

The Role of Pesantren Culture in Bullying Prevention: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Although Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) emphasize character education through moral values, religious practices, and exemplary role models, bullying continues to occur within these institutions. Existing studies have highlighted the potential of pesantren culture in fostering positive student behavior; however, empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness in preventing bullying remains fragmented and is largely dominated by qualitative research. This study aims to synthesize the available empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the pesantren cultural approach in preventing bullying among santri through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, literature published between 2015 and 2025 was systematically identified from Google Scholar and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Of the 200 records initially identified, 10 studies met the inclusion criteria after screening, quality appraisal using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist, and full-text review. The synthesis indicates that pesantren culture contributes to bullying prevention by strengthening empathy, moral awareness, emotional regulation, and a positive social climate through value internalization, exemplary leadership, mentoring systems, religious practices, and collaborative conflict resolution. However, current evidence is predominantly derived from qualitative studies using indirect indicators of bullying prevention, limiting robust conclusions regarding causal effectiveness. This review contributes to the literature by consolidating fragmented evidence on the role of pesantren culture in bullying prevention while highlighting the need for rigorous quantitative and longitudinal studies that operationalize pesantren culture as a measurable construct and examine its direct influence on bullying behavior among santri.

Keywords: Bullying Prevention, Pesantren Culture, Islamic Boarding Schools, Systematic Review, School Climate.

1. Introduction

Bullying remains one of the most persistent challenges in educational settings worldwide because of its detrimental effects on students' psychological well-being, academic achievement, social relationships, and moral development. Despite the implementation of various anti-bullying policies and intervention programs, recent international reports indicate that bullying and cyberbullying continue to affect a substantial proportion of school-aged adolescents during the 2024–2025 period (UNESCO, 2024; OECD, 2024; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). The problem is particularly evident in boarding school environments, where intensive daily interactions, hierarchical relationships, and prolonged peer contact increase the likelihood of repeated aggressive behavior (Rigby, 2017; Salmivalli, 2010). Although numerous prevention programs have been implemented across different educational contexts, empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of culturally grounded approaches within religious boarding schools remains limited. This gap highlights the need to examine whether institutional culture can function as an effective protective factor against bullying.

In Indonesia, bullying in educational institutions has become an increasingly serious concern. National monitoring reports show that cases of violence in schools, including bullying and cyberbullying, continued to rise throughout 2024 and 2025 (KPAI, 2024; KemenPPPA, 2025). Empirical studies further demonstrate that bullying is not confined to public schools but also occurs in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), where students live together within a highly structured social environment (Nugroho et al., 2020; Emilda, 2022). These findings suggest that the boarding school system itself does not automatically ensure a safe educational environment. Instead, the effectiveness of institutional values and cultural practices in shaping students' social behavior requires further empirical investigation.

Conceptually, *pesantren* are Islamic educational institutions that emphasize character formation through the internalization of religious values, moral education, discipline, and exemplary leadership (*uswah hasanah*) (Dhofier, 2011; Azra, 2019). Unlike conventional schools, students in *pesantren* live within a communal environment where interactions with peers, teachers, and caregivers occur continuously throughout daily life. From the perspective of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 2002), such an environment should facilitate the development of prosocial behaviour because students continuously observe, imitate, and internalize the behaviours demonstrated by respected authority figures. Consequently, the cultural environment of *pesantren* is theoretically expected to function as a protective factor against aggressive behaviour, including bullying. However, empirical evidence presents a contrasting reality. Despite the strong emphasis on moral and religious values, bullying continues to occur within many Islamic boarding schools, particularly through senior–junior power relations and disciplinary practices that may normalize aggressive behaviour (Nugroho et al., 2020; Arif, 2024).

This inconsistency suggests that the existence of religious values alone may not be sufficient to prevent bullying unless these values are effectively translated into students' everyday social interactions.

Existing empirical studies have identified various factors associated with bullying prevention in Islamic boarding schools; however, their findings remain inconsistent. Some studies emphasize the importance of individual psychological characteristics, such as empathy, self-control, emotional regulation, and moral internalization, in reducing bullying behaviour (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Van Noorden et al., 2015; Oktaviani, 2020). In contrast, other studies argue that institutional factors—including school culture, disciplinary practices, dormitory supervision, and the overall pesantren climate play a more decisive role in shaping students' behaviour (Rigby, 2017; Wang & Degol, 2016; Arif, 2024). These differing perspectives indicate that the relative contribution of institutional culture to bullying prevention remains unclear. Moreover, previous studies have generally examined psychological and institutional factors separately, providing limited understanding of how pesantren culture influences students' psychological development and ultimately contributes to bullying prevention.

