of symbolic interactionism, argues that individuals develop self-identity through interactions with others and social experiences. In *Pesantren*, daily life—full of social interactions, religious teachings, and religious routines—shapes the *Santri*'s perceptions and attitudes toward conformity.

Tajfel and Turner (1979), in Social Identity Theory, explain that individuals adapt to their groups in order to build social identity. In *Pesantren*, *Santri* identity as part of the community influences the extent to which they internalize *Pesantren* norms and behave in accordance with group expectations. Research shows that conformity plays a role in shaping the social behavior of individuals in environments with strong collective norms (Baron et al., 2008; Myers, 2010). However, studies on conformity in *Pesantren* are still limited, especially in the context of institutions that combine religious and formal academic education. Phenomenological research by Giorgi and Giorgi (2009) emphasizes the importance of understanding individual experiences within a particular social context. On the other hand, Nail et al. (2000) demonstrate that factors such as group cohesiveness, social norms, and group size influence the degree of conformity.

A study conducted by Ahmad (2012), entitled *Santri Conformity in Maintaining Religious Traditions in Pesantren*, shows that the level of *Santri* conformity to *Pesantren* rules is strongly influenced by their understanding of religious teachings and by the presence of authority figures (*kyai* or *ustaz*) who serve as role models. This study also found that *Santri* tend to be more obedient to rules related to worship and religious morals. However, Ahmad's research focused on traditional *Pesantren* with purely religious curricula, without examining the unique challenges faced by *Santri* who must balance formal academic education with *Pesantren* life.

Siti Aminah (2015), in her research entitled *Santri's Life Experience and Its Influence on Character Building*, explains that the life experiences of *Santri* in *Pesantren* shape their attitudes and behaviors in interactions, both with fellow *Santri* and with wider society. This experience also contributes to their level of conformity to the rules. The study reveals that the longer a person stays in *Pesantren*, the more likely they are to conform to prevailing norms. While valuable, Aminah's study employed a quantitative approach that did not capture the deep lived experiences and personal meanings that *Santri* attach to conformity. Fatimah's research similarly relied on self-report questionnaires, which may not fully reflect the complexity of conformity in daily life.

Research by Fatimah (2019), entitled *The Level of Compliance of Santri to the Pesantren Rules of Order*, shows that *Santri* who have studied at *Pesantren* for a longer period tend to be more obedient to its rules. This study also shows that influential factors such as the authority of religious figures and the internalization of religious values play a significant role in conformity.

Zainuddin (2021), in *The Role of Islamic Boarding Schools in the Formation of Santri's Social Identity in Indonesia*, examines how *Pesantren* function as places for social identity formation, where students learn to adapt to groups and to rules within the institution. This study concluded that *Pesantren* play a major role in shaping *Santri* identity, which includes rule compliance and social conformity. Despite these contributions, prior studies have focused primarily on traditional *Pesantren*. Limited research has explored conformity in institutions that integrate formal academic education, where *Santri* face the dual pressures of maintaining religious devotion while meeting university academic standards.

This research framework focuses on the interaction between the life experiences of students and the factors that influence conformity in LTPLM. Understanding conformity in integrated *Pesantren* contexts is urgent because lack of insight into this phenomenon can lead to excessive social pressure on *Santri*, negative behaviors stemming from poorly managed peer dynamics, and difficulties in balancing academic and religious roles—all of which may compromise both educational outcomes and student wellbeing. Conformity is understood as the adaptation of individual behavior and beliefs to the social norms and values prevailing in *Pesantren*. This study uniquely examines conformity in Islamic boarding schools integrated with formal higher education, addressing the interplay between life experiences, compliance with rules, and internalization of institutional values. In this framework, the life experiences of *Santri* are influenced by three main elements: compliance with rules, acceptance of *Pesantren* values, and cultural adaptation.

This research aims to: (1) understand the meaning of conformity for *Santri* in the context of *Pesantren*; (2) identify factors that encourage and hinder *Santri* conformity; and (3) explain the impact of conformity on the formation of *Santri*'s religious and social identity. This research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of studies on conformity in the *Pesantren* environment, as well as provide practical recommendations for *Pesantren* managers to create policies that are adaptive and responsive to student needs. The hypothesis guiding this study is that conformity in the LTPLM *Pesantren* environment is influenced by group cohesiveness, prevailing social norms, and group size, which simultaneously shape the formation of *Santri*'s religious and social identities.