Beyond the empirical inconsistency, previous studies also reveal an important theoretical limitation. Existing research has predominantly examined individual psychological factors and institutional cultural factors as separate determinants of bullying prevention, with limited attempts to explain how these two dimensions interact (Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Swearer & Espelage, 2011). Social psychological theories suggest that aggressive behaviour emerges through dynamic interactions between individual characteristics and the surrounding social environment (Bandura, 2002; Anderson & Bushman, 2002). In the context of pesantren, however, little is known about the psychological mechanisms through which institutional culture influences students' behaviour. Constructs such as empathy, moral awareness, emotional regulation, and self-control are frequently discussed independently, yet their relationship with pesantren culture has rarely been synthesized systematically. Consequently, the theoretical pathway linking institutional culture and bullying prevention remains insufficiently understood.

The cultural approach adopted in pesantren—including moral education, religious practices, exemplary leadership, communal supervision, and value internalization—is widely considered a potential strategy for fostering prosocial behaviour and preventing bullying. Previous studies consistently report positive associations between these cultural practices and improvements in students' empathy, discipline, and social relationships (Dhofier, 2011; Azra, 2019; Arif, 2024). Nevertheless, most of this evidence remains descriptive or qualitative in nature and relies primarily on perceived behavioural changes rather than direct measurements of bullying outcomes. Furthermore, considerable variation exists in the operationalization of pesantren culture across studies, making comparisons difficult and limiting the generalizability of existing

findings. Consequently, despite growing recognition of the importance of pesantren culture, its effectiveness as an evidence-based bullying prevention strategy has not yet been firmly established.

Given these empirical and theoretical limitations, a comprehensive synthesis of the available evidence is required to clarify the effectiveness of pesantren culture in preventing bullying. Unlike previous narrative discussions, the present study applies a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines and incorporates methodological quality assessment using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist. This approach enables a more rigorous evaluation of the existing evidence while identifying methodological strengths, limitations, and research gaps across studies. Therefore, this study aims to systematically synthesize empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of pesantren culture in preventing bullying among santri, identify the cultural components associated with bullying prevention, evaluate the methodological quality of existing studies, and propose directions for future evidence-based research. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by strengthening the understanding of culturally grounded bullying prevention, methodologically by providing a comprehensive synthesis of empirical evidence, and practically by informing the development of evidence-based anti-bullying strategies within Islamic boarding schools.

2. Research Method

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to comprehensively synthesize empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of the pesantren cultural approach in preventing bullying among santri. An SLR was selected because it provides a transparent, systematic, and reproducible approach for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing available empirical studies while minimizing selection bias compared with traditional narrative reviews. The review process was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines, ensuring transparency throughout the stages of literature identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion.

The articles included in this review meet certain inclusion criteria, namely research with subjects who are santri or students enrolled in Islamic boarding schools. The focus of the study is on bullying behavior, whether verbal, physical, social, or cyberbullying. The selected studies must examine the pesantren's cultural approach as a prevention strategy, such as the internalization of values of manners and moral character (), the exemplary behavior of kyai or ustadz, the habit of religious behavior, the application of discipline, and the boarding school care system. In addition, articles must report on the outcomes of bullying prevention, including a reduction in bullying or aggressive behavior, an increase in empathy, the formation of a positive social climate, or other relevant

psychological indicators. Research with quantitative, quasi-experimental, mixed methods, or qualitative designs that explicitly present bullying prevention outcomes will be considered for inclusion, with publication years between 2015 and 2025, using Indonesian or English, and available in full text.

Articles were excluded from this study if they were conceptual writings, opinions, essays, or editorials that did not present empirical data. Research on bullying conducted in public schools without the context of Islamic boarding schools or religious boarding schools is also excluded. In addition, articles that only discuss violence in general without focusing on bullying behavior, publications that are not available in full text, and manuscripts with low methodological quality based on critical assessment are excluded from the synthesis process.

The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). These databases were selected because they provide broad coverage of educational, psychological, and Islamic education literature, including national and international publications relevant to pesantren studies. Google Scholar was particularly useful for identifying Indonesian empirical studies that are not comprehensively indexed in major international databases, while DOAJ was included to capture peer-reviewed open-access publications.

The search strategy was designed using a combination of keywords strung together with Boolean operators so that the results obtained were in line with the focus of the study. The main terms used include "bullying," "peer bullying," and "peer aggression," which are combined with the contextual terms "pesantren" or "Islamic boarding school," as well as keywords related to prevention and culture, such as "prevention," "intervention," "school culture," "religious values," and "moral education." This combination aims to narrow the search results so that they only include articles that explicitly discuss bullying in Islamic boarding schools and approaches to its prevention.