By nature, humans are social creatures who need companions and cannot live alone, meaning that they naturally depend on one another in daily relations, whether in friendship, neighborhood, or community. However, Islam sets boundaries and rules for these interactions, particularly concerning how students should associate and choose friends. Thus, Allah advises His people to associate with the right and pious. In Qur'an Surah At-Taubah verse 119, Allah forbids believers from associating with and being influenced by people with bad morals who invite them toward the wrong path—one leading to divine punishment and eventual regret in this world and in the hereafter.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative method with a descriptive phenomenological design. This design aims to explore the in-depth experiences of students at the Luhur *Pesantren* Higher Institute of Malang (LTPLM) regarding the meaning of conformity in their daily lives. The phenomenological approach was chosen to understand in detail how the students interpreted

their life experiences and the meaning of conformity in their daily lives. conformity in the context of *Pesantren*, without being influenced by the assumptions or biases of researchers.

The research subjects consisted of 9 students who were selected through purposive sampling technique. Subject inclusion criteria are:

- 1) Students are active in LTPLM.
- 2) Have a minimum stay of two years at the boarding school.
- 3) They come from diverse gender and regional backgrounds to provide a broader perspective.

The composition of the subjects consisted of five female and four male *mahaSantri* with an age range between 21-27 years old.

Data was collected using semi- structured in-depth interviews and participatory observation.

- 1) In-depth Interviews: The researcher used an interview guide to explore views, experiences, and meaning of conformity for the *Santri*. Interviews were conducted in person and recorded to ensure data accuracy.
- 2) Participatory Observation: The researcher observes the social interactions, daily activities, and behaviors of the students.

in the *Pesantren* environment to complement the interview data.

The study did not involve direct experimental interventions, but focused on naturalistic data collection in a boarding school environment. The research procedure involved:

- 1) Preparation: Identified subjects who met the inclusion criteria and obtained ethical approval and research permission from the boarding school.
- 2) Implementation: Conduct in- depth interviews and observations to ensure that the data collected reflect the authentic experiences of the students.
- 3) Data Validation: Triangulated the data by comparing the results of interviews and observations, as well as asking for confirmation from the subject regarding the transcription results.

Data were analyzed using a transcendental phenomenological approach with procedures developed by Moustakas (1994):

- 1) Interview Transcription: Create verbatim transcripts of the interviews.
- 2) Horizontalization: Identifying the units of meaning of each subject statement.
- 3) Grouping Themes: Grouping units of meaning into major themes.
- 4) Textural and Structural Description: Compile a description of the subject's experience based on the themes found.
- 5) Theme Integration: Organize the essence of experiences that reflect the meaning of conformity in the *Pesantren* environment.

This technique was chosen because of its ability to capture the subjective experience of the subject in depth and provide rich interpretations related to the meaning of conformity in the social context of *Pesantren*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study analyze the meaning of conformity based on the life experiences of students at the Luhur *Pesantren* Higher Institute of Malang (LTPLM). Data obtained from in-depth interviews and participatory observations were analyzed using the transcendental phenomenology method, resulting in the main findings summarized in three

broad categories, namely conformity in the context of *Pesantren*, *Santri* life experiences, and the meaning of conformity for *Santri*.

Conformity in the *Pesantren* Context

Santri at LTPLM showed conformity to three main types of behavior:

- 1) Adherence to the Rules of Order: Students disciplinedly follow the daily rules, such as the obligation to attend prayer congregations, scientific halaqah, and return to the *Pesantren* at the appointed time.
- 2) Acceptance of *Pesantren* Values: The values of simplicity, sincerity, and respect for teachers are accepted as an important part of life in *Pesantren*.
- 3) Adaptation of *Pesantren* culture: *Santris* adopt *Pesantren* culture, such as speaking politely, dressing according to Sharia, and maintaining social relations with typical *Pesantren* traditions such as the "hobby" culture (sharing food).

Table 1. Types of Conformity in *Pesantren*

Type of Conformity	Percentage of <i>Santri</i> who did (%)	Behavior Example
Compliance code of conduct	93%	Follow schedule ngaji Book, madrasah diniyah, halaqoh and rules that applicable in <i>Pesantren</i> such as limit back to boarding school
Acceptance of boarding school grades	90%	Upholding simplicity and sincerity
Adaptation of <i>Pesantren</i> culture	87%	Dressing according to Shari'ah, speaking polite

These findings align with Baron et al.'s (2008) social influence theory, which posits that individuals in cohesive groups exhibit higher conformity rates. The high percentages observed across all three types of conformity (87-93%) support Myers' (2010) assertion that strong group norms significantly shape individual behavior, particularly in closed residential communities like *Pesantren*.