Article selection was conducted through stages following the PRISMA flow. In the initial stage, all articles obtained from the search results were identified and selected based on their titles and abstracts to assess their relevance to the research topic. Duplicate articles were then removed to avoid duplication. Articles that passed the initial stage were then reviewed in full to ensure their suitability with the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles that did not meet the pesantren context, did not specifically discuss bullying, or did not report prevention outcomes were excluded from the study.

The methodological quality of eligible studies was assessed using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist, with the assessment instrument adapted according to the design of each included study. The appraisal evaluated several methodological aspects, including the clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of study design, participant selection, validity and reliability of data collection methods, analytical procedures, and credibility of the reported findings. Only studies

demonstrating adequate methodological quality were included in the final synthesis. Articles that exhibited substantial methodological limitations were excluded to enhance the reliability and credibility of the review findings.

A narrative synthesis approach was employed because the included studies demonstrated substantial methodological heterogeneity in terms of research design, intervention characteristics, outcome measures, and analytical procedures. Consequently, statistical meta-analysis was not considered appropriate.

The synthesis involved comparing findings across studies to identify recurring themes regarding the implementation of pesantren cultural approaches and their association with bullying prevention outcomes. Particular attention was given to cultural components consistently reported as protective factors, including moral education, value internalization, religious practices, exemplary leadership, mentoring systems, social management, and deliberative conflict resolution. Similarities and differences among studies were critically examined to identify empirical patterns, methodological limitations, and directions for future research.

3. Result

After searching the literature through the specified databases, 200 articles relevant to the search keywords were obtained. In the initial identification stage, articles that appeared as duplicates due to cross-database searches were checked. The results of the check showed that there were 6 duplicate articles, which were then deleted, leaving 194 unique articles for the next selection stage.

The next stage was screening based on titles and abstracts, referring to the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. At this stage, 154 articles were excluded because they were not relevant to the context of Islamic boarding schools, did not specifically discuss bullying behavior, or did not mention a prevention approach based on the culture of Islamic boarding schools. Thus, 40 articles were deemed eligible for full-text screening.

At the full-text review stage, articles were evaluated in greater depth to ensure the suitability of the population, the phenomenon studied, the type of intervention, and the reporting of bullying prevention outcomes. The results of the assessment showed that 28 articles did not meet the inclusion criteria, partly because they did not explicitly report prevention outcomes, used a non-boarding school context, or had significant methodological limitations. Therefore, 12 articles remained that met the substantive criteria for the methodological quality evaluation stage.

Next, the 12 articles were assessed for quality using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist, which was adapted to the design of each study. This process aimed to assess the methodological feasibility and credibility of the research findings. Based on the quality assessment results, 2 articles were excluded because they did not

meet the minimum quality standards, so the final number of articles included in the data extraction and systematic synthesis process was 10 articles.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the ten studies included in the systematic review. The extracted information comprises the authors, publication year, research objectives, participants, sampling techniques, research instruments, analytical methods, and principal findings related to bullying prevention.

Table.1. Characteristics of the Included Studies

Author	Title	Research Objective	Participants	Sampling Technique	Instruments	Data Analysis Technique	Research Findings
Arifin & Afrudin (2025)	<i>The Role of Moral Education in Preventing Bullying in Islamic Boarding Schools</i>	Analyzing the role of moral education in preventing bullying in Islamic boarding schools	Students, teachers, caregivers	Purposive sampling	Interviews, observation, documentation	Thematic analysis	Moral education integrated into pesantren life contributes to reducing the potential for bullying, depending on the consistency of role models
Risqi & Samsurrohman (2024)	<i>Hierarchical Culture in Islamic Boarding Schools Related to the Normalization of Bullying Behavior</i>	Examining the relationship between hierarchical culture and the normalization of bullying	Islamic boarding school students	Purposive sampling	In-depth interviews	Phenomenological analysis	Seniority culture and power relations normalize bullying as a disciplinary practice
Zahid (2024)	<i>Bullying Prevention Strategies through the Foster Guardian Program in Islamic Boarding Schools</i>	Evaluating the role of foster guardians in bullying prevention	Junior and senior students	Purposive sampling	Interviews, observation	Qualitative descriptive analysis	The guardian program increases supervision and reduces conflicts among students
Abdullah et al. (2024)	<i>Bullying psychoeducation for Islamic boarding school students</i>	Assessing the effectiveness of psychoeducation on bullying	60 boarding school high school students	Total sampling	Psychoeducation module, questionnaire	Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test	Psychoeducation significantly improves anti-bullying knowledge and attitudes