Santri Life Experience

Santri face challenges in balancing academic life on campus and *Pesantren* activities. Most of the students initially found it difficult to adapt to the strict routine of the *Pesantren*, but over time, they felt the benefits. the benefits in character building. The experience of the *Santris* also shows:

- 1) Influence of Social Interaction: The presence of students from various backgrounds creates group dynamics that demand tolerance and cooperation.
- 2) Positive Impact: Conformity promotes religious identity formation and reinforcement of disciplinary values.

Further reviewed, a *Santri* also applies a sense of nationalism in himself. Nationalism can be defined as an attitude of love for the homeland. Nationalism also has principles, including unity, freedom, equality, personality, and achievement. This is stated in the typical slogan owned by LTPLM, namely 3 CO which was stated by the caregiver, Abah Mudlor. 3 CO means CO Ownership, CO Responsibility, and CO Determination. CO Ownership means a sense of belonging. CO Responsibility means a sense of responsibility responsibility. CO

Determination, a sense of mutual determination. Indirectly, the points in Triple CO are also related to the principle of nationalism. Moreover, this 3 CO slogan has been ingrained in LTPLM students. Although the scope is smaller, if the 3 CO slogan is always implemented continuously, it will certainly foster a sense of nationalism in youth, because nationalism is a sense of love for the country where the principles are unity, equality, personality, and achievement. The spirit of nationalism with the principle of unity wrapped in the 3 CO slogan, makes the sense of individualism disappear from the students of *Pesantren* Luhur Malang.

The biggest hope is that *Santri* have a 3M soul (Mujtahid, Mujaddid and Mujahid). Mujtahid is a person who has entered the area of *ijtihad* with the breadth of his knowledge, a person who has the authority to make *ijtihad*. This area begins with a serious search for knowledge, both methodological and substantive. Mujaddid (reformer) is a person who has the ability to read the situation and conditions that surround him, so that with his ability to read the signs aspects that have been considered out of date, it is deemed necessary to be renewed by a Mujaddid with a Mujtahid background. Mujahid (warrior), the struggle requires strength or power.

The Meaning of Conformity for *Santri*

Baron, Branscobe, and Byrne (2008) explain three factors that influence conformity: group cohesiveness, group size, and type of social norm. Cohesiveness in LTPLM is the extent to which students are attracted to a social group and want to be part of LTPLM. The existence of this interest, the greater the *Santri* to conform to the norms in LTPLM. Likewise with group size, the larger the group size, the more students who behave in certain ways, so that more follow it.

The injunctive ones tend to be ignored, while the descriptive ones tend to be followed. For example, all *Santri* know that skipping the Quran is not allowed, but many do it. Therefore, many male students skip the Quran. Compared to those who do not conform, there are certainly more *Santri* who conform to social norms. If not, imagine how chaotic the *Pesantren* environment would be. There is no order, no agreement on what should and should not be done. Thankfully, *Santri* tend to follow the rules that exist in their environment and most *Santri* follow these rules. This can be understood because of the motive to be liked by others (normative social influence), so that it can be accepted by the environment, and the motive for certainty about the truth of the behavior to be displayed (informational social influence).

***Santri* interpret conformity as:**

- 1) Social and Religious Value Learning Process: Conformity provides a real-life experience of the importance of cooperation, responsibility, and adherence to religious norms.
- 2) Strengthening Religious Identity: By conforming to *Pesantren* norms, students feel more connected to their religious identity.

Hypothesis Analysis

Hypothesis: Conformity in the LTPLM *Pesantren* environment is influenced by group cohesiveness, prevailing social norms, and group size.

The results of the data analysis support this hypothesis.

- 1) Group Cohesiveness: The stronger the relationship between students, the higher the level of conformity to *Pesantren* norms.
- 2) Social Norms: Descriptive norms (such as most students attending halaqah) are followed more often than injunctive norms (such as the prohibition of skipping class).

- 3) Group Size: Large groups in LTPLM increase the uniformity of *Santri* behavior, reinforcing conformity.

The results of this study show that conformity in LTPLM *Pesantren* functions as a mechanism for strengthening social and religious values, as well as creating complex social dynamics.

The results of this study reveal that conformity plays very significant role in the lives of students at the Luhur *Pesantren* Higher Institute of Malang. (LTPLM). The conformity that occurs in this *Pesantren* is not only related to compliance with *Pesantren* rules and values, but also related to the formation of *Santri*'s religious, social, and character identities. Through the analysis of interview and observation data, it was found that conformity in LTPLM involves three main types of behavior: compliance with the rules, acceptance of *Pesantren* values, and adaptation of *Pesantren* culture. In this context, the life experiences of *Santri* show the existence of social dynamics that play a role in the formation of their personalities.

Interpretation of Research Results

Conformity in LTPLM apparently does not only include compliance with strict *Pesantren* rules, but is also part of the learning process to form character and religious identity. Most *Santri* consider conformity as a means to achieve spiritual and social maturity. This can be seen from the high level of adherence to the daily schedule, religious activities, and acceptance of *Pesantren* values that are highly emphasized by *Pesantren* caregivers and administrators. Involvement in activities such as scientific halaqah, congregational prayer, and the formation of simple living habits shows that conformity in LTPLM is an instrument that strengthens the character and morality of *Santri*.

However, this conformity also poses challenges. Many *Santri* feel social pressure to conform to existing norms, especially related to the culture of seniority which sometimes leads to negative behavior such as skipping class or actions that are not in accordance with religious values. Even so, most *Santri* still feel that this conformity process is an important part of their experience as *mahaSantri* and part of formation of personal and social maturity.

Evaluation of Research Results

The research successfully revealed the role of conformity in the lives of LTPLM *Santri*, but there are several aspects that need to be considered in evaluating the results of this study. One of them is the data collection method that only relies on in-depth interviews and participatory observation, which may be limited to the views and personal experiences of a few selected *Santri*. By involving only nine subjects, the results of this study may not be fully representative for the entire population of *Santri* at LTPLM, who have a diversity of backgrounds and experiences. In addition, despite using data triangulation techniques, the potential for bias in the researcher's interpretation of the interview and observation data remains.

In addition, this study focuses more on the positive impacts of conformity, such as religious and social identity formation, but less on the negative impacts, such as the potential for conformity to lead to deviant behavior or excessive social pressure. Further research involving a larger and more diverse sample could provide a more comprehensive perspective on conformity. About the dynamics of conformity in the *Pesantren* environment.

Related Issues Affecting Research

There are several issues that influence the results of this study. First, the strong social and cultural norms of *Pesantren* play a big role in shaping *Santri* behavior and attitudes. The existing norms tend to be more towards compliance and acceptance without much room for individual expression. This can affect the freedom of thought and action of *Santri*, thus creating dependence on the group and pressure to conform.

Second, relationship between conformity and social pressure in *Pesantren* deserves further attention. Many *Santri* feel that they must follow the norm even if they do not fully agree with it, due to the fear of social sanctions or ostracization. This research shows that Although conformity can strengthen religious identity, it can also create social pressure that have a negative impact, such as internal conflict for *Santri* who have different views.

Third, the role of *Pesantren* caregivers and administrators is very influential on the level of conformity received by *Santri*. *Pesantren* caregivers who have strong and traditional values often set rules that must be followed by *Santri*, which sometimes creates tension between the desire to stick to these values and the need to adapt to the modern academic environment. This issue is closely related to the way *Pesantren* respond to the times and how to manage the balance between *Pesantren* traditions and the demands of the formal education world.

Research Weaknesses

This study has several weaknesses that need to be considered. First, the limited number of subjects involving only nine *Santri* may affect the validity and generalizability of the findings. A larger study with more diverse subjects could provide a more comprehensive picture of conformity in *Pesantren*. Second, despite the use of triangulation techniques, the potential for bias in the interpretation of the results of interviews and observation

This is especially true since the researcher was directly involved in the data collection. Therefore, further research using more objective methods and more diverse approaches may provide more accurate results.

CONCLUSION

Conformity at LTPLM is characterized by students' compliance with *pesantren* rules, acceptance of religious values, and adaptation to *pesantren* culture, all of which contribute to the formation of their social and religious identities. While this conformity fosters positive outcomes such as character building and spiritual maturity, the study also highlights challenges, particularly excessive social pressure and potential negative behaviors linked to seniority traditions. Given its significant impact on *santri*'s social, religious, and academic life, future research should further explore strategies to manage seniority culture and develop balanced approaches that maintain the positive aspects of conformity while minimizing its harmful effects.

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