Aqillah et al. (2025)	<i>The Effectiveness of Peer Counseling in Addressing Cyberbullying among Students in Islamic Boarding Schools</i>	Testing the effectiveness of peer counseling	150 students	Random assignment	Cyberbullying and empathy scales	t-test / ANCOVA	Peer counseling significantly reduced cyberbullying and increased empathy
Hisbidaturrosidah et al. (2025)	<i>Strengthening the Social Management System of Islamic Boarding Schools through the Ukhuwah Diniyah Islamiyah Approach</i>	Testing the strengthening of social management in Islamic boarding schools	40 students	Purposive sampling	Ukhuwah questionnaire, observation	Pretest-posttest analysis	Positive social climate increased and conflicts among students decreased
Solihatun et al. (2025)	<i>Literacy Profile of Students in Efforts to Reduce Bullying in Islamic Boarding Schools</i>	Examining the role of literacy in preventing bullying	MA boarding school students	Purposive sampling	Literacy tests, interviews, observations	Descriptive qualitative analysis	Literacy in values and empathy contributes to a reduction in bullying
Suzanna et al. (2023)	<i>Emotional Management of Students as an Effort to Prevent Bullying in Islamic Boarding Schools</i>	Improving students' emotional control	35 students	Total sampling	Emotional management module	Pre-post descriptive analysis	Aggression decreased and self-control among students increased
Rizal (2025)	<i>Syura-based conflict resolution as a preventive strategy for bullying in Islamic boarding schools</i>	Analyzing syura as a preventive strategy for bullying	Students, guardians, leaders	Purposive sampling	Interviews, observation, documents	Case study analysis	Syura strengthens empathy, dialogue, and non-violent conflict resolution
Rozi et al. (2025)	<i>Internalizing Islamic Boarding School Values to Prevent Violence among Students</i>	Examining the internalization of Islamic boarding school values in the prevention of violence	Pesantren students, pesantren administrators	Purposive sampling	Interviews, observation	Thematic analysis	Pesantren values foster empathy and anti-violence attitudes, but without quantitative testing

The synthesis of the ten included studies indicates that pesantren culture consistently emerged as the primary institutional approach to bullying prevention. Although the specific cultural components varied across studies, most interventions emphasized the internalization of moral values, exemplary leadership, religious practices, communal supervision, and collaborative conflict resolution as mechanisms for fostering prosocial behaviour and reducing aggressive interactions among santri. Overall, all included studies reported positive associations between these cultural approaches and bullying prevention outcomes, although the strength of the evidence differed according to study design and measurement methods.

Regarding methodological characteristics, seven of the ten included studies employed qualitative designs using interviews, observations, and document analysis as the primary data collection methods. Three studies adopted quantitative or quasi-experimental approaches employing questionnaires, psychoeducational modules, and statistical analyses such as the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, t-test, and ANCOVA. Direct measurement of bullying behaviour was reported in only a limited number of studies, whereas most studies assessed bullying prevention through indirect indicators such as empathy, emotional regulation, social climate, and conflict reduction.

Among the three quantitative and quasi-experimental studies, all reported statistically significant improvements following intervention programs implemented within pesantren. The reported outcomes included increased anti-bullying knowledge, stronger empathy, improved emotional regulation, more positive attitudes toward bullying prevention, and reduced cyberbullying behaviour. These findings provide empirical support for structured intervention programs implemented within the cultural context of Islamic boarding schools.

In terms of participant characteristics and sampling techniques, santri were the main subjects in all studies, with the predominant use of purposive sampling and total sampling. Several studies also involved caregivers, guardians, and pesantren leaders as key informants, confirming that bullying prevention is understood as the collective responsibility of the pesantren institution, not just an individual santri issue (Zahid, 2024; Hisbidaturrosidah et al., 2025; Rizal, 2025). However, methodological limitations are still apparent in the lack of detailed reporting on sampling procedures, instrument validity, and measurement reliability in some studies.

Overall, the included studies consistently reported positive relationships between pesantren cultural practices and bullying prevention indicators. The most frequently reported outcomes were increased empathy, improved emotional regulation, enhanced moral awareness, and a more positive social climate among santri. Nevertheless, the methodological characteristics of the reviewed studies varied considerably, particularly regarding research design, outcome measurement, and analytical procedures. These findings provide the empirical basis for the subsequent discussion concerning the

effectiveness and methodological limitations of existing evidence. (Abdullah et al., 2024; Aqillah et al., 2025).

4. Discussion

This discussion focuses on synthesizing empirical research findings on the effectiveness of the pesantren cultural approach in preventing bullying among santri, emphasizing comparisons of data analysis techniques and research results used in previous studies. The synthesis was conducted to identify patterns of similarity across research findings and to assess the extent to which the available empirical evidence is capable of answering the research objective, namely to examine the effectiveness of the pesantren cultural approach as a preventive strategy against bullying.

The synthesis results show that studies with quantitative and quasi-experimental approaches, although limited in number, provide more explicit evidence regarding the effectiveness of interventions compared to qualitative studies. Research using inferential analyses such as t-tests, ANCOVA, or Wilcoxon tests reported a decrease in bullying behavior especially cyberbullying— as well as an increase in empathy, anti-bullying attitudes, and social awareness among students after the intervention was given (Abdullah et al., 2024; Aqillah et al., 2025). These findings are consistent with the synthesis reported by Arif et al. (2024), which confirms that structured interventions based on pesantren culture tend to show more measurable impacts when combined with psychological approaches.

Conversely, the majority of qualitative studies use thematic or phenomenological analysis techniques to interpret changes in behavior and the social climate of Islamic boarding schools. These studies consistently report a reduction in conflict, an increase in harmony between senior and junior students, and a strengthening of the values of empathy and moral awareness among students as indicators of bullying prevention (Arifin & Afrudin, 2025; Zahid, 2024; Rizal, 2025). However, these results are generally not supported by quantitative measurements of bullying behavior, so their inferential power is weaker. This pattern was also identified by Abdurrohim et al. (2024), who concluded that most anti-bullying research in Islamic boarding schools is still descriptive and not yet oriented towards outcome-based effectiveness evaluation.

The similarity between the findings across studies lies in the consistent role of the pesantren cultural approach as a protective factor against bullying behavior. Both quantitative and qualitative studies show that the internalization of values of manners and morals, the exemplary role of pesantren authority figures, the boarding school care system, and the strengthening of collective social relations contribute to a decrease in the tendency for aggressive behavior among santri (Zahid, 2024; Hisbidaturrosidah et al., 2025; Rozi et al., 2025). This similarity reinforces the findings of Arif et al. (2024), which place pesantren culture as the main foundation in bullying prevention strategies,



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although its effectiveness is highly dependent on the implementation mechanism and institutional context.

From a data analysis perspective, methodological differences have direct implications for the strength of the conclusions drawn. Studies that use descriptive qualitative analysis tend to produce claims based on perceptions and narratives, while studies with inferential statistical analysis are able to provide causal evidence or at least a stronger relationship between interventions and outcomes in bullying prevention. These findings are in line with Abdurrohim et al. (2024), who emphasize the need for a shift in research from phenomenological exploration to empirical testing based on quantitative data so that the effectiveness of the pesantren cultural approach can be evaluated more objectively.

Based on the synthesis of these findings, the main finding that answers the research objective can be formulated, namely that the pesantren cultural approach has the potential to be effective in preventing bullying behavior among santri, especially when implemented through structured interventions accompanied by the strengthening of psychological mechanisms in santri such as empathy, emotional control, and moral awareness. However, this effectiveness has not been supported by adequate and consistent quantitative evidence, so the conclusions drawn are still tentative and contextual (Arif et al., 2024; Abdullah et al., 2024; Aqillah et al., 2025).

Overall, this discussion confirms that although there is empirical consensus on the importance of the pesantren cultural approach in preventing bullying, the existing literature is still dominated by qualitative research with limited outcome measurements. Therefore, as recommended by Arif et al. (2024) and Abdurrohim et al. (2024), further research needs to be directed towards quantitative or quasi-experimental designs that directly test the effectiveness of the pesantren cultural approach on bullying behavior using standardized instruments and inferential statistical analysis. This synthesis reinforces the position of this SLR as a conceptual and empirical basis for the development of further quantitative research in the pesantren context

5. Conclusion

The results of this systematic review indicate that pesantren culture has the potential to become an important foundation in preventing bullying behavior among santri if it is understood as a system that regulates values, social interactions, and daily educational practices. The role of this cultural approach is not inherently or automatically effective, but rather depends on the level of consistent implementation and its relevance to the process of shaping the psychological aspects of students. Thus, this study makes a conceptual contribution by placing the prevention of bullying in Islamic boarding schools as a phenomenon influenced by the reciprocal relationship between the cultural structure of the institution and the psychological characteristics of individuals.



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In line with these findings, future research should develop a more methodologically robust research design, particularly through quantitative or quasi-experimental approaches. These efforts should focus on clearly measuring the cultural components of Islamic boarding schools as research variables, as well as testing the role of psychological factors of students as mediators or moderators in relation to bullying behavior

